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# THE UNMENTIONABLE: VERBAL TABOO AND THE MORAL LIFE OF LANGUAGE

## **Name Taboos and Rigid Performativity**

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### **Abstract**

*Cross-culturally personal names are frequently avoided to the point of being taboo. The paper seeks to give a semiotically grounded analysis of why names in particular are so often taboo, and in so doing attempts to shed light on the species of performativity which undergirds the unmentionability of verbal taboos. From the avoidance of names in second-person address to the unmentionability of forms phonetically similar to the avoided name, a gradient scale of unmentionability is sketched out for the case of name taboos. Through the analysis of a wealth of examples, the paper shows how the patterning of the avoidance of a form is inextricably linked to its performative function and ideological conceptualization. [Keywords: Verbal taboo, performativity, avoidance registers, personal names]*

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## Introduction

The tabooing of personal names is a frequent and rather salient phenomenon, showing up time and again in ethnographic descriptions. Taboos on saying the names of various categories of affinal kin are the most widespread, being very common in Melanesia (see Simons 1982 for a survey), Australia (e.g., Thomson 1946 on Wik Monkan), as well as diverse parts of Africa (e.g., Irvine 1998 on Zulu, Treis 2005 on Kambaata, Mbaya 2002 on Oromo). In much of South Asia, it is normatively expected that women shouldn't utter their husband's name (e.g., Trawick 1996:95 on Tamil). In the Americas, taboos on uttering the names of the dead are probably those which are the most elaborated (e.g., Elmendorf 1951 on Twana). Taboos on naming a big-man, chief, or king are also widely reported (e.g., Raum 1973 on Zulu, Frazer 1958 on Maori). Just as there is variability in whose name is tabooed cross-culturally, so too is there a lot of variation in beliefs about the consequences of producing a tabooed name from place to place. Some Tamil women believe that if they say their husband's name that "harm will befall him" (Trawick 1996:95). For a Kambaata speaking woman in Ethiopia, mistakenly saying the name of her father-in-law would count as an insult and a cause of shame (Treis 2005). Among the Haruai of Papua New Guinea, the use of a taboo name may make the speaker ill or lead to crop failure (Comrie 2000:80).

For many cases, we have good descriptions of the structural and symbolic factors organizing taboos culture-internally (e.g., Leach 1964, Valeri 2000). The goal of this paper is to augment and complement these more hermeneutic approaches to verbal taboo, not to supplant them. In this paper, I locate commonalities across widely variable name taboo practices, abstracting from the particular social relations subject to name taboos and the beliefs and sanctions concerning breaches of the taboo. Rather, I seek to answer the question of why it is that personal names—and not kin-terms or pronouns or some other noun-phrase type—are so frequently the privileged site of verbal taboo cross-culturally. In doing this, I hope to illustrate something about the nature of verbal performativity and specifically those extreme cases, like unmentionables, which are the subject of this issue.

Though this method generalizes over cases of name taboo that involve widely different cultural beliefs about the purposes and sanctions of the taboo, it does not leave the question of the language ideologies which govern personal name taboos and the avoidance registers which crop up around them wholly unaddressed. Extreme forms of name avoidance,

most pronounced in the avoidance of words bearing phonetic traces of the taboo target, implicitly frame the power of words as adhering in their very materiality. Here formal patterns of avoidance and functional properties of performativity stand in a motivated relationship to one another. This ideological convergence on the performativity of the material sign form, clearly illustrated in this cross-cultural survey of name taboos, suggests that verbal taboo is a domain of ethnolinguistic study uniquely amenable to cross-cultural study.

In this paper, I present a semiotic-functional motivation for the cross-linguistic prevalence of personal name taboos. I argue that the referential indexical function of personal names, characterized by the unique manner in which personal names pick out the same referent across all occasions of use, serves as model and motivation for the elaboration of the nonreferential indexical functions of name taboos (i.e., their ability to cause offense, harm, shame, etc.). I trace out three points along a name taboo continuum or cline: (1) the avoidance of names in personal address, a phenomenon very much comparable to “politeness” in pronominal address and one focused on the relationship between the core participants in a discursive interaction (i.e., speakers and addressees); (2) the avoidance of all instances or tokens of a name, including those occurring in reported speech constructions; and (3) homophone or near-homophone avoidance—that is, the avoidance of phonetic forms similar to tokens of the taboo name type. These three points along a name taboo continuum—avoidance of a name in address, in all acts of reference, and as a phonetic substance—represent the progressively greater and greater elaboration of name avoidance and taboo. Though implying a diachronic model of their development, this continuum should be understood as a synchronic typology which encodes certain implication relations (i.e., if homophones are avoided then all tokens of the taboo type will be avoided, if tokens of the type then names in address). At a broader level of generalization, I hope that this study serves as a concise argument for the indisociability of unmentionability as a formal process from performativity as its functional correlate.

### **Inherent Referentiality**

Granting the premise that names are the most frequent target of word taboo cross-linguistically, we are led to the question: Why are personal names rather than other types of words so often tabooed? Their inherent

referentiality, the fact that a name always picks out some specific referent, seems to be important in this regard. As the rich literature on politeness and honorification makes clear, other inherently referring noun-phrase types like pronouns, anaphors, and demonstratives, often similarly are the focus of rules of avoidance.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, looking at the referential hierarchy of noun-phrase types—a hierarchy determined precisely by the degree to which different noun-phrase types inherently index their objects—we can note that it is the inherently indexical forms (towards the top of the display in Table 1) which are most often avoided in contextualized usage (see Silverstein 1976, 1987b for a discussion of the referential hierarchy and its motivations). A brief review of the referential hierarchy will help to motivate this claim.

While we often speak of symbolism as the semiotic function which distinguishes natural language from all other forms of animal communication, the referential hierarchy points out the way in which the indexical semiotic function serves as an indispensable ground for grammar and discourse. The referential hierarchy is ordered in terms of the degree to which different noun-phrase types inherently refer, that is, inherently index their objects. At the top of the display are the most inherently indexical noun-phrase types: 1st and 2nd person pronouns. Such “shifters” refer simply by virtue of their occurrence in discursive interaction, picking out the speech-participant roles of speaker and addressee respectively. Pronouns are inherently indexical because their reference has a real (or causal) relation to those individuals who stand in the roles of speaker and addressee. At the bottom of the display in Figure 1 are truly symbolic noun-phrase types, like kin-terms and natural kind terms. These are purely symbolic in the sense that they have constant and conventional denotation which does not depend upon co-occurring features of context. Such noun-phrase types, e.g., English *cat* or *police officer*, do not have inherent reference. Common nouns, like these, typically require a definite determiner, a demonstrative, or some other form of specification in order for us to ascertain the particular referent in a given instance. As we can see, different noun-phrase types—though we consider them part of a coherent grammatical category—are differentiated in terms of their semiotic functions. This patterning of noun-phrase types in terms of semiotic function has been shown to condition quite a number of grammatical processes, from splits in case-marking (Silverstein 1976) to accessibility to relativization (Keenan and Comrie 1977). But considerations of inherent semiotic func-

tion are not only important in explaining morphosyntactic processes. They must also be taken into account in looking at pragmatic phenomena.

It is the inherently referential noun-phrase types which are the ones which most often develop “polite” pragmatic alternants. Indeed, reference to addressee is the most elaborated site of pragmatic distinctions cross-linguistically. So-called “polite” 2nd person pronouns appear in languages throughout Europe and South Asia (see Helmbrecht 2005 for a survey). In many languages, a “politeness” distinction is extended to 3rd person anaphors and demonstratives. The avoidance of the use of an individual’s personal name can be seen in the same light, as a pragmatic phenomenon based on the relatively inherent referentiality of the noun-phrase type.

Personal names are social indexicals, the indexical connection between a name and its referent having been forged in a baptismal event. The successful use of a personal name presupposes that both speaker and addressee have been socialized to this name-referent connection. They are links in a speech-chain which connects that initial baptismal event to the present instance of referring. The inherent referentiality of these forms means that their use, for those socialized to the name, unambiguously points to or picks out the associated referent. Within social interaction, such unambiguous reference may be re-analyzed as a speech act implying certain status asymmetries between speaker and referent. Indeed, avoidance of personal names often signals deference entitlements, in the sense of Agha (1993), of speaker to referent. In address within kin-groups, for instance, it appears to be a near universal that generationally higher individuals have greater entitlements to use personal names in address than do generationally lower individuals, who most often are expected to avoid personal names and only use kin-terms (cf. Luong 1990:109-111, Fleming n.d.). Kin-terms are semiotically motivated to serve as more deferential address forms precisely because, being true symbols, they are not, in their default usage, inherently referential.

Transparency of reference again lies behind the elaboration of pragmatic paradigms in politeness phenomena. However these forms may subsequently become conventionalized, the fact that “polite” pronouns of address are initially sourced either from 2nd plural forms (as in Latin and Russian) or from 3rd singular forms (as in German and Norwegian) or from both 3rd person and plural forms (as in Tamil) shows (1) that denotational opacity of the form vis-à-vis the referent is selected for, and (2) that forms that are relatively less indexically transparent are used, and motivated to serve as signs of

deference to addressee. While “polite” pronominal forms are always conceptually elaborated as culturally-specific pragmatic tropes, at a first order they involve making reference less unambiguous and less indexically transparent.

As we can see, considered from the perspective of the comparative study of the pragmatics of personal reference, the prevalence of personal name taboos can be accounted for in part by the fact that personal names are an inherently referring noun-phrase type. As with cases of “politeness” distinctions in pronominal, anaphoric, and demonstrative paradigms, this inherent indexical relation between sign-form and referent is being re-analyzed as a nonreferential performative. That is, these inherently referential forms are being modeled as a kind of a speech act. The indexical dimension of reference always runs the risk of being converted into an all too explicit performativity. In French, one does not just address another as *tu*. Rather, one also engages in a recognizable speech act by using the form in question. Hence the existence of a special delocutive verb, *tutoyer* “to address someone with the *tu*-form,” to denote the speech act. The use of such unambiguously and transparently referential forms is often conventionalized in terms of interactionally mediated deference. So it is that where the referent is a father-in-law or the Emperor, presupposing one’s rights to unambiguously and transparently refer may become a liability.

### **Nomic Reference**

But though inherent referentiality can be seen to account, in part, for the prevalence with which they are avoided, it cannot account for why personal names—in contradistinction to other inherently referring noun-phrase types—are so often taboo (see endnote 1 on the distinction between “avoidance” and “taboo”). Considerations of inherent referentiality can account for why pronouns, anaphors, and names are so often sites of contextualized avoidance in honorific address and reference. It cannot, however, account for the features of unmentionability which are the most interesting formal characteristics of verbal taboo.

In some cases, like the name avoidance occasionally practiced towards parents-in-laws in the United States, avoidance of a personal name may be limited, in the manner we have just been discussing, to its use in address (see Table 2). What is avoided in such cases is the occurrence of a personal name when its referent occupies the speech-participant role of addressee. Such context-bound avoidance of personal names is common in the US and

Europe (cf. Brown and Ford 1961). This name avoidance in direct address may be a diachronic source of true name taboos. In Bengali, for instance, the taboo on a wife uttering the name of her husband, or of any male in-law of same or ascending generation, developed from pragmatic restrictions on her use of these names in direct address (Das 1968:24). In other instances, the two kinds of avoidance can be seen side by side. Among Banggi speakers of East Malaysia, personal names are avoided in addressing most categories of affines, but not in (3rd person) reference to them, while the personal names of core categories of affines (i.e., mother-in-law and father-in-law) are completely taboo (Boutin 1984:309). Similarly in Oromo (Ethiopia), the names of a man's mother- and father-in-law are wholly taboo to him while he merely avoids the names of his other affinal relations in direct address (Mbaya 2002:232).

Note that the avoidance of pronominal address does not follow this same pattern. That is, we do not see cases where an impolite 2nd person pronoun is avoided in direct address, in one context, while it is wholly unmentionable in another. While the use of impolite pronouns may have very serious interactional consequences when used in direct address, such impolite usages can typically be replicated in reportive mentions without themselves causing offense. Pronouns—as opposed to personal name taboos—are never unmentionable. The special properties of pronouns as “shifters” helps account for this difference. Of particular importance here is the fact that pronouns are reflexively calibrated in their defaults of denotation, while personal names are not.

Elaborating on the framework Jakobson (1957) presented in “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb,” Silverstein (1993) has introduced calibration type as a framework for formalizing the different ways in which what is said in a discursive interaction (the “denotational text” of a discursive interaction) can be indexically related to what is happening in it (the “interactional text” of a discursive interaction). To say that linguistic signs in context are reflexively calibrated is to say that features of the denotational text are given their values by appeal to features of the co-occurring interactional text. But of course, as Jakobson and Benveniste recognized long ago, this is precisely how the referential values of 1st and 2nd person pronouns are set. The denotation of such “shifters” can only be determined by knowing the identities of the central participants, the speaker and addressee respectively, of the ongoing discursive interaction. Importantly, the referential-defaults of such reflexively calibrated denotational categories can be re-

set by their occurrence under a reportive calibration, a calibration type in which denotational values are determined with respect to another event of signaling distinct from the co-occurring interactional text. Such re-setting of the default values occurs, for instance, when 1st and 2nd person pronouns are used within direct represented speech constructions. Note that in such cases (e.g., “Johnny said “*tu*” to the French teacher”) the pragmatic effect of the form does not “leak” (see Irvine’s paper in this volume) into the signaling event. Though the impolite 2nd person pronominal is “mentioned,” its occurrence is not considered to be disrespectful towards the addressee. Importantly, the addressee no longer need be the referent of the pronoun under such a framing. Though 2nd person pronominals may have performative pragmatic effects quite similar in kind to verbal taboos when they occur under a reflexive calibration, they are not unmentionable, in the specific sense of being unreportable or uncitable. Indeed, such acts of impolite address can quite readily be reported (i.e., ‘mentioned’) in full.

What is true of 1st and 2nd person pronouns is ipso facto the case for 3rd person anaphors and demonstratives. The very nature of such anaphoric indexicals is to be reportively calibrated. That is, they receive their specification from some other segment of signaling—e.g., cross-referenced noun-phrase, non-linguistic gesture, etc.—aside from the one in which they occur. The value of 3rd person anaphors and demonstratives often changes from discourse segment to discourse segment. This means that while, for instance, the impolite 3rd person masculine anaphor in Tamil, *avan*, may be inappropriate at one segment in discourse it may be expected in the next, as the identity of the individual referred to with it changes. That anaphors have their values set by reportive calibration means that, just as with personal pronouns, they do not become unmentionable. As we can see then, the reference of pronouns and anaphors varies depending upon different framed relationships of denotational and interactional text. These considerations account for the fact that pronouns, anaphors and demonstratives, while they may be avoided in contextualized discourse, rarely, if ever, become fully taboo or unmentionable.

Personal names function in a manner quite distinct from these other denotational indexicals. They occupy a special place on the so-called referential hierarchy of noun-phrase types (cf. Silverstein 1987b:149). They are at the mid-way point between the inherently referential denotational indexicals—the speech participant deictics, 3rd person anaphors, and demonstratives—and the more purely symbolic noun phrase types which make up the

great bulk of the lexicon, like kin and status terms, common nouns and natural kind terms, and indeed they share properties of both (see table 1). Like pronouns, personal names have an indexical aspect. In order to identify the referent of a personal name we must be linked through a chain of semiotic events to the performative and baptismal moment wherein referent and name were joined together. As Saul Kripke (1980 [1970]) illustrated, in his lectures on “Naming and Necessity,” it is not that personal names have a semantic intension—some one unique definite description—to which only one thing in the universe (its unique extension) conforms. Rather, the personal name is indexically connected to its referent through a singular (and performative) baptismal event which every use of the name subsequently presupposes. However, unlike other denotational indexicals, personal names are not given new specification in each event, either as a function of which individual occupies the role of speaker or addressee, as with pronouns, or depending on what antecedent noun-phrase cross-references them, as with anaphors. Rather, they are, as Kripke called them, rigid designators. Their reference is set once and for all.

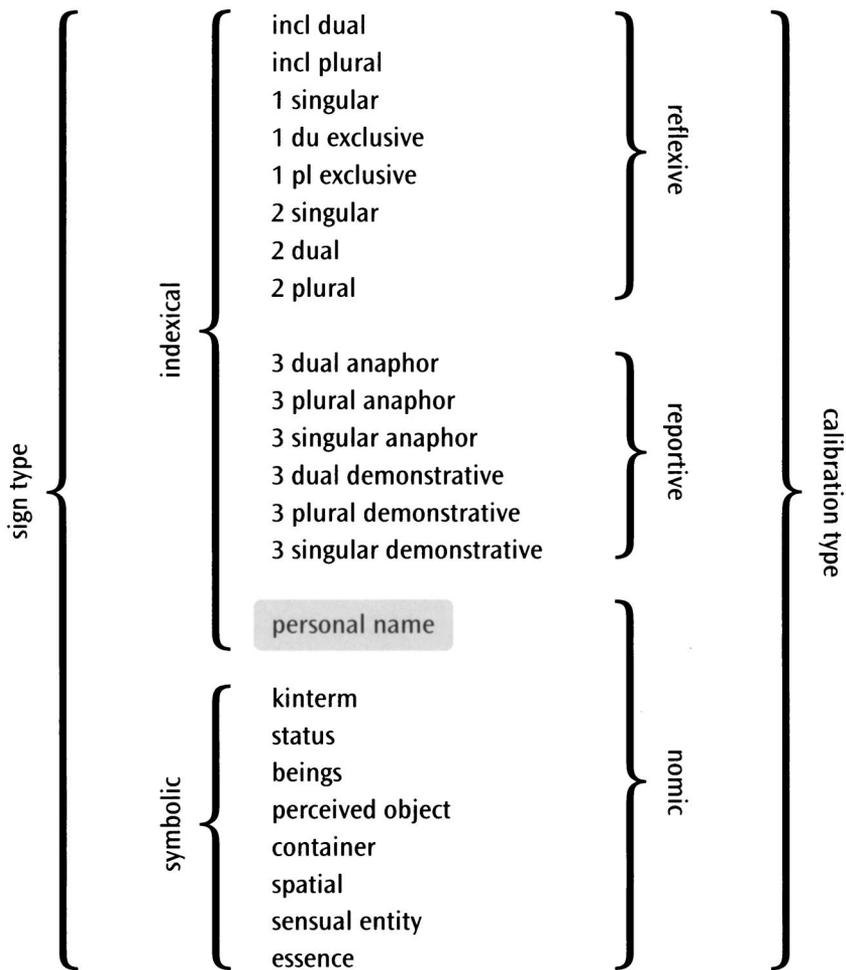
What then, is the calibration type of personal names? Their referential defaults are not set by co-occurring features of the immediate context, as with the reflexively calibrated 1st and 2nd person pronouns. Neither is their reference variably bound by co-textual cross-referencing, as is the case for the reportively calibrated 3rd person anaphors and demonstratives. Rather, personal names are more like the purely symbolic noun-phrase types, like common nouns, in this regard. Just as the denotation of a common noun is constant across instances of use, so too is the reference of a name constant across instances of its use. True symbols have their denotations, not as a function of this or that event of speaking, but rather because this is the content they are conventionally understood to have. Symbols have a nomic (that is, “timeless” or immutable) calibration of denotational to interactional text (cf. Handman 2010). Names, invariant in their reference across tokens, share this nomic calibration with symbols.

Personal names do differ from true symbols in their being inherently referential. The inherent reference of a personal name is predicated upon its indexical connection to its referent forged in an original and performative baptismal act itself replicated in each link of a speech chain which introduces the name and its associated referent to an ever wider community of speakers. Nevertheless, and despite this indexical dimension, personal names, like true symbols, are nomically calibrated. This is reflected in the

constancy of their reference across token instances, even under reportive calibrations (e.g., even within reported speech constructions). As Kripke argued, the reference of personal names, while not a priori, is necessary. For all possible worlds “Nixon” refers to Nixon. Even if, in some other world Nixon were never elected President, this name would still refer to the same

**Table 1**

*Hierarchy of noun phrase types after Silverstein (1987b) showing default calibration type on the right side of the display, and semiotic function or sign-type on the left-hand side. Note that personal names are the unique nomically calibrated indexical noun phrase type.*



individual (Kripke 1980 [1970]:40-53). It is in this sense, then, of nomic calibration—i.e., of truth in all possible worlds—that personal names are like pure symbols. Practically speaking this nomic reference of personal names is manifest in their uniform reference, not across possible worlds, but across universes of discourse for those socialized to the forms. Thus while the values of all other inherently referential noun-phrase types can be re-set, as when they occur within reported speech constructions, personal names have constant reference regardless of their contextualization in discourse.

As we can see, then, personal names are a special kind of noun-phrase type, uniting the constant denotation of the truly symbolic nouns with the indexical denotation of shifters, anaphoric pronouns and demonstratives. The difference between pronominal avoidance and the unmentionability of personal names can be accounted for by the fact that pronouns can change reference depending upon their contextualization in discourse, while personal names are constant in their reference. It is this particularity of their semiotic organization which accounts for the cross-cultural prevalence of personal name taboos. The “timeless” indexical relation between form and referent models and motivates a similarly immutable performative relation between form and referent which, in cases of taboos, must be avoided. There is a strong semiotic functional motivation for the inherent and invariant indexical relation between form and referent to be re-analyzed as a causal and performative one. Indeed, in cases of name taboos, the referential indexical function of the noun-phrase type serves as a ground, and site of semiotic exaptation, for a nonreferential performative function which, in some cases, all but supplants it.

### **Rigid Performativity**

The invariant reference of personal names across contexts of occurrence—what I have been calling their nomic reference—is functionally paralleled in the performativity of verbal taboos, whose negative connotations make them unmentionable under diverse contextualizations.<sup>2</sup> But while bad words cannot be recontextualized because of their negative interactional associations, names become taboo in part because they are always already resistant to recontextualization. Names, as we have just seen, are resistant to recontextualization qua referential indexicals because they maintain uniform reference even under reportive calibration. This is a reflection of the fact that their nomic calibration is infeasible. As I hope to show,

curse words and name taboos are similarly characterized by an indefeasible nomic calibration, here of performative function, of their tokens to their contexts of occurrence.

Name taboos, like all verbal taboos, are performative (cf. Searle 1969:155-156).<sup>3</sup> Being performative, they operate on the principle of iconic indexicality (Silverstein 1987a:34). A token of the performative accomplishes that which the type predicates (Benveniste 1971a [1963]:236). Just as with names, though here in the domain of performative predication and not of reference, the act is achieved through a nomic (or “timeless”) calibration of the denotational text—what is said—onto its interactional text—what is done (Silverstein 1993). That is, while performatives both reportively invoke other events and reflexively regiment participation in the interaction, it is their ability to instantiate rule-governed acts in the here and now of interaction which is their distinguishing property. The commonly used example of “explicit performativity,” after Austin (1962), is that of marriage. A token occurrence of the expression “*I hereby pronounce you man and wife*” instantiates that which the type predicates. That is, if performed by an authorized individual for a willing couple, it accomplishes a pronouncement of marriage. Performative formulae like this necessitate that quite a few contextual requirements, or “felicity conditions,” be met for the performatively achievable act to be accomplished. Not so for the performativity of curse words and other verbal taboos. Indeed a good provisional definition of a verbal taboo might be that it is a performative which has minimal if any felicity conditions on its success. If you are telling a story and you mention that the preacher pronounced them man and wife, you don’t risk inadvertently marrying your interlocuters. The same is not true with linguistic taboos. When Joe Scarborough “dropped the F-bomb” on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* in November of 2008, the reaction of his co-hosts and of management was no less dramatic because he did it in reporting the speech of Rahm Emanuel. Verbal taboos are performatives whose iconic-indexical function, in extreme cases, is indefeasible even as report (hence the need for special non-iconic citation forms, e.g., “F-word”).

As we can see, just as a diagnostic of the nomic reference of personal names was the constancy of their reference even under reportive calibration, so too is an important diagnostic of the extreme performativity at work in verbal taboos restrictions on quoting the target taboo form. Most performative utterance types—illocutionary acts organized around so-called “explicit performatives” (Austin 1962) like the English verbs “promise,” “for-

give,” and “name”—no longer have performative effects once framed as reported or represented speech. That is to say that they do not retain any perlocutionary effects under delocutionary derivation (cf. Benveniste 1971b [1958]). Unmentionables, like curse words or tabooed personal names are distinguished from such canonical speech-act verbs by the fact that they still have perlocutionary effects when framed as represented or reported speech. A second, though related, diagnostic of the extreme performativity of verbal taboos is the avoidance of forms which are similar to the taboo target, along relevant axes of iconism (see next section). These two diagnostics signal a kind of verbal performativity which is, as Silverstein (e-mail message to the author, March 27, 2008) has termed it, undecontextualizable. Any occurrence of a form iconic with the type—whether it be a token of the type reproduced within a reported speech construction or the occurrence of an unrelated homophone—is sufficient in and of itself to instantiate the performative effects of the tabooed form. These two symptoms of verbal taboos suggest that these words and expressions so effectively and unavoidably create or entail their contexts of occurrence that attempts to neuter them of performative effect by recontextualization always run the risk of replicating their taboo effects. Indeed their semiotic uniqueness consists in this fact. It is this undecontextualizability of perlocutionary effect that defines what we might call the rigid performativity of verbal taboos.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Token Becomes the Type**

If name taboo involves a re-analysis of the invariant referential relationship between form and referent as a similarly invariant performative relationship instantiated in each and every token of the name, then homophone and near-homophone avoidance—the avoidance, that is, of words phonetically similar to the taboo target—is characterized by the avoidance not only of all tokens of the taboo type but also of a range of forms which are conventionally understood to be iconic with tokens of the taboo type. Such homophone and near-homophone avoidance is common in cases of name taboo, but it is by no means universal. It represents a kind of final stage in the ideological essentialization of the performative effect (what Austin [1962] calls the “perlocution” of a performative) as adhering in the material substance of the form itself. In such cases performativity ceases to be governed by the denotational sense or reference of the word-types which trigger it. Here the relationship between word meaning and performative

effect, already noticeably dislodged in the case of verbal taboos whose semantic meanings bear only a tangential relation to their pragmatic efficacy, is fully decoupled. It is to such iconic avoidances of verbal taboos, and what they reveal about rigid performativity, that we now turn.

In the case of tabooed personal names, as with other avoidance behavior generally, it is common for words which are similar to the taboo target to also become taboo. (Rupert Stasch, in an earlier version of his paper for this issue, gave this the apt moniker of “iconophobia.”) The contagious spread of verbal taboos to other parts of the lexicon is a scourge well known to historical linguists since such avoidance, and the lexical replacement which it leads to (often by word borrowing from neighboring languages) may result in rapid lexical change and diffusion. Under such conditions not only the taboo target but similar sounding phonetic strings in speech, or similar orthographic forms in writing, are also avoided. This avoidance of similar forms is a property of non-linguistic taboos just as much as it is of verbal taboos, and may occur in any modality whatsoever. For instance, characters that were similar to the written name of the Emperor were also tabooed in Imperial China.

Perhaps the best studied case of homophone and near-homophone avoidance arising from name taboos is that of the *hlonipha* speech register used among Zulu speakers. Irvine (1998) has shown that women’s respectful speech in the home, organized around the focal point of the avoidance of the father-in-law’s name, was calqued on in the emergence of men’s respectful speech with regard to the King or Chief, which consists in an avoidance of his name and words similar to it. For instance, taboos on the personal names *uMpande*, *uNdlela*, and *sandla* meant that the words *iMpande* “root,” *iNdlela* “path,” and *isAndla* “hand” were also avoided (Irvine 1998, Raum 1979:79). In Zulu, personal names are derived from words, so both semantic and phonological factors may be at work in the spreading of the avoidance from the taboo target to similar words. This is not always the case. In Tahiti the name of the King, and of like sounding words, were taboo until his death. Upon the succession to the throne of King Tu, the homophone and near-homophones *tu* “to stand,” *fetu* “star,” and *tui* “to strike,” were also prohibited (Simons 1982:211). Among Kambaata women in Ethiopia, who also employ an honorific in-law avoidance register, “words starting with the same syllable as the name of [a woman’s father- or mother-in-law] have to be avoided” (Treis 2005:295). Thus a woman whose father-in-law is called “*Tirágo*” must avoid a range of words with the initial syllable *#ti*.

In these cases we should note the analogy between avoiding the quotative mention of the form, as a preliminary stage in the becoming taboo of a word, and the avoidance of e.g., phonetically, orthographically, gesturally, etc. similar forms of different word-types. While the former process involves an unmentionability at the level of the word- or name-type, this latter pattern of avoidance involves an unmentionability at the level of the token. It reflects a reification of the taboo-performativity as inherent in the material substance of the form itself, and no longer only insofar as the form is a token of the taboo type. Within the Peircean framework of type/token relations (Peirce and Welby 1977) we would say that this represents a movement from avoiding all tokens of the taboo type to a broader avoidance, of all tones (or 'marks') of tokens of the taboo type (see Table 2). That is, the material substance of the sign, whether phonetic, graphic, or gestural, need only be (taken to be) iconic with tokens of the taboo type for them to be avoided. Material instances need not be taken to be tokens of the taboo type to still have performative effects.

In some cases, this situation arises as forms which are not tokens of the taboo type are avoided out of anxieties about the possibility that they may mistakenly be taken to be tokens of the taboo type (cf. contemporary controversies surrounding the use of the English adjective "niggardly"). This common correlate of taboos (both linguistic and non-linguistic) might be described semiotically as consisting in a flexibility of token-iconism under conditions of extreme performativity, since a wider range of forms are taken to be tokens of, that is iconic with, a taboo word- or expression-type than is the case with non-taboo-expression-types. This flexibility of iconism is a function of anxieties about the indefeasible performativity of a given sign type. Where any occurrence of a given phonetic sound sequence—from those occurring in reported speech constructions to innocent homophones—can have taboo effects extra precautions must be taken to safeguard against accidental or otherwise inadvertent violations of the prohibition. A good example of this overcompensation comes from Haas (1964 [1957]), whose essay on interlingual word taboo documents how native speakers of Thai and Creek, while in the company of native English speakers, would avoid words in those languages which appeared to their ears similar to English curse words.

Such anxieties about similar sounding forms being taken to be tokens of the taboo type and/or counting as performative instances themselves, likely often contribute to the genesis of homophone avoidance. At the very least such anxieties act as an efficient cause or feedback loop operative in

the maintenance and propagation of taboos (cf. Malinowski 1948:30-31 on anxiety and ritualization). Whatever the case may be, as the avoidance registers which surround name taboos become conventionalized it is clear that mere iconism with tokens of the taboo type is sufficient to achieve the performative effect. No one need misinterpret the occurrence of the homophone as being a token of the taboo word-type for the form to have its undesired causal effects. The distinction is subtle, but important. Take for instance the Tahitian word for “star,” *fetu*, whose second syllable is phonetically identical to the name of a long deceased Tahitian King. An occurrence of the word “star” during the reign of King Tu wouldn’t have been misinterpreted as a token of the King’s name. It still denoted “star.” Nevertheless, such occurrences of the Tahitian word for “star” were taboo during the life of the King because the phonetic form itself instantiated the performative function. In such a case, the performative function is autonomous from the original taboo word-type. It is not just the King’s name which is taboo, but also a conventionalized repertoire of forms corresponding to a phonetic-type identical with his name.

Note that this instantiates a more extreme kind of unmentionability than the kind where the taboo form cannot occur when quoted. This is an unmentionability in the technical sense of the “use/mention” distinction often invoked by philosophers, (i.e., a citational mention of the kind: “Socrates’ has eight letters” [Searle 1969:73]). From the perspective of how to represent this we might say that [tu] is taboo, giving a phonetic representation to the verbal taboo, since denotation or reference—and thus the dimension of phonemic as opposed to phonetic representation—no longer has anything to do with the realization of the taboo. Indeed, the double articulation of the linguistic sign is severed in half in this final stage in the naturalization of rigid performatives. Here the last felicity condition on the effectiveness of the performative, that the form only instantiates the type inasmuch as it is a token of it, is lost. In these cases of homophone avoidance the token has become the type.

In cases of homophone avoidance the performative becomes a type without sense or reference—a purely perlocutionary effect, where the referential dimension of the personal name has been wholly converted into a non-referential indexical effect. Of course this is not to say that the performative isn’t still instantiated in word-types that do have sense and reference (e.g., in the Tahitian word for star or the name for the King). It is just to say that there is no longer any necessary and rule-governed relation between the

denotation or reference of those forms (i.e., /fetu/ or /tu/) and the illocutionary effect of the taboo type (i.e., [tu]). Such rigid performatives as are instantiated both in tokens of the source type and in its homophones represent the sublation of the performative principle, freeing the perlocutionary effect of tabooed personal names from reference as the guiding principle of their operation.

**Table 2**

*Three stages of unmentionability in personal name avoidance and taboo. The first stage is characteristic of name avoidance in US and Europe (cf. Brown & Ford 1961). An example might be of someone avoiding addressing his or her father-in-law (e.g., Phillip) by first name. The example from the second stage is of a wife's avoiding ever saying her husband's name in Tamil. The name "Ayyu" is an example from Trawick (1996:96). For the third stage, homophone avoidance, I have given examples from Tahitian (see discussion above). PN = personal name.*

	Avoidance of PN in address- ing referent	Avoidance of all tokens of the PN type	Avoidance of all forms (‘tones’) iconic with tokens of the type		
TYPES (lexical)	[PN.Phillip]	PN.Ayyu	PN.Tu	“star”	“to.strike”
TOKENS (phonemic)		/ayyu/	/tu/	/fetu/	/tui/
TONES (phonetic)			[tu]	[fetu]	[tui]

### Flexibility of Iconism and the Ritualization of Avoidance

Homophone and near-homophone avoidance represents an essentialization of the performative effect of verbal taboos as adhering in the material sign-form itself. At the same time, the phonolexical range of forms which are avoided in such cases serves as an analog or iconic-indexical measure of the rigid performativity of a form. For instance, in Twana, a Salishan language of the Pacific Northwest, there was a taboo on saying the name of a dead adult. This did not, however, always affect homophones.

Unlike the name taboo, which automatically operated on the death of anyone bearing an adult name, the word taboo went into effect only on the initiative of the deceased's kin, involved sponsorship of a formal feast, and seems only to have been exercised in cases where the deceased was a prominent upper-class person. (Elmendorf 1951:206)

Elmendorf (1951:207) also cites the case of a family of low status failing in their attempt to get a homophone of a dead relative's name prohibited. As we can see, in some cases only the names are taboo while in others both the name and its homophones are. The distinction is not an arbitrary one. Rather, flexibility of iconism (i.e., the range of phonolexical avoidance) functions as a second-order index of the elevated social standing of the individual referred to by the name and of his or her kin-group. Similarly, in Hawaii and Tahiti the names of chiefs were tabooed while those of kings were both tabooed and homophones of their names were also avoided (Frazer 1958). Just as a wider cone of avoidance may surround the names of those of higher-status, so too are there cases where those of lower-status are expected to go to further lengths in avoiding forms that might be considered iconic to the taboo target. Gendered asymmetries are pronounced in the case of the *hlonipha* name avoidance registers. While a husband avoids the name of his mother-in-law he does not generally avoid homophones of her name, while the wife must avoid not only the father-in-law's name but also homophones and words containing any syllables of the father-in-law's name (Herbert 1990a:461). As Herbert notes, this greater constraint in speech is an index of the lower status of women in Zulu society. Spousal name taboos in South Asia seem to be similarly gendered being either reciprocal or tending to asymmetrically affect the speech of women more than that of men.

In these cases, greater flexibility of iconism in homophone avoidance is correlated with asymmetrical power relationships between speakers and referents. In Twana—and indeed in all cases of royal name taboo—homophone avoidance is a nonreferential referent-focal index. It is the referent of the personal name and his or her kin-group which is paid respect, and which thus accrues status, through avoidance of the form. In Zulu, the greater flexibility of iconism which affects women's avoidance speech over the avoidance speech of men is a nonreferential speaker-focal index of the relatively lower status of women. Flexibility of token-iconism, a dialectical relationship between anxieties about just how little similarity between phonetic segments and tokens of the taboo type is sufficient for a given

utterance to count as a performative, and the ritualization or conventionalization of avoidance repertoires, cyclically naturalizes the performative efficacy of verbal taboos. The speaker-focal and referent-focal deference entitlements diagrammed through the asymmetrical elaboration of avoidance registers often reflect the ways in which these anxieties of social relationship differentially affect those of lower status.

In these cases we can see that flexibility of iconism correlates with the degree of essentialization of rigid performativity and the severity of penalties paid in cases of breach of the taboo (cf. Herbert 1990a:459 on correlation between degree of elaboration of Zulu avoidance registers and severity of punishments accompanying breaches of them). Greater flexibility of iconism corresponds to heightened anxieties about occurrences of the taboo form. The hazards of such formal contagion may be seen to account, in no small part, for the frequent reliance on maximally differentiated, non-derived, and often suppletive forms as substitutes for taboo forms. It is in this regard that verbal taboo has always been a thorn in the side of historical linguistics. In lexical replacement a premium is placed on formal difference. This is reflected in the reliance on word-borrowing (e.g., Holzknicht 1987 on the Markham languages). But such avoidance of iconicity may extend even beyond word-level units to the phonetic sound segments themselves, reflecting the focus on material sign-forms and their phonetic realization. In Zulu, clicks are much more prominent in *hlonipha* register items, and likely have entered the language by being used in substitute terms in the avoidance register (Irvine 1998:65). It is notable that in such borrowing clicks were not assimilated to velar stops or some other less marked phonetic realization (Herbert 1990b:299). Given that not only the name but the syllables which make up the name were conventionally avoided in the *hlonipha* register, the phonetically highly marked clicks from the neighboring Khoisan languages would have offered Zulu and Xhosa speakers safe substitutes in their avoidance of taboo words (Herbert 1990b:299, 303-304).

In such cases, we see the iconic indexical differentiation of avoidance registers from the taboo types from which they emerge. This consists in a kind of analog or by degrees differentiation where the iconic indexical range of avoidance, or flexibility of iconism between taboo targets, itself serves as an emblem of the performative effect of the avoided form. Ritualization and conventionalization of avoidance registers occurs at sites of anxiety as a means to contain the performative effects of taboo forms. Ironically, this

elaboration only serves to naturalize those performative effects and essentialize them as inherent in the avoided phonetic forms themselves.

### **Essentialization and Enregisterment of Taboos**

At the level of language ideology, the loss of felicity conditions characteristic of the emergence of rigid performativity motivates a change in the conceptualization of how the taboo operates. Taboo performativity does not depend upon contextual factors or “felicity conditions,” like the speaker’s intentions or the appropriateness of the social context, to have its effectiveness. It requires only the occurrence of the taboo form. Under such conditions there is a tendency for the taboo to be ideologically conceptualized in purely sign-centric terms. The taboo effect must be the effect of the material sign form itself, for wherever and whenever it occurs it has this effect. This sign-centricity of ideological conceptualization arises in dialectical relation with greater and greater constraints on the occurrence of the name-form (e.g., from avoidance of its use only in direct address to all tokens of the taboo name-type to all occurrences iconic with tokens of the type). In this sense then, movement from avoidance of direct address to full unmentionability is also correlated with degree or manner of ideological elaboration. Context-bound avoidance is generally conceptualized straightforwardly in terms of face-to-face interactional effects and figures, like “politeness” and “respect.” True unmentionability, on the other hand, may be associated with supernatural effects, like crop failure (Haruai), injury to referent (Tamil), injury to speaker (Zulu; Herbert 1990a:461), or the visitation of an ancestral spirit (Kewa; Simons 1982:213), etc. This is not a necessary relation, but rather one of motivation. In-law unmentionability in Kambaata, for instance, is quite readily conceptualized in terms of “shame” and “respect.” Nevertheless, ideologies which essentialize linguistic form with highly specific supernatural performative properties tend to be those which are similarly unmentionable. Certainly this is the case culture-internally, where greater homophone avoidance is correlated with heightened performative values of deference and status, as in the Twana case discussed above.

Such ideological conceptualizations are projections from the unmentionability of words and expressions. Constraints on the production of a form-type and of tokens iconic with it are reanalyzed as evidence of the active performativity of linguistic form at the level of ideological conceptualization. The avoidance of forms iconic with tokens of the type dialectic-

tically naturalizes essentializing and sign-centric ideologies concerning the active performativity of personal name taboos. It is precisely in the fact that contingent homophonies inadvertently uttered count as occurrences of the performative that serves as the self-evidence that the power of the locution is in the form itself.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show some of the bottom-up processes at play in the dialectical emergence of verbal taboos. I have argued that semiotic function is one very important factor in their development, as the ubiquity of personal name taboos attests. Referential indexical functions are often re-analyzed as having specific nonreferential indexical effects, as in the case of pragmatic contrasts in pronominal address. In the case of names, “rigid designators” which pick out the same referent across all possible worlds, token occurrences can be explicitly reconceptualized as instances of performative predication relating speaker and referent. The inherent indexical relation between form and referent characteristic of personal names implicitly models beliefs about what consequences will befall the speaker or referent as a consequence of a token occurrence of a taboo name.

Once forms are conceptualized as having an inherent performative potential to be avoided their taboo status is further naturalized through another bottom-up process originating in anxieties about the performative potential of taboo forms—that is, the tendency for more and more diverse signs to be taken as tokens of the taboo type. This flexibility of iconism motivates the avoidance of forms similar to tokens of the taboo type and the conventionalization of appropriate substitutes often exaggerated in polar opposition to the taboo target in order to avoid risking any chance occurrence of the taboo. Such avoidance registers, because they treat homophones and near-homophones as tantamount to tokens of the taboo type, frame the performative efficacy of name taboos as adhering in the material substance of the signs themselves. Asymmetries in the verbal circumvention of phonetic forms iconic with the taboo name further emblemize beliefs about what avoidance registers and violations of verbal taboos do within a given society, serving as diagrams of the performative power of the taboo forms that they are organized around. Verbal taboos, and their unmentionability, reveal formal patterns (i.e. avoidance practices) and functional properties

(i.e. performative essentialization) to be mutually reinforcing and inseparable aspects of a unified sociolinguistic phenomenon.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>In this paper ‘avoidance’ refers to the suppression of a term in contextualized usage. To say that a word is ‘taboo’ has a stronger significance, referring to the suppression of a word or expression not only in contextualized usage but also, minimally, in reported speech constructions (i.e., a ‘taboo’ word is unmentionable). Where a form is avoided only in certain construction types—like an impolite pronoun avoided only when being used to refer to addressee—we may say that it is avoided. Where all tokens, including those occurring in reported speech constructions, are avoided, we say a form is taboo.

<sup>2</sup>Note that in giving a semiotic-functional account of verbal taboo I have held speech genre as a constant variable. Just as curse words are wholly taboo within certain speech genres—e.g., on the TV news—so too are they exploited to exaggerated effect in others—cf. Seizer’s paper on stand-up comedy in this volume. For words and expressions to be taboo they need to be unmentionable under diverse contextualizations—i.e., in nomic, reflexive, and most importantly, repertive calibrations of denotational to interactional text—only for some speech genres, not for all of them. Indeed, the oft exploited interactional value of curse words—e.g., as emblems of interactional solidarity and affect—derives precisely from their being unmentionable in other speech genres (cf. the frequent co-occurrence of ‘joking relationships’ and ‘in-law avoidance registers’). The question of the social organization of discursive restraint and of the necessarily intertextual basis for the value of entailing social indexicals, while interesting in its own right, is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup>The assimilation of all rigid performatives—whether four-letter words or tabooed personal names—to the same pragmatic functions as a result of their unmentionability is witnessed in the fact that quite often taboo personal names perform a secondary function as swear words, or oaths. “When an aboriginal [from Cape York Peninsula] inadvertently strikes his toe against a stump or root he does not break out with an oath or obscene expression, but calls upon the name of a relative long deceased.” (Thomson 1935:467) Similarly, among the Zulu otherwise avoided taboo names may be used as swears (Raum 1973:68-70). See also Stasch (2008:4) for a similar practice in Korowai. Unmentionability gives performative and affective value to forms, though invariably folk-consciousness understands the order of causation to be the reverse—i.e., as stemming from the e.g., ‘dirty’ or ‘bad’ properties of the forms themselves.

<sup>4</sup>The term “rigid performativity,” which was suggested to me by Michael Silverstein, captures the idea that name taboos stand at the intersection of those two great themes of reflection on indexicality in 20th century analytic philosophy; speech-act performativity in the tradition of J.L. Austin and the rigid designation of personal names in the tradition of Saul Kripke.

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