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THE UNMENTIONABLE: VERBAL TABOO AND THE MORAL LIFE OF LANGUAGE

Introduction: Beyond Bad Words

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As that which ought not to be said, taboo speech involves the moral life of language. Efforts to proscribe speech may be justified variously, by appeal to religious dictates, state policy, or etiquette. They may be conventionalized and institutionalized, policed and punished in myriad ways. But a familiar irony haunts all these efforts: proscription is, in a word, productive (cf. Foucault 1978, Butler 1997). The more intense the interdiction, the more power seems to accrue to the transgressive act.

From Freud's theory of subconscious repression to the laments over the failure and futility of civility campaigns, this irony is a familiar one. The more that taboo acts are prohibited, the more their power seems to grow. The same is true for language use. Under proscriptive regimes, like the FCC-ban on obscenities on broadcast television and radio, or the edicts of the royal court in Tahiti prohibiting the utterances of the king's name (Simons

1982), one can't even innocently "mention" a taboo expression, by embedding the wayward curse in a quote, for instance, without the utterance counting as a taboo "use." Verbal taboos are, properly speaking, *unmentionable*. Ironically, proscriptions and even the appropriate substitutes these regimes recommend (e.g., euphemisms, circumlocutions, special citational forms like "the F-word") make taboo utterances more salient. And rather than fix or stabilize a speaker's relation to the taboo object—by ensuring a safe, respectful "distance," for instance—proscription and efforts at containment seem to make such relations *less* stable. As conventions, they may now be flouted, parodied, played upon, or otherwise altered for strategic and interactional effect. These essays on the moral life of language thus explore the dynamic affordances and instabilities of verbal taboo, with cases that draw on diverse languages from sites and populations across the globe. In addressing the manifold ways in which proscription is productive, we push past an earlier literature that saw verbal taboo as a matter strictly of "avoidance" and "control," and as involving the mechanical reproduction of cultural norms and values.

1. Unmentionables as Performatives. A core irony explored in this issue is the way proscriptions can intensify the performativity of would-be taboos items, investing the prohibited forms with a seemingly inherent power and efficacy, to the extent that the expressions are seen to have inescapable, indefeasible effects. John Austin (1962), it may be recalled, argued that speech-act performativity depends in part on features of context, which he formulated in terms of "felicity conditions." For a wedding to be successful, the individual who says "I now pronounce you man and wife" must be an ordained minister, the couple willing, and a witness present. Such felicity conditions precede, condition, and otherwise constrain the performativity of language; without them the performative utterance wouldn't count as an act. But taboo utterances (e.g., saying the F-word on FCC-regulated broadcasts or uttering the Tahitian king's name) rest on few, if any, such conditions. Like pragmatic "prefabs" or "readymades," these expressions seem to have their context coiled tight inside. Utter them, and they count as a social act (as profanity, blasphemy, social injury, etc.) irrespective of felicity conditions like the intentions of speech participants or the institutional authority of the speaker to engage in the act. Quote a verbal taboo in a reported speech construction and you risk replicating the offense. Unmentionables may become so essentialized that their performativity comes to rest on few

if any felicity conditions, demonstrating a seldom appreciated point: performativity is *gradient*, a matter of degree.[1] The strong indexicals—from curse words to stigmatized dialects—that the authors in this volume discuss represent points at the far end of this continuum.

2. Hazards of Addressivity. Strong performatives usher into existence not just actions, like 'blasphemy,' but addressees. Unmentionables not only accomplish acts, they also project their own participation frameworks— their own models of communicative events and the actors that inhabit them. Given that linguistic deference and insult, confrontation and avoidance are typically a function of who the *addressee* is, this suggests that we should inquire into what Bakhtin (1986:95) called "addressivity," an utterance's "quality of being directed to someone." Prophylactic practices surrounding verbal taboos, like in-law avoidance registers in Australia, often require speakers to avoid directly addressing the taboo target. Here the figure of the "bystander," frequently a trigger of avoidance practices, emerges from these anxieties and avoidances surrounding certain categories of would-be addressee.

Taboo expressions (and even substitute expressions like euphemisms) ironically thrust the speaker, the potential transgressor, into the relational *co-presence* of these (now ratified) addressees, some of whom may be present or in ear-shot, while others may be virtual addressees—addressees who can't be seen or heard because they reside beyond the close quarters of the here-and-now speech event (Agha and Wortham 2005). Such is the case with the verbal taboos surrounding hunting and fishing (especially prevalent in Oceania) where speakers avoid everyday words to mask their presence and intentions from spectral overhearers, whether those be predators or prey, demons or ancestor spirits (e.g., Pawley 1992, Fox 2005). Whom do I risk offending with bad words and blasphemes, a co-present bystander, like a mother-in-law, or an overhearing "superaddressee" (Bakhtin 1986) like God, the FCC, or, as Lempert (this issue) shows, a constituency—as in cases where commentarial pundits read candidate avoidance of "The Issues" as a bid to appease segments of the electorate. This doesn't mean that these spectral overhearers and ethereal addressees are necessarily materialized in the moment of utterance, as illustrated well by Silverstein's essay (this issue) on what is now a minor industry of political commentary: critical, after-the-fact readings of candidate bloopers. Nevertheless, anxieties about, and heightened attention to, addressivity,

which arise under regimes of proscription, can materialize the addressees these regimes try not to offend. Stasch's essay (this issue) on Korowai speakers of West Papua, Indonesia, shows with particular clarity "avoidance's paradoxical logic of achieving relational intensification through relational restraint," that is, "[a]voidance indexes attentive restraint toward an other, and thus *creates* intensified relatedness through that restraint." Irvine (this issue) spotlights this irony well when she recalls A.W. Read's (1964) notion of "ostentatious taboo," expressions like the furtive "you-know-what"—said with non-vocal accompaniments like "smirking, the arched eyebrow, a slyness of manner" (Read 1964:162)—that draw attention to the "eight-hundred-pound gorilla" precisely through the noisy effort to shoo it away.

3. *Strategies of Containment and Conventionalization.* Proscription may ratchet up the performative strength of speech and ironically make taboo addressees more salient, but proscriptive regimes do offer speakers acceptable, conventionalized methods of "avoidance" and "containment." What do these methods do, though? These substitute signs mitigate—or, rather, *purport* to mitigate—the risk of transgression and fix appropriate, often morally inflected, relations between speaker and the hazardous agent or object. Irvine's essay surveys several major categories of containment strategy, including stratagems by which speakers displace "responsibility" for utterances (Hill and Irvine 1993), as they do when they frame a taboo utterance as "merely" reported speech and thereby appear uncommitted to its content or consequences (Goffman 1974, 1981). These strategies often include non-linguistic modalities of communication. In Guugu-Yimidhirr, an Australian Aboriginal language, there existed a distinctive "brother-in-law" register used for speaking within earshot of taboo kin (Haviland 1987). This was not exclusively linguistic, for one would also sit at a distance and studiously avoid eye contact.

Earlier literature on taboo often resorted to functionalist correlations between social structure and taboo behavior, as if the latter just reflects and reproduces the former, but the containment strategies of proscriptive regimes don't necessarily preserve and stabilize social relationships to taboo objects. If anything, these methods ironically engender entropy, destabilizing the containment they desire. As the case of Guugu-Yimidhirr's brother-in-law register reminds us, conventionalization here involves register formation or "enregisterment" (Agha 2007), where repertoires of

speech forms like oft-studied "avoidance registers" (Haviland 1979, Laughren 2001) become separated out and invested with cultural value for some social domain of people. Once ways of handling taboo objects are enregistered, they can become objects of further, second-order reflection, making counter- and alternative-valorizations possible (Silverstein 2003). In this volume, for instance, Stasch shows how, among the Korowai, close friendships can be created by troping upon the name avoidance conventions which characterize in-law avoidance—deferential attention to the other in speech coming here to signal not the respect and distance of the affinal relation but the affection of friendship. Haviland (this issue) shows how fast-talking street performers in Mexico City use bad language to comic effect, while parting their clients from their money. Seizer (this issue) shows how the enregisterment of bad language in the stand-up comedy scene, the fact that it is now expected, inspires secondary forms of classification that stand-up comics use to sort out who they are. It allows them to distinguish true performance artists from hacks who get cheap laughs from "dick jokes."

4. Sign-Fetishes in Ideologies of Verbal Taboo. An oft-reported instability that stems from conventionalization has to do with the way taboo expressions infect expressions that sound like them, or the way in which substitute expressions—avoidance terms—themselves become taboo. Euphemisms are notoriously unstable and need to be replaced rapidly, a dynamic Pinker (2007:320) has dubbed the "euphemism treadmill." Forms of contagion (cf. Tylor 1913, Frazer 1963), whereby speakers avoid not only the taboo expressions, but signs that seem similar in material form, are common as well. Where words felt to resemble the taboo expression are also avoided the class of unmentionable forms expands. In the Ethiopian language Kambaata, for instance, married women observe a name taboo with their in-laws to convey deference to them; they avoid not only the names, but many words sharing the same first syllable (Treis 2005). In Australian languages like Guugu-Yimidhirr, name taboos were traditionally observed upon an individual's death, but one also avoided words that sounded like the deceased's name. To fill the gaps in the lexicon, the community would then borrow words from a neighboring dialect or language leading to rapid linguistic change.

The avoidance of forms iconic to verbal taboos reflects the idea that the performative power of the forms resides in the material signs them-

selves. The avoidance registers that emerge around verbal taboos tend to naturalize convention (Parmentier 1994), making the arbitrariness of unmentionables seem motivated by their very substance. Prophylactic measures surrounding the mentioning of unmentionables tend to frame the performative power of these utterance-types as inherent to the sign forms themselves, as if their potency were lodged "in" the material substance of the sign itself. In her essay on a forbidden performance of the 'Great Speech' of the Mopan Maya, Danziger (this volume) calls this a kind of "symptomic" (Keller 1998) conception of language, in which "sign form is taken to be necessarily related to sign content through indexical relations of cause and effect, part-whole, or other kinds of (meta)physical contiguity." Explaining the naturalization of verbal taboo requires appeal to institutional practices and language ideologies that foster it, like the FCC-ban on obscenities on broadcast television and radio during the hours of 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. or royal edicts in Tahiti prohibiting the use of words that sound like the king's name (Simons 1982, Stokes 1955:323). But at the same time, the tendency of ideologies of verbal taboo to fixate on the materiality of sign forms—their essentialization of performative efficacy as a force "in" the signs themselves—may be reinforced by strategies of containment that frame the sign's substance as having power independent of any sign-external felicity conditions.

Prior work on verbal taboo tended to privilege words-and-expressions while neglecting the manifold nonreferential indexical effects of proscribed language. Several essays in this issue do focus on canonical examples of verbal taboo, proscribed words and expressions like personal names, bad words, and blasphemes. Others, however, describe cases of more diffuse, configurational, and multiply realizable verbal taboos, like the avoidance of accent, register, and discourse topic. Lempert, for instance, considers the way professional commentators scrutinize candidate behavior before "The Issues" in US political debate—a category of discourse topic—while Kuipers shows how framing knowledge as a collective effort is stigmatized in middle-school science classrooms. A pair of papers, Frekko on the avoidance of Castilian in Catalonia, and Moore on a moral panic surrounding a stigmatized dialect in Dublin, showcase unmentionable languages and "accents," units that possess much of the performative potency of swear words. *Any* facet of language, Irvine reminds us, may be targeted for proscription. While the study of verbal taboo needs to

look beyond the special case of proscribed words and expressions, Fleming considers why some kinds of words, like personal names, do tend to become taboo more frequently than others. He finds cross-linguistic motivation that explains why certain forms tend to be singled-out and enregistered by proscriptive regimes, just as he finds motivation for the avoidance of forms iconic with taboo targets—an important way in which proscription is linguistically productive.

In sum, work on "bad language" (e.g., Andersson and Trudgill 1990, Wajnryb 2005, Allan and Burridge 2006, McEnery 2006) has rarely explored the myriad nonreferential indexical effects of proscribed speech varieties or the way these repertoires do things other than threaten the moral order. Explaining such effects means appreciating the natural histories of taboo language, how they are conventionalized and made into value-laden registers—and not by treating bad words as readymade repertories whose pragmatic meaning derives from their unclean or salacious semantic content, which is just how many proscriptivists, and some researchers, tend to think about bad language. Rather than approach verbal taboo with paradigms that exclusively focus on the referential and denotational properties of linguistic form, the essays in this volume approach unmentionables in terms of their performative and indexical functions. In analyzing the interplay between proscriptive regimes and the intense, often indefeasible, performativity of unmentionables, we hope this volume will open up new perspectives on the study of indexicality as a gradient phenomenon.

ENDNOTE
[1]For a different, more purely speech-act-based attempt to scale illocutionary force in terms of relative "strength" and "weakness," see Ahern's (1979) essay on ritual performativity.

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