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What are the linguistic taboos on the tabooness of incest?

A cross-linguistic research to query the universality of the incest taboo

Taboos have been prevalent in all societies throughout history. Taboos prescribe behaviours related to death, food, and sexuality, and one of the primary sexual taboos is incest. Incest is worth exploring from a sociolinguistic perspective as it is both a social and linguistic taboo. Incest is defined as a prohibition of marrying within a kinship and is said to be universal (Lévi-Strauss 1949).

Therefore, we aim to investigate whether the same social taboo is reflected in similar linguistic taboos across different languages and cultures. To achieve this, we will conduct a cross-linguistic study comparing the treatment of the incest taboo in British and French newspapers. A corpus was compiled through the keyword incest from 2017 to 2022, starting from the #MeToo outburst up to the first collection day.

To begin with, we will discuss the methodological challenges of using corpus linguistics to study cross-linguistic taboos. Cross-linguistic studies are an under-explored area of corpus linguistics (Freake et al., 2011; Vessey, 2013; Taylor, 2014; Nardone, 2016). Conducting a cross-linguistic study involves three main methodological issues. The first consideration is to ensure equivalent keywords in both languages across unparallel yet comparable corpora. The second issue is a 'translation-related challenge' (Partington et al. 2013, p. 190). The final consideration is that not all cultural elements are transferable from one context to another, which implies a 'cross-cultural variation' (Ibid, p. 191). For instance, the French newspapers are divided into national and regional publications, unlike the British press, split into tabloids and broadsheets.

Finally, we will analyse the use of language, including keywords (Baker, 2004; Baker et al., 2013; Brookes & Baker, 2021) and discourse prosodies (Baker, 2006; Partington, 2013; Taylor & Marchi, 2018; Tranchese, 2023), to discuss incest in these two cultures. The linguistic similarities and differences will be closely examined to question the universality of the incest taboo.

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