

# **Euphemization and Representations of the Verbal Taboo in Ozarkian Dialect**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Euphemization is a common linguistic phenomenon wherein a speaker replaces an offensive or harsh word or phrase with one that is more mild or ambiguous. The words that are euphemized by a speech community in turn reveal much about that society's underlying notions of what is undesirable or worthy of disapproval, namely its notion of the verbal taboo. I want to study the culture of swearing and verbal taboo in the Ozarks and how implicit religious belief systems contribute to the interpretations of words as offensive so that we can better understand how language is used within various dialects to preserve a sense of conversational etiquette. My investigation will take the form of an in-depth ethnographic study, comprised of research on the regional history and background of the Ozarks and the Ozarkian dialect, as well as field research (participant observation, interviews) conducted across the region.

## BACKGROUND

In the wake of the rapid social change of the last 20 years, many social situations occur between younger people and older people wherein worldviews and moral frameworks clash and must be mitigated by language. Perhaps one of the most visible instances in which these frameworks clash is indirectly spoken expressions of the verbal taboo, but underlying attitudes can also be evidenced in the words that a given speech community decides are worthy of euphemization (Deng). Social sanctions take the form of immediate reactions within conversational dialogue after a person has said that which may or may not be offensive to the listener, providing distinctive opportunities to study euphemization in context for its function in preserving a sense of conversational etiquette. For this reason, the study of euphemization is worthwhile and is especially applicable in today's rapidly-changing social climate, wherein technological advancement has allowed for greater linguistic diversity that brings with it greater likelihood for ideological conflict to surface based on underlying language patterns.

Closely related to notions of the verbal taboo are religious and moral beliefs of the people who comprise a given speech community. The introduction of religion adds a different authority to language usage and is a force unique in its ability to influence language change, which merits study in itself (Yaeger). Areas of high religiosity in the United States, specifically the "Bible Belt" of the South, are distinct in the extent to which evangelical Protestantism affects social, political, and cultural life. Within the Bible Belt lies the Ozark Mountain region. Language as it is spoken in the Ozarks region is considered its own dialect, which has fewer speakers than the

vast majority of other dialects of American English, and whose geographical area is made up of primarily central and south Missouri and northern Arkansas (Randolph, 2003).

This population offers numerous reasons to study it, including its rural and cultural landscape that are unmatched in other areas of the United States. Rural language changes differently over time (Christian, Donna et al.); with the technological advancement of the last 10 years even, language is changing more rapidly than ever, but rural communities are often behind or simply affected differently by technological advancements. Much time is spent studying emerging technology and how it relates to communication, yet the populations that lag behind in the acquisition of this technology are rarely subjects of study. Furthermore, distance from centers of mainstream cultural production such as Los Angeles and New York City creates an element of insulation whereby cultural influence many times is exerted on the Ozarkian population, but the population itself does not contribute to the same extent when it comes to influence on cultural production.

The vast majority of linguistics research is conducted in the areas of bilingual studies and second language acquisition, and linguistic ethnography in itself is even less established as a field of research. In addition, the language patterns of the Ozarkian dialect have been comparatively under-studied. As a person who grew up in the Ozarks and is already intimately familiar with the social dynamics of the region, I believe I can offer well-informed contributions to the existing body of sociolinguistic research.

## INQUIRY

I want to study the culture of swearing and verbal taboo in the Ozarks and how implicit religious belief systems contribute to the interpretations of words as offensive so that we can better understand how language is used within various dialects to preserve a sense of conversational etiquette. I will focus specifically on euphemization, including an examination of the circumstances under which a person chooses to euphemize in avoidance of the taboo, how such circumstances are related to religiosity, and the circumstances under which a person will forego euphemization.

## METHODS

My ethnographic study will involve both preliminary research and fieldwork. Preliminary research will be centered on understanding regional history and background, with an in-depth dialect study based on existing research as well as secondary media and literature like local news and printed publications. I will also review available instructional literature that is used in religious settings for the explicit purpose of instructing adherents of a particular faith tradition in how they should communicate with others, namely to avoid swearing.

The field components of my research will include participant observation, interviews, and other field notes that may prove relevant upon assembling my research. Demographic data will be collected from participants so as to record their names, ages, locales, any languages spoken in addition to English, and information about their religiosity, to complement information received from their participation. Interviews and discreet speech events will be documented according to the SPEAKING model set forth by Dell Hymes in *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*:

S - setting and scene: where the speech event is located in time and space

P - participants: who takes part in the speech event, and in what role (e.g. speaker, addressee, audience, eavesdropper)

E - ends: what the purpose of the speech event is, and what its outcome is meant to be

A - act sequence: what speech acts make up the speech event, and what order they are performed in

K - key: the tone or manner of performance (serious or joking, sincere or ironic, etc.)

I - instrumentalities: what channel or medium of communication is used (e.g. speaking, signing, writing, drumming, whistling), and what language/variety is selected from the participants' repertoire

N - norms of interaction: what the rules are for producing and interpreting speech acts

G - genres: what 'type' does a speech event belong to (e.g. interview, gossip), and what other pre-existing conventional forms of speech are drawn on or 'cited' in producing appropriate contributions to talk. (Hymes)

Additionally, speech events will be recorded using a digital device and later transcribed for ease of analysis and for potential integration with language analysis software. In participant interviews, video recording will be implemented to more fully capture the key and instrumentalities of the speech act as described above.

## EXPECTED RESULTS

I hypothesize that the age of speakers in conjunction with their religious backgrounds will provide the most insight into their choices to personally euphemize in conversations, but

there are certain circumstances in which the age and religiosity of the listener will determine whether the speaker chooses to euphemize. Overall, I anticipate that those of greater religious conviction will not necessarily euphemize more often than their less-religious or non-religious counterparts, but that their euphemizations will reflect a pattern that is similar to those of others with the same level of religious conviction. Incidences that may encourage a person to forego euphemization include contexts in which only one sex is present, and a swear word is less likely to be euphemized by any speaker if it is a word that is known to have appeared in a Biblical context (e.g. ass, damn, hell). The deliverable that will come out of this work will be a formal article for submission to publication in peer-reviewed academic journals such as the *Journal of Pragmatics*, the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, and the *Journal of Linguistic Geography*.

## CONCLUSION

By examining euphemization and its relationship to underlying religious sentiments, it is possible to gain knowledge of how speakers of the Ozarkian dialect use linguistic devices to sidestep words or phrases that may be offensive to listeners. This population merits its own study based on the uniqueness of its cultural landscape and the language patterns that go along with it. My research will involve an ethnographic study, including both research based in existing bodies of literature as well as fieldwork, namely in-person interviews and participant observation. I anticipate that people with greater religious involvement will not necessarily be more likely to euphemize in everyday speech, but that religious affiliation does play a role in how a person

euphemizes. I will collect my findings and write them to be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX: BUDGET

Camcorder for interviews and field documentation	\$180
Voice recorder for interviews and field documentation	\$120
Housing stipend for 8 weeks in short-term rental	\$2200
Travel expenses, within region (primarily for gas)	\$200
Time compensation: 320 hours total, spanning 4 weeks of preparation and preliminary study and 4 weeks of fieldwork, 40 hours per week	320 hrs (at rate of per-hour stipend)
Total funds requested:	\$2700 + time compensation