The Use of Taboo in Djenar Maesa Ayu's *Mereka bilang, saya monyet!*

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Abstract

This paper concerns on the use of taboo expressions in a literary work: Djenar's Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet!, *which is about eighty. Based on those data, those expressions can be grouped into their categories and degrees of politeness-impoliteness. Those categories are: comparison with animal, bodily effluvia, bodily organ, mental defect, disease, torturing-raping-killing, sexual activity, sexual-related behavior, consumption, place and verbal insult. Meanwhile, the degrees of politeness-impoliteness are: euphemism, orthophemism and dysphemism. It is expected that the reader of this paper can comprehend the use of taboo, particularly in a literary work.*

Keywords*: taboo, politeness, impoliteness*

Introduction

As human, we live in a complex society that exists in the world and has diversity in its culture. The culture in a society influences the way we behave. Similarly, our behavior also influences the culture. Language itself is a part of society that is also interrelated to culture. Thus, language and society are not independent. Wardaugh states that there should be some kind of relationship between the sounds, words and syntax of a language and the ways in which speakers of that language experience the world and behave in it (2006: 221). Therefore, language and culture are closely related to one another. The relation between society (culture) and language becomes the main concern of the discussion in sociolinguistics.

In every culture, there is always a rule about prohibition or forbidden things to do or say, which can be written or unwritten. This rule is widely known as taboo. Taboo is believed to be related to bad things. However, along with the development of society, now people feel more freely to express their expression and aspiration. Indonesia has started this era since the fall of Soeharto regime in 1997, the beginning of reformation era. This also affects the development of literature. In Indonesian literature, young female authors like Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari, Fira Basuki and Djenar Maesa Ayu are popping up and becoming famous. They bring up controversial issues and develop them in various ways in their writings.

Among young female writers, Djenar portrays sexual abuse, incest, pedophilia, sadism and other disruptive issues in her works. Muhammad states that her literary works like *Nayla* (2005), *Jangan Main-main dengan Kelaminmu* (2004) and *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* (2003) are considered to have unusual aesthetic (2010: 136). This unusual aesthetic leads some people to judge that Djenar is improper, unpleasant, vulgar,

taboo and shameless. As a matter of fact, her works contain taboo language that is presented explicitly within the stories. Taboo has been chosen by the author to express her feeling toward certain issues emerging in the society. Relating to this phenomenon, generally people now are more permissive to openness when they deal with the world of literature. However, what is taboo is still taboo. It raises the effect of offensiveness to the people who are subjected to.

This paper is intended to analyze the use of taboo expression in a literary work entitled *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet!* written by Djenar Maesa Ayu. This work is already translated into English *They Call I'm A Monkey* by Michael Nieto Garcia. In this novel, the author eventually mentions about taboo subjects. Different from other authors, she uses sex and other taboo-related subjects as the themes of her story, yet she does not want to exploit those subjects. Djenar explicitly narrates and depicts the story with taboo expressions because she assumes that it should be presented as it is. Later on, taboo subjects become her main concerns and the way to present taboo explicitly becomes her writing style.

Taboo Origins and Its Subjects

The word taboo is derived from Polynesian language Tongan *tabu,* which was being noticed in the end of the eighteen century. The word *tabu* (in English becomes *taboo*) has meanings to *forbid*, *forbidden*, and can be applied to anything which is prohibited. In Polynesian, taboo also refers to a rule of etiquette, an order from the leader, or a restriction for the children not to play with the elders' belongings. This term is discovered by Captain James Cook during his settlement in Tahiti on his first voyage around 1768 - 1771 (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 2). He observed that taboo (or *tabu*) is used to describe the behavior of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched.

The concept of taboo does not only exist in Polynesia. Fromkin states that in all societies certain acts or behaviors are frowned on, forbidden, or considered taboo (1974: 289). The words or expressions referring to these taboo acts are then also avoided or considered 'dirty'. Language itself cannot be entirely obscene; the rejection of specific words or linguistics expressions only reflects the culture of given society. Similarly, Wardaugh (1992: 236) states that taboo is one way in which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of behavior believed to be harmful to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such behavior is held to violate a moral code. In other words, taboo can be considered as a prohibited behavior believed to insult some people or society as a whole. Some expressions that are considered as taboo and may elicit embarrassment or offence to people in one language may be used naturally by people in other languages.

Until nowadays, the word taboo or 'taboo language' commonly refers to things that contain "dirty words". The definition of the phrase "dirty words" is contextual. As Allan and Burridge state that the language which is counted as dirty has been derived from the belief that it communicates the essential nature of thing(s) that being referred to. They are expressed in terms for: 1) bodily organs concealed by bikinis and swimming trunks, because they are organs of sexual desire, stimulation and gratification and/or used for micturition and defecation; 2) activities involving these SMD (sex, micturition, defecation) organs; and 3) bodily effluvia issuing from these SMD organs (2006: 41).

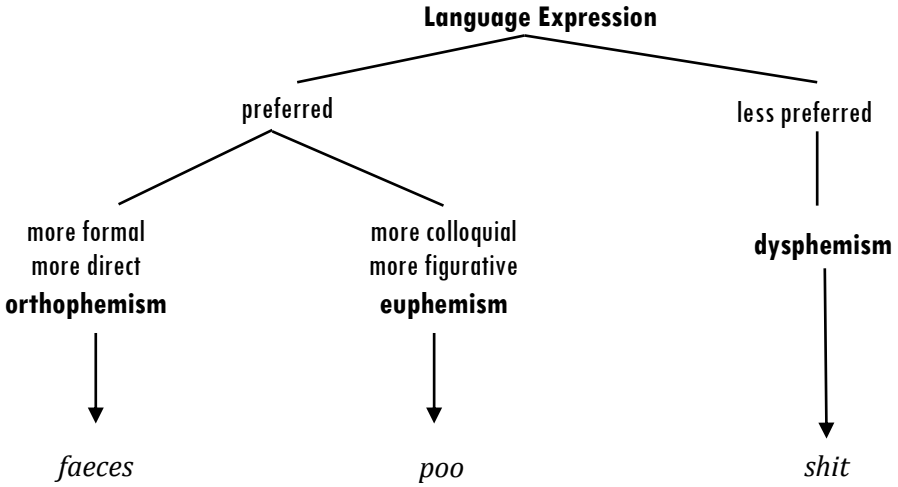
In addition to the expressions related to taboo, Allan and Burridge (2006: 1) also mentioned that taboo is a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life, including: 1) bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.); 2) the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation; 3) diseases, death and killing (including hunting and fishing); 4) naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places; and 5) food gathering, preparation and consumption.

In order to make taboo become more 'smoother' in its effect when spoken, people use euphemism. Fromkin states that euphemism is a word or phrase that is used to replace a taboo word in order to avoid

unpleasant effects (1974: 280). Euphemism was derived from Greek 'eu' (*well*) and 'pheme' (*speaking*), which means '*right silence*'. According to Hughes the most typical device of euphemism is the use of metaphor (2006: 181). For example, people may still prefer euphemistic terms such as *sleep with, go to bed with, make love, make out, do it, have it away with,* and so on, rather than *have sex* since those euphemistic terms are socially acceptable.

The term dysphemism is in contrast to euphemism. It can be compared to taboo as it is used in speaking offensively. Dysphemism was also derived from Greek 'dys' (*bad, unfavorable*) and 'pheme' (*speaking*). According to Allan and Burridge (2006: 163), dysphemistic terms are: 1) comparison human with animal that are only conventionally ascribed certain behaviors (e.g. *bitch*, *dog*); 2) epithets from tabooed bodily organs (e.g. *asshole*, *prick*), bodily effluvia (e.g. *shit*) and sexual behavior (e.g. *fucker*, *cock-sucker*, *dipshit*); 3) ascription of mental defect (e.g. *idiot*, *moron*) or physical defect like (e.g. *baldy*, *spastic*); 4) sexist, racist, ageist words and other *–ist* dysphemism (e.g. sexist terms: *Tina Fritz* turns into *Freena Tits*), 5) terms of disrespect, in which some of them involves slurs on target's character (e.g. *bag*, *crank*). Resulting offensiveness, dysphemism is surely a subject to taboo.

As it has been stated above, taboo has closed relationship with both euphemism and dysphemism. They are significant in term of degree of politeness-impoliteness of language usage (2006:1). There is one more term related to those *-isms,* which is called orthophemism. Orthophemistic terms are those which are used in scientific purposes, such as in medic. Being used as scientific terms, they are less offensive compared to those dysphemistic terms. The difference among them also lies on the people's preference in using the terms in communication. Euphemism and orthophemism are more preferred. Euphemism is more figurative and colloquial (e.g. *bits*, *have a period*, etc.). Orthophemism is more formal and direct (e.g. *vagina*, *menstruate*, etc.). Meanwhile, dysphemism can be said to have the rudest terminology (e.g. *bleed*, *cunt*, etc.). The comparison between euphemism, ortophemism and dysphemism can be formulated as follows,



Discussion

The part of language that is going to be discussed here is taboo expressions in a literary work. Those expressions are presented variously in term of classes: words, phrases, clauses or even sentences. There are about eighty taboo expressions that are found in the novel *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* Those expressions were not taken randomly. They are orderly selected form 10 short stories. In order to examine briefly, those expressions are presented in Table 1. The table contains columns, namely number, taboo expressions, the categories of those taboo expressions and their degree.

The categories of taboo expressions are based on the theories of taboo, coined by Allan and Burridge (2006), and the degree of politeness-impoliteness (euphemism, orthophemism and dysphemism).

Based on the data of taboo expressions found in the novel, the percentage of the use of those eighty taboo expressions can be formulated under the charts. Chart 1 shows the groups of taboo expressions based on their categories, while Chart 2 presents the groups based on the degree of polite-impoliteness.

Chart 1: Taboo expression categories

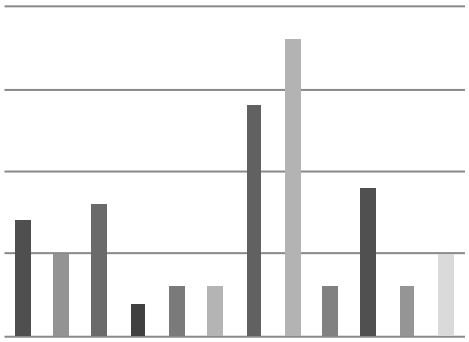


Chart 1 above shows that the category of taboo is mostly employed in *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet!* is *sexual activity*. It is not surprising that the central theme employed the author is about sex (or probably various kind of sex-related themes). The *sexual activity* category equals to 22%. The second position is employed by *torturing-raping-killing* which is about 17%. This category include three different issues, but they share similar understanding that is doing something harmful to other people and make them feel suffering or dying. The third category, *consumption*, covers 11% from the total taboo expressions*. Bodily organ* is in the fourth category that equals to 10%. The next category is *comparison with animal* which is about 9%. *Bodily effluvia* and *verbal insult* take the sixth and seventh category as employing 6% each. Four categories employ the eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh positions; they are *disease*, *sexual-related behavior*, *place* and *death*. Each of those categories covers 4%. The last category is *mental defect*, which is only about 3 % from the total.

The first category shows how the author depicts *sexual activity*(es) in the novel. The example of this category can be seen in expression (30) *menyetubuhiku* and (23) *bercinta dengan banyak laki-laki*. Both expressions *menyetubuhi* and *bercinta* have meaning of having sex with somebody. Not only about having sex, this category also contains other specific issues including sexual disorientation, such as in expression (59) *bersetubuh dengan hewan* (having sex with animals), and incest, like in expression (51) *bersetubuh dengan ibunya* (having sex with his mother).

The second category is *torturing-raping-killing*, which can be seen in, expression (54) *memotong kelamin ibunya lalu memotong kelaminnya sendiri* (cut off his mother's genitals, then cut off his own), expression (26) *Hyza mulai memperkosa Stefan (*Hyza began to force herself on him), and expression (63) *menggorok leher mereka* (slashing their throat). The action of cutting of the genitals is torturing. Meanwhile, forcing herself to him can be considered as the act of raping. Probably the expression 'to force oneself to somebody else' is more appropriate for female as the agent of the action than 'to rape' (as mostly done by male). Slashing throat means killing, because the patient of the action carried by the agent is intended to die.

The next category is *consumption.* This category may include religious issues, like in expressions (9) *cognac*, (78) *whiskey*, and (79) *bir* (*beer*). Those three beverages contain alcohol. As alcoholic liquid is forbidden for all moslems to consume, cognac, whiskey and beer are considered taboo. Alcoholic beverage is forbidden because it may cause somebody to lose his/her consciousness, and moreover, it breaks human vital organs. Losing consciousness may lead people to be more temperamental, to do crimes or other threatening behaviors. Not only related to religion, *consumption* may also reflect *sexual activity*, such as in expressions (39) *pengen makan kamu* (I want to eat U) and expression (40) *besok mau makan aku?* (want to eat me tomorrow?). Those expressions are used in a communication between lovers. Surely, it does not mean that

they want to eat each others. Allan and Burridge stated that the talk between lovers is sometimes strikingly cannibalistic (2006: 194). The expression 'eating you' is a euphemism for 'having sex with you'.

The fourth category, *bodily organ* involves those of sexual desire, stimulation and gratification and/or used for micturition and defecation (2006: 41). In the novel, this category is reflected in expression (18) *tubuh saya yang belum berbulu dan bersusu* (my hairless, breastless body) and expression (45) *vagina yang tidak lagi lentur* (a vagina that wasn't tight anymore). The bodily organs (e.g. vagina and breasts) which are expressed there should be covered, meaning that they must not be presented or in other words, they must not be stated.

The following category is a *comparison to animal*. This comparison is based upon certain behaviors they share that are conventionally ascribed. Comparison to animal becomes taboo when it brings negative images rather than positive. It can be seen in the expression (5) *mengendus-endus kemaluan si Kepala Serigala* (sniffed Jackal Head's crotch) and expression (49) *ia berkelakuan seperti anjing* (he behaves like a dog). In expression (49) the author compares human to animal, which is a dog, in term of their behaviors. In this case, the behaviors the dog has, which are being compared to human, are the negative ones. They must not be about loyalty or intelligence. Expression (5) does not only about comparison to animal. It is obvious that the early action animals (dogs) do before they have sex is sniffing each other's crotch. Thus, expression (5) also relates to sexual activity.

The sixth category, *bodily effluvia* relates to something that comes out from human/animal body (can be solid or liquid) that must be considered disgusting and nauseating. Bodily effluvia can be seen in expression (33) *darah segar* (fresh blood). Blood is considered dirty. The consideration 'dirty' comes up as people who have just got a contact to blood need to wash their hands before eating. The *bodily effluvia* can also be seen in other expressions, such as (2) *kencing* (pee) and (70) *bersimbah peluh* (drenched in sweat).

Verbal insult is the seventh category. It is normally intended to wound the addressee or bring a third party into disrepute, or both. *Verbal insult* can be found in expression (56) *anjing lu!* (you dog!) and (57) *bajingan!* (sonofabitch!). The term *bajingan* in expression (57) is very offensive to be addressed to somebody who has very bad behaviors and manners. Similarly, expression (56) contains comparison to animal. When it is used as verbal insult, it must be addressed to a very unpleasant people. *Dog*, as it has been discussed previously, is taboo for most moslems. They consider dogs as ritually unclean and there is rule stating that touching dog's saliva causes *hadath,* or impurity, which must be cleansed by the lesser ablution (*wudu*). However, the use of verbal insults as in those expressions would be understood differently in a conversation among best friends.

The next category, *disease*, is reflected in expressions (22) *kusta* (leprosy) and (77) *penyakit kelamin* (venereal disease). Most people consider those diseases are loathsome. They are also afraid of being infected by the diseases as they are extremely infectious. In the religious view, both leprosy and venereal diseases are believed to be God's punishments to the sinners. According to Allan and Burridge, most communities in this world also view leprosy as the punishment for sin and heresy, and because of that *lepers* (those who are infected by leprosy) are viewed as both physically and morally dangerous (2006: 208).

Sexual-related behavior is associated to dirty jobs and also the ones who do those jobs. In this case, doing dirty jobs means earning money by having sex with people. This category is seen in expression (12) *gigolo* and expression (41) *pelacur dan waria dipinggir jalan* (prostitutes and transvestites standing on street). Those expressions contain *sexual-related behavior* of *gigolo*, *prostitute* and *transvestites*. It is obvious that those jobs are strictly forbidden. Nobody wants to have such jobs. In some countries, the government include

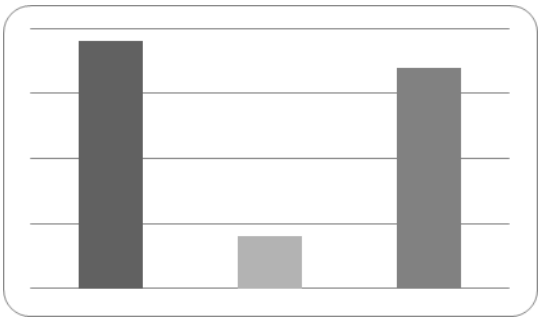
prostitute as an illegal job. In the point of view of religion, all jobs related to sexual desire are forbidden. In many communities, transvestites are considered as having sexual deviation. As the consequence, transvestites are hardly to be accepted in society.

The next category is *place*. It refers to a place where people do not feel comfortable to visit. It may also refer to a place that people try not to visit because they are ordered not to do so. Taken for example, the expressions (21) *rumah sakit jiwa* (asylum) and (76) *rumah prostitusi* (a brothel). Latin *asylum* originally meant 'place of refuge, retreat' (2006: 216). People tend to avoid asylum as it is now referring to a recovery place for those who are insane. Meanwhile, a brothel is a place that is forbidden for religious people to visit. Both people who sell their bodies (for sex) in order to earn money and those who become the customers of pleasure in a brothel are sinners. They would be punished by God, such as getting infected venereal diseases.

The eleventh category is related to *death*. It covers all things that have correlation with death and dying. Almost all people are afraid of *death*, since then talking about it is considered taboo. The category of *death* can be seen in expressions (6) *mampus* (die), (73) *batu nisan* (gravestone) and (75) *kuburan* (graveyard).

The last category found in the work is *mental defect.* It covers things related to mental illness. It covers an enormous assortment of conditions, ranging from mildly eccentric or neurotic behaviour to severe psychotic disorders where a patient might lose total contact with reality (2006: 213). Mental defect is found in expression (20) *gila* (insane). Because the behaviour of people who are insane does not conform to morally and socially accepted norms, it is usually viewed as threatening and strange, and is often believed to result from maliciousness of character. In most community, it is common that normal people may feel the fear of becoming insane, taking equal place with those of cancer and death.

Chart 2: The Degree of Taboo



Instead of the categories of expressions, the use of taboo is also analyzed based on its degree. In Chart 2, it can be seen that the degree of taboo employed by the author in *Mereka Bilang, Saya Monyet!* is dominated by euphemism. Euphemism covers 48% of the total taboo expressions found in the work. The use of euphemistic expressions can be seen in (34) *lucuti pakaian kalian dan 'garap' saya satu per satu* (strip your clothes and have a go at me) and (37) *dedek* saya kangen (junior misses you). In expression (34) the term *garap*, which is translated into 'have a go' is considered as more polite than *perkosa* (rape). However, it is a slang word, which is not officially used in formal communication as not all people have similar understanding in comprehending the meaning. Similarly, expression (37) has *dedek* (junior) to replace penis, which obviously refers to sexual organ. Euphemistic term also can be found in the category of sexual activity, like in expression (47) *bercinta dengan posisi dari belakang.* The term bercinta (to make love) is assumed more polite rather than *berhubungan seks* (to have sex), by omitting the taboo *sex*.

The use of orthophemism only equals to 10%. It can be seen in expressions (35) *penis*, (43) *vagina*, (46) *sejenis kanker ganas pada ovariumnya* (a malignant form of cancer had been detected in her uterus.). The terms penis, vagina and uterus are commonly used in scientific purposes. They are less offensive, but considered too direct. In consequence, some people who are not familiar to use those terms still feel uncomfortable to state (or listen) to them.

From the total taboo expressions, the use of dysphemism is about 42%. Dyspemisem is considered as the rudest, the

most offensive expressions. Dysphemistic expression can be seen in the category of *death* (6) *mampus* (die) and *sexual-related behavior* (74) *pelacur* (whore). The term *mampus*, which refers to die, is considered offensive and inappropriate to be used for honorable people. Commonly, it is only used for animals or very unpleasant people, such as criminals or sinners. The term *pelacur* is also more offensive than *WTS* and *PSK,* Indonesian abbreviations for adulteress and commercial sex worker. It is analogous to the comparison between prostitute *vs* bitch *vs* slut *vs* whore in English. There are also dysphemistic expressions in the category of *consumption*, such as the terms *kokain* (cocaine), *ganja* (marijuana), *heroin* can be made into more acceptable term *narkoba* (drugs). Other consumption-related category like *cognag*, *whiskey* and *bir* (beer) are more appropriate to be referred as *minuman beralkohol* (alcoholic beverages) in communication in order to avoid offensiveness.

Conclusion

The use of taboo in Djenar's *Mereka Bilang Saya Monyet!* is various. It can be classified into categories and degrees. The categories of taboo found in the works are: *sexual activity* (22%), *torturing-raping-killing* (17%), *consumption* (11%), *bodily organ* (10%), *comparison with animal* (9%), *bodily effluvia* (6%), *verbal insult* (6%), *disease* (4%), *sexual-related behavior* (4%), *place* (4%), *death* (4%) and *mental defect* (3%). Meanwhile, form the degree of taboo, it is found: euphemism (48%), orthophemism (10%), and dysphemism (42%).

Regarding to the domination use of euphemism in the work, it can be concluded that the author still tries to present taboo expressions in polite ways, though she emerges some controversial themes. In conclusion, the understanding whether things are taboo or not is important for us as human who live in a particular society. Though, it cannot be denied that the use of taboo is absolutely contextual. Some terms or expressions that are considered taboo and may elicit embarrassment or offence to people in one context may be used naturally by people in other contexts.

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