THE USE OF TABOO WORDS BETWEEN MAIN CHARACTERS
SEEN IN CONVICTION MOVIE

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ABSTRACT: This study was aimed at identifying taboo word or linguistic taboo which is defined as any word that are generally related to sexual organs, the supernatural, excretion, religious matters, and death. The data of this study were taken from Conviction movie and analyzed based on theory of impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996), taboo words (Ekstrom, 2008) and face work (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The result showed that not all taboo words indicated positive impoliteness superstrategy.

Keywords: Taboo words, impoliteness superstrategy, Conviction movie.

A linguistic interaction is necessarily a social interaction. Yule remarked that it is possible to specify a number of different general principles for being polite in social interaction within a particular culture (1996:59-60). One common principle to be polite in an interaction is by avoiding taboo word. Taboo words are sometimes found in the communication activity in the society. Wardaugh (1986:239) stated that taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. It is an extremely strong politeness constraint. Taboo word was defined by Battistella in Ekstrom (2008:7) as offensive language which falls into several categories: epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. In her study later on, Ekstrom chose five types of taboo words to analyze, they are cursing, profanity, obscenity, epithet and insults. Any act which is related to taboo, whether performing an action or uttering words which are related to taboo, is considered harmful. The harm or threat which results in a conversation between speakers and hearers is explained in the Face Threatening Act theory.

Face Threatening Acts (FTA) is explained by Brown and Levinson (1987:65) as certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker. By ‘act’ we have in mind what is intended to be done by a verbal or non-verbal communication, just as one or more ‘speech acts’ can be assigned to an utterance. Linguistic taboo is included in those acts and described as expressions of violent (out-of-control) emotions. Using taboo words in a conversation is therefore considered as the form of impoliteness.

Impoliteness was defined by Culpeper in Bousfield (2008:89) as the use of utterances or actions that attack one’s interlocutor and cause disharmony and/or social disruption (rather than promoting or maintaining social harmony, which is the purpose of politeness of course). One of the impoliteness strategies is the use of taboo word which Bousfield (2008) included in impolite utterances.

Bousfield (2008: 66) noted that issue of impolite utterances is a ‘breakdown’ of Brown and Levinson’s ‘model person’ and future research into impoliteness based on the face management view must take this into consideration and attempt to account for it. Thus it is not adequate to use Brown and Levinson’s
politeness strategy to explain phenomenon of taboo words, so new concept of face management, namely impoliteness superstrategy is used to explain this phenomenon. To show the use of taboo words researcher chose *Conviction* movie.

*Conviction* is 2010 movie based on the true story of Betty Anne Waters, a single mother who worked tirelessly to free her wrongfully convicted brother Kenny. The story unfolded in flashbacks, and the film opened with the scene of a brutal murder in Massachusetts in 1980. We soon saw that Betty Anne's life in many ways revolves around her brother, who was in jail for the murder. Despite Kenny's knack for getting in trouble, they had always been close. Two years after his release as a suspect in the 1980 murder of Katharina Brow in "new" testimony from two witnesses led police to arrest Kenny and he was tried. Based on this circumstantial evidence, Kenny was convicted in 1983 of first degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole. Betty finally managed to get her degree and proved that her brother was not guilty in the end of the story. In this study, researcher used utterances of the main characters.

The main characters of the movie were Betty Anne Water, Kenny Waters and Abra Rice. The main purpose of this study was to analyze whether or not all taboo words that are used by main characters in the ‘Conviction’ movie indicated positive impoliteness. In order to answer this problem, researcher also tried to analyze some areas related to the use of taboo words in *Conviction* movie which help lead to the answer of the research.

The research also analyzed the frequency of taboo words used by main characters of conviction. The frequency of the taboo words helped researcher show how many taboo words which indicated positive impoliteness superstrategy since some kinds of taboo words did not damage the face want of the hearers. Researcher also classified taboo words found in the movie based on their kinds.

Kinds of taboo words used by main characters of conviction movie were also analyzed based on the classification of taboo words used by Ekstrom (2008) in her study. Functions of taboo words used by main characters of conviction varied in some possibilities, firstly they appeared as the application of positive impoliteness superstrategy, secondly there were also some taboo words which functioned as the application of positive politeness strategy.

In analyzing the functions of taboo words, researcher used combination theory of Face Threatening Act (FTA) from Brown and Levinson (1987) and theory of positive impoliteness superstrategy from Culpeper (1996).

**METHOD**

This research is descriptive-qualitative research. In this research, the researcher tried to interpret and formulate the patterns of the findings. Based on Johnson and Christensen, (2004:359), qualitative research relied primarily on the collection of qualitative data (nonnumerical data such as words and pictures). In addition, this research did not involve any statistical analysis of *Conviction* and it described the phenomenon of taboo words which was present in *Conviction* script which was used as the data source.

Data sources included two scripts, they were the English subtitle and the original script of the movie. The researcher used the script written originally by Pamela Gray, the script writer of the Conviction movie. The script was downloaded in a form of PDF file. The script was used to help determine in which
scene the dialog took place which also determined the numbering system in data analysis. Data collection and data analysis were done almost at the same time like what Johnson and Christensen (2004: 361) stated that data collection and data analysis are often done concurrently or in cycles in qualitative research. Therefore there were some steps of data analysis which appeared similar in data collection.

Data collection was done in several steps. First, researcher took the data from pre-climax and climax part of the movie. Second, the data were collected in a table containing percentage and function of taboo words. Third, researcher analyzed the circumstances in which taboo words appeared. Researcher collected the data only from pre-climax and climax parts of the movie because by taking the data taken from those two parts was enough to answer the general research question. The data then were identified in some more steps in data analysis.

Data analysis included three major steps. First, researcher identified and coded the data and put them in a table. Second, the data were described to answer research problems concerning the percentage, kinds and function of taboo words. Finally researcher summarized percentage, kinds and functions of taboo words and drew conclusion to answer the general research question.

RESULTS

The results showed that taboo words varied in term of their use in two stages of the movie. The description of the findings was divided into two phases, taboo words found in the pre-climax part of the movie and climax part of the movie. The results were summarized in two tables for each part containing percentage of how much each kind of taboo words appeared in each part of the movie.

Pre-climax of the movie lasted for around 44 minutes which started from minute 29.10 until minute 75.30 of the movie. The scene in which Kenny was fighting the guard marked the beginning of pre-climax of the movie and it ended when Betty furiously messed up her house after receiving a call. Researcher found 44 data of taboo words during pre-climax part.

In pre-climax part of the movie obscenity (f****ng, f**k, s**) dominated the appearance. The second most frequently appearing kind of taboo word was profanity (God, Jesus Christ). The third was epithet (d**n, god**n, son of a b***h), the fourth was insult (f***ers, s**m-bag, s**theads, b***h, motherf**kers) and the last was cursing (f**k).

Table 3.1 Taboo Words Uttered by Main Characters Found In Pre-Climax

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Kinds of Taboo Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Obscenity</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Profanity</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Insults</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Cursing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Epithet</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Climax of the movie lasted for around three minutes which started from minute 75.30 until minute 78.15 of the movie. The scene in which Betty visited
Kenny to tell him that he could not get out of the jail marked the beginning of climax part of the movie and it ended when Betty discussed the solution of her brother’s case with Barry. Researcher found 15 data of taboo words during climax part.

In climax part of the movie, epithet (b***h, motherf**ker) was the most frequently (appearing kind of taboo word. Obscenity (f**king) was the second most frequently appearing taboo word. Profanity (Christ sakes), cursing (f**k) and insult (s**thead) had same number of appearance.

Table 3.2 Taboo Words Uttered by Main Characters Found In Climax

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Types of Taboo Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Obscenity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Profanity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Insults</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Cursing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Ephitet</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION
Taboo Words in Pre-climax Part of the Movie

Kinds of taboo words varied in two stages (pre-climax and climax) of the movie. Researcher chose similar grouping of taboo words like what Ekstrom (2008) did in her research, there were five kinds of taboo words found in this movie, they were cursing, profanity, obscenity, epithet and insults. Below is an example of data analysis for one kind of taboo word (obscenity) found in pre-climax part of the movie.

Here is an example of taboo words of obscenity which could be seen in the dialog below between Betty and Kenny. Betty brought the result of the DNA test which showed that the blood in the knife which was used to prove that Kenny was convicted of the murder did not match Kenny’s DNA. The conversation took place in the jail when Betty visited Kenny. Kenny yelled happily to the guards that he was innocent while holding the DNA test.

(43)

U744 KW 1: Okay. My baby sister’s a f**king genius.
U755 BW 2: You look great. They can still kick your ass.

KW = Kenny Waters  
BW = Betty Anne Waters

In the dialog above we can see that Kenny used a taboo word in U744 (f**king). The function of this word was considered an intensifier. However the effect of uttering this word by Kenny is different from the common obscenity words. The word f**king here was used to intensify the word genius. It is a compliment for his sister who managed to get the DNA test after she went through some problems caused by the authorities that hindered her from doing so. Therefore we can say that there is no indication of the taboo word here used to
attack Betty’s positive face. Rather it can be categorized as a Brown and Levinson’s positive politeness strategy (1987:104) number two which is Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H). Betty positive face was achieved through Kenny’s compliment. The above example showed how taboo words did not always function to attack the hearers’ face which in this movie represented by one of the main characters of the movie.

Main characters, Betty Anne Waters, Kenny Waters and Abra Rice in the pre-climax part of the movie used all types of taboo words. The most dominant kind of taboo word used by main characters in the movie was obscenity. The reason why this type was quite dominant in appearance was that this kind is one of the most suitable to express characters’ feeling, especially when they felt annoyed, angry or disappointed. The second most frequently used kind of taboo word was profanity. Profanity taboo words were usually used to express frustration in more polite way. The difference of those two kinds was just that profanity never appeared to hurt or attack the positive face of the hearers. Below the researcher summarized the appearance of obscenity in pre-climax of the movie.

Obscenity tended to appear as an intensifier rather than a single word. When the word like (f**k, d**n) appeared as a single word and directed at the speaker it was categorized into cursing or epithet. Some obscenity expressions had no effect of threatening the hearer’s positive face because they appeared as intensifier, another reason for taboo words did not hurt the hearer’s positive face because the speaker and the hearer were quite close so that they had mutual understanding that using such taboo words was permitted and they realized that it was not meant to attack each other’s positive face by uttering some taboo words.

Most of taboo words which appeared in the pre-climax part of the movie did not indicate their function as positive impoliteness superstrategy. Those taboo words did not attack or hurt the positive face of the hearers, therefore they did not signify the implementation of positive impoliteness superstrategy.

One interesting fact of taboo word which appeared in pre-climax part as obscenity, in some chances functioned as intensifying modifiers which matched two possibilities. First is that it can play a role as positive impoliteness strategy (Culpeper, 1996) when it has an effect of hurting or attacking the hearer’s positive face and the second is that it can play positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987) when it has an effect of maintaining the face want of the hearers.

Taboo Words in Climax Part of the Movie

Researcher still chose similar grouping of taboo words like what was used in the pre-climax part by using grouping of taboo words proposed by Ekstrom (2008) including cursing, profanity, obscenity, epithet and insults. Below is an example of data analysis for one kind of taboo word (obscenity) found in climax part of the movie.

Below is an example of data analysis for one kind of taboo word found in climax part of the movie. The conversation below took place in the jail when Betty told his brother that the effort of getting him out of the jail might fail because the DNA test still did not solve the fact that Kenny might be involved in the murder. Betty made her regular visit for Kenny to inform her brother that there was still evidence that could hold him in the jail. Both Kenny and Betty were very disappointed with this fact and Kenny could not hold his disappointment.
(45)

U774KW 1: I’m gonna kill that f**king bitch.
U775BW 2: Kenny.
U776KW 3: I’m gonna kill her.

BW = Betty Anne Waters
KW = Kenny Waters

To analyze this taboo word the researcher still used the concept of obscenity based on Montagu in Ekstrom (2008:8) was a form of swearing that make use for indecent words and phrases. More specifically, Batistella in Ekstrom (2008:8) remarked that obscenity term refers to words or expressions which characterize sex-differentiating anatomy or sexual and excretory functions in a crude way, such as s**t and f**k.

The use of taboo word in the dialog above was found in Kenny’s utterance U116.8 (f**king). This taboo word was categorized into obscenity because lexically it has the meaning of sexual function. The type of the taboo word was also similar like what was found in pre-climax of the movie. It appeared as an intensifier. In this utterance, the word f**king intensified the word bitch in the sentence “I’m gonna kill that f**king bitch.”

In the dialog above the use of all taboo word did not function as positive impoliteness superstrategies. The use of this taboo word did not even cause the hearer, Betty in this case, to feel uncomfortable and it did not signify any attempt to attack the hearer’s positive face. in U116.8 Kenny said “I’m gonna kill that fucking bitch.” Here we could see that Kenny while in the middle of the conversation with Betty used that taboo words. However he did not intend to attack Betty’s positive face. The reason he used such expression was he felt frustrated because of Martha’s authority blocked his sister effort to get him out of the jail. Therefore that taboo word did not signify the application of positive impoliteness superstrategy by one of the main characters in the dialog.

Main characters, Betty Anne Waters, Kenny Waters and Abra Rice in the climax part of the movie also used all types of taboo words. There were two dominant types which were used, they were Obscenity and Epithet. The reason why those two types were quite dominant in appearance was that the characters used those expressions as one way to express their feeling especially when they felt annoyed, angry or disappointed. There were two dominant kinds of taboo words in climax part of the movie, they were epithet and obscenity.

Epithet dominated the appearance in the climax part of the movie. In the pre-climax, epithet ranked in the second position as the most frequent appearing taboo words however, in climax part other taboo words excluding epithet decreased significantly in terms of their number of appearance. Another kind of taboo word which had unique characteristic in climax part was obscenity.

Obscenity in the climax part of the movie tended to appear as an intensifier rather than a single word. In fact all of the obscenity words found in climax part of the movie were in the form of intensifier. All obscenity words had no effect of threatening the hearer’s positive face because they appeared as intensifier, another reason for taboo words did not hurt the hearer’s positive face because the speaker and the hearer were quite close so that they had mutual understanding that using
such taboo words was permitted and they realized that it was not meant to attack each other’s positive face. Thus there was no taboo word of obscenity which functioned as positive politeness strategy in climax part.

In climax part, researcher could not find taboo words which indicate the implementation of positive politeness strategy. However all the taboo words used by main characters also did not show the implementation of positive impoliteness superstrategy because they did not attack the positive face of the hearers.

The use of taboo words in climax and pre-climax was not too different in terms of percentage but the number of taboo words which were used in pre-climax was more than what found in climax part. The researcher found that the use of taboo words was affected by the development of the movie. It was shown that when the movie moved to the climax part, the use of taboo words increased, when the conflicts in climax parts were solved, the use of taboo words significantly decreased. It was also shown that the function of taboo words as positive impoliteness superstrategy by Culpeper (1996) did not apply to all taboo words found in the movie. From 59 data of taboo words in Pre-Climax and Climax parts, there were only 12 taboo words (20.3%) which functioned as positive impoliteness superstrategy. The average of taboo words appearing in the movie was summarized in the figure below.

**Figure: Chart of Taboo Words Appearing per minute**

The chart above showed number of taboo words which appeared per-minute in two stages of the movie. In pre-climax part, there were 44 taboo words which appeared in around 44 minutes, thus we can conclude that in one minute there was presumably one taboo appeared in the main characters’ utterances.

The number of taboo words which appeared in climax part of the movie was averagely higher than that which was found in pre-climax part of the movie. The climax part occurred around three minutes and there were 15 taboo words appeared in this stage. Thus we can conclude that in one minute there were around three taboo words appeared in main characters’ utterances. The figure also showed that when the conflict reached its peak, the use of taboo words increased.

**CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

Taboo words which based on the Culpeper’s (1996) impoliteness theory included as one of positive impoliteness superstrategies, were used in *Conviction* movie. Here the researcher found that there are taboo words which are not used to attack the hearer’s positive face that is from the Profanity category. There are also some uses of taboo words which indeed possess negative meaning but they are not
meant to hurt the hearer’s positive face because both speaker and the hearer have mutual understanding that those taboo words are not meant to hurt each other. There were only 12 taboo words (20.33%) from 59 data of taboo words which functioned as a positive impoliteness superstrategy.

There were 59 data of taboo words found in pre-climax and climax stages, the most frequent type of taboo words which appears is Obscenity: f**k, s**t that appeared in main characters’ utterances (40.67%), and the second is Epithet: godd**n, b***h, d**n which appeared in main characters’ utterances (23.72%), the third is Profanity: God, Christ sakes, Jesus Christ which appear in main characters’ utterances (15.25%), fourth is Insults: you f**kers, you b**ch which appeared in main characters’ utterances (13.55%), and the last is Cursing: f**k you, f**k her which appear in main characters’ utterances (6.77%).

Researcher also found that being taboo is not always impolite while conducting this study. Value of tabooness is constructed by society however when it comes to politeness, the value of politeness of taboo words is different depending on the person, place and time.

There have been some cases shown in the discussion where the hearers did not feel insulted with taboo words used by the speaker which signified the harmony between speaker and hearer was not harmed. Thus, researchers who are interested in the use of taboo words in real life situation may study this topic since there are not many research of this topic conducted so far.

REFERENCES


