CONSIDERATIONS ON THE STUDY OF TABOO(S) IN LANGUAGE, MEDIA, AND AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

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Abstract: Taboo, by its very nature, is deeply rooted in language and culture, constantly evolving as the social boundaries of what is acceptable shift – sometimes slowly, sometimes almost imperceptibly. What we mean today by taboo needs careful examination, in order to investigate how the boundaries have been redrawn over the years and how these boundaries are constantly negotiated, for example when it comes to intercultural communication. Without any pretense of being exhaustive, this contribution offers some contextualization for the study of taboo(s) in the fields of language, media, and audiovisual translation across themes such as sex, religion, death, disability, homo/transphobia, and racism. It includes discussion on present and future directions in taboo research and it also introduces and contextualizes the contributions included in the special issue *Taboo in Language, Media, and Audiovisual Translation*.

Keywords: taboo; TaCo conference; audiovisual translation; language; media.

An article recently appeared in the Television section of British newspaper *The Guardian* (Hogan 2024) comments on the trend of featuring male genitalia more prominently in media (particularly TV and film) in the last few years. Starting from an episode of the HBO series *House of the Dragon* (Season 2, Episode 3), in which two penises are shown – the first of which erect during fellatio – Hogan proceeds to list several examples of other on-screen appearances of full-frontal male nudity in recent years, among others, in the TV series *Euphoria* (2019-in production) and *Normal People* (2020), and in the Amazon Prime Video film *Saltburn* (2023). As the article argues, while female nudity has long been normalized on screen, male nudity – whether aided by prosthetics or not – is still likely to cause a level of viral curiosity at best and outrage in the worst of cases.

However, a key and defining element in the reception of taboos that Hogan also mentions is context. As supported by Allan, a prolific scholar in the field of taboo as language behavior, "taboo is conditioned by context" (2018: 10), and more specifically "every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people for a specified context at a given place and time. There is no such thing as an absolute taboo that holds for all worlds, times, and contexts" (ibid.: 16). In the case of media products, "context" might be defined as when and where a piece of media is shown, to what audience, and what the recipients' expectations are. For example, extreme violence, sex, and swearing would be not only tolerated but somehow even expected in the kind of programming offered by US cable channels such as HBO and Showtime and by the subscribers to these services; on the other hand, the same kind of content could hardly be shown to the more general public on networks such as ABC or CBS during the primetime slot, at least not without viewer complaints. To further complicate the issues relating to taboo reception is of course the fact that many audiovisual media products are now made globally available, as is content accessible on the web, for example through social media. Both in the cases in which this content is mediated for different lingua-cultural contexts and in the cases in which it is accessed by speakers of other languages through a lingua franca such as English, the receivers' culture(s) is bound to have an impact on taboo perception. To return to the initial example of male nudity displayed in *House of the Dragon*, in the version of the episode available for Italian viewers on SKY the erect penis is blurred, while the non-erect one is plainly visible, a choice that speaks, more in general, to issues relating to the manipulation and adaptation practices that audiovisual media may undergo when they cross national borders, and, more specifically, to potential differences in the kinds of taboo that are considered suitable for a target lingua-cultural context – in this case, for example, male nudity seems to be considered more acceptable when not engaged in sexual activity.

In a world that seems to be pushing the envelope of taboo acceptability for the inhabitants of specific linguistic and cultural contexts as well as on a global scale, it seems to be particularly relevant to acknowledge the importance of a scholarly investigation of taboos and their reinforcement and/or breaking in various areas of language, culture, society, media, translation, and communication in general. Similarly, the subject of taboo in language, culture, and media seems to have become especially relevant in the last few years, a

period in which political correctness at both the institutional and individual level has been seen, on the one hand, as a crucial tool in protecting minorities and more vulnerable people from verbal abuse and in preventing the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes and, on the other, as a set of measures and a way of thinking which can significantly limit free speech in many aspects of the public sphere. For instance, American comedian Jerry Seinfeld has recently expressed his views on contemporary comedy, stating in an interview (Remnick 2024) that the current crisis of comedy was brought about by "the extreme left and P.C. crap, and worrying so much about offending other people", referring to the notion – often invoked by right-wing politicians and pundits – that "you can't joke about anything anymore" because political correctness has, effectively, killed comedy. It is therefore easy to see how ideas about taboos and how taboos are received by audiences can effortlessly be manipulated and weaponized for ideological reasons, and used to polarize public opinion (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Mendiburo-Seguel *et al.* 2023).

These and other similar considerations on taboos in their various incarnations have contributed to set the rationale for The Taboo Conference (TaCo) Series, an interdisciplinary conference held every two years and originated in 2012 by a group of scholars at the University of Bologna's Department of Interpretation and Translation. One of the main goals of this conference series is to offer scholars in different disciplines a space to share their research on taboo, a feat that can prove fraught with taboos in and of itself at other conferences focused on more general aspects of the humanities. TaCo has had five editions so far, with the first one held at the University of Bologna at Forlì, Italy (2012), the second one at Durham University, UK (2014), the third one at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain (2016), the fourth one in Bertinoro, Italy (2018), and the fifth at Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata in Rome (2022). Although each edition has had a specific focus, TaCo has always encouraged the scholarly exploration of areas such as, among others, sex and sexuality (including nudity, non-normative sexual practices, and pornography), death and dying, sickness and disability, scatology, racism and sexism, and religion and blasphemy. Over the years, both plenary talks and general submissions have reflected the full scope of the conference's themes, focusing on issues such as taboos in political satire, identity and gender politics, ethnic stereotypes, political correctness and the discourse(s) surrounding it, wokeness and free speech, and the debate between real and perceived offense through humor and comedy. Scholars from disciplines as diverse as linguistics, translation studies, cultural anthropology, sociology, media studies, performance and theatre studies, and literature have presented their research at TaCo.

As the first collective publication inspired by TaCo since its inception, the articles selected for this special issue build on some of the themes of the conference, with a particular focus on explorations of taboo in language, media, and translation, and – in many cases – the intersections among these different but increasingly interconnected fields. The aim of this special issue is to offer a multidisciplinary space in which the study of taboo can continue to be pursued by building on previous relevant research in adjacent disciplines. For example, scholarly interest in taboo has come from disciplines and subdisciplines such as

linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and language acquisition, in which swearing and "rude" language in general have been looked at not only from the point of view of production (for example in learners of a second language and in terms of the gendered use of profanities) but also in terms of their pragmatic ramifications for interpersonal communication, such as in the case of politeness and impoliteness research (e.g., Bousfield 2008; Brown and Levinson 2014; Culpepper and Hardaker 2017; Culpepper 2018), derogatory language (Andersson and Trudgill 1990; McEnery 2005), and the use of dysphemisms as face-threatening behavior (Goffman 1967; Zajdman 1995). A number of contributions in this special issue tackle taboo-related issues in audiovisual translation, a discipline that over the years has been very prolific in the study of cross-cultural taboo mediation, particularly in dubbing and subtitling. Specifically, the angle of textual manipulation and (self)censorship in audiovisual products seems to be endlessly fascinating, with both older and more recent publications (e.g., Chiaro 2007; Díaz-Cintas 2012; Alsharhan 2020; Valdeón 2020; Avila-Cabrera 2023; Guillot 2023; Pavesi and Formentelli 2023; De Rosa 2024) focusing on how different taboos are negotiated across different language combinations. Media and humor studies have often looked at taboo breaking in the context of comedy and offence (e.g., Oring 2003; Pérez 2022), both in fictional and non-fictional genres – for example in stand-up comedy (Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Krefting 2014) and political discourse in comedic television programming (e.g., Sienkiewicz and Marx 2021; 2022). Among the key issues often addressed in these disciplines are the difference between "punching up" vs. "punching down" (Lockyer and Pickering 2008) – i.e., using taboo humor to make fun of privileged people or categories of people as opposed to people who are the victims of social oppression or other forms of discrimination (Davies 2011) – and the use of taboo comedy for shock value (Krefting 2014). Both could be seen as relevant aspects to the study of taboo in general, as they reconnect to the previously mentioned ideas of context and purpose, and to the sliding nature of taboos that necessarily require to be anchored to a specific time, place, and culture.

On a terminological note, going back to Allan and Burridge's work on taboos that many papers in this collection reference, a particularly helpful statement by these scholars notes that "taboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 11). While this concept of taboo seems very apt – particularly because of its expansiveness – at the same time we prefer not to define "taboo" in more specific terms for the purposes of this special issue. Taboo has been given such an extensive range of definitions that limiting ourselves to only one of them would be restrictive and anachronistic. Therefore, it is our intention to leave it to each contributor to provide their own definition of, and perspective on, taboo. We truly believe that offering different angles to the ongoing conversation on the topic, from different disciplines, will add to the significance of this special issue.

The essays collected here reflect the multidisciplinary vocation of the TaCo Conference Series and range from audiovisual translation studies to media studies and theatre, humor studies, linguistics, and computer science. Analyses

apply both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and, in a bid to linguistic inclusivity, they include both European and non-European languages. The taboo areas and fields of application covered in the collection run the gamut from religion and sex in its various iterations to political discourse, body modification, and censorship and regulation.

The first group of essays falls under the broader area of audiovisual localization. The paper by **Pilar Rodríguez-Arancón** and **José Javier Ávila-Cabrera**, "Religious References in the Subtitling of *Succession* into Spanish", analyzes the religious references retrieved in the subtitling of the TV series *Succession* (Season 3) from English into European Spanish. Based on a descriptive approach, the study employs Ávila-Cabrera's taxonomy of translation techniques to validate the initial hypothesis: religious references tend to not be transferred into the target language, as they are either omitted or toned down. Speaking of dysphemistic language, **Angela Sileo**'s essay "Dirty Dubbese: Dubbing as a Means of Taboo Language Transfer from English into Italian" looks at the phenomenon of "dubbese" – and specifically at what she terms "dirty dubbese" – aiming to investigate the ways in which this hybrid, pseudo-colloquial variety of Italian made up of routine translations, cliched expressions, and calques from English has been influencing the taboo language production of native Italian speakers. By means of a quali-quantitative analysis, Sileo's findings reveal that primarily negative transfers (in Gideon Toury's terminology) can be observed. In her paper "The Translation of Sex-Related Language in TV Series: Analyzing the Fictional Speech of LGBTQ+ Characters", **Sonia González Cruz** analyzes the depiction of LGBTQ+ characters in TV series on streaming platforms, which presents a challenge for translators and adaptors: their task is to transfer fictional speech based on diverse identities that need and deserve to be properly preserved into another lingua-cultural system. The paper focuses on the translation of *Euphoria* and *Sex Education* from English into Spanish and shows that LGBTQ+ characters' sex-related speech does not seem to be considered a taboo, as no omissions nor censorship have been detected in the adaptation process. **Chiara Bucaria**'s contribution "(Re)Assessing the Adaptation of Audiovisual Taboo Content: The Role of Paratextual Information" analyzes the localization of taboo language and content through the paratextual information available on the streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Her research suggests that, in general terms, blatant examples of textual manipulation and censorship of audiovisual products on streaming platforms have decreased over the past few years due to the adoption of extra-textual, taboo-mediating tools such as ratings and content advisories.

The second set of contributions offers perspectives on the areas of language, communication and performance. One of the papers that look at taboo in the form of swearing, **Marianne Rathje**'s "Use of Swear Words Among Young Danes in the Reality TV Series *Ex on the Beach*" tackles the so-far relatively neglected area of swearword use in the speech of young Danish people. The study aims to bridge this gap by providing valuable insights in a gender-related perspective, by contradicting previous research indicating that the use of swearwords – as revealed by her analysis of *Ex on the Beach* – is more frequent in men than in women. Also looking at lesser studied languages, **Thomas Wier**'s article

"'Whored-out to the KGB': Defining Obscenities in Georgian and Other Languages of the Caucasus" explores how obscene constructions function across languages and what their connection is to anthropological taboos. It argues that obscenities have three key characteristics: nonliteral taboo referents, lexical specificity, and grammatical idiomaticity. Weir also shows that these same traits found in the obscenities of Western languages can also be found in less-commonly studied languages of the Caucasus. In "From *Sex and the City* to *Sex Education*: Sex-Related Metaphors in TV Series", **Adeline Terry** compares sex-related metaphors in the two TV series with the aim of determining whether shifts in the use of conceptual sex metaphors can be detected, roughly two decades apart. By adopting a quantitative methodology focused on metaphorical X-phemisms, Terry concludes that – even though *Sex Education* is generally thought to adopt a more inclusive approach – the source domains used for sex-related conceptual metaphors mostly remain anchored in dysphemistic, violent, dehumanising language. **Roxanne Padley**'s study titled "'You Won't Be Able to Tell It's Been Done': A Linguistic Analysis of Stigma in Cosmetic Surgery Discourse" looks at the cultural taboo of cosmetic surgery. Through a mixed-method analysis of a corpus of spoken surgery consultations, Padley analyzes linguistic patterns related to stigma around cosmetic surgery. By adopting corpus linguistic methodologies, ethnography, and corpus-based discourse analysis, she finds the patterns that emerged indicate both surgeons' and patients' desire to hide the surgery. In turn, she concludes, this might have negative repercussions by reinforcing the already existing stigma around seeking out cosmetic surgery. In the realm of performance studies, **Alexander Millington**'s essay "Sex as Spoken Words in Contemporary British Drama" focuses on the descriptive acts of sex and intimacy on the contemporary British stage as written texts and spoken words, specifically the use of language in Katherine Chandler's *Lose Yourself* (2019) and Anna Jordan's *Freak* (2014). Millington argues that by using the description of the sexual acts, rather than overtly performing them, the intimate, aural connection that occurs between the performer and the spectator can be greater than the visual.

The last two essays in this special issue address the increasingly relevant uses of taboos in the world of digital communication. In "'From Guard Rails to Epic Fails': Can Generative AI Police Its Own Capacity for Offense?", **Tony Veale** notes how social media platforms have become the outlets of choice for many provocateurs in the digital age. Not only do they afford egregious behaviors from their human users, but this misbehavior can also serve to magnify, and even weaponize, the least desirable outputs of the generative AI systems (often called "bots") that also operate upon them. Veale's article considers the responsibilities that AI system builders bear for the offences caused by their online creations, and explores what they can do to prevent, or mitigate, the worst excesses, whether explicit or implicit. Lastly, **Anthony Dion Mitzel**'s contribution "An Unlimited Memeiosis of the 'Let's Go Fuck Joe Brandon' Meme: Sociocultural Ramifications of Taboo Humor in Strategic Political Discourse" analyzes the role played by memes in political communication, by focusing on one specific case study, the "Let's Go Brandon" meme cycle, as an example of complex political ideas distilled into content that is easy to share and able to influence public

opinion and political engagement. The paper also attempts to offer future insights into the evolving and dynamic intertwining of sociocultural/political discourse, memes, and the impact of taboo language and humor at the sociocultural level.

Despite the richness of the nuanced and varied contributions collected in this special issue, a number of aspects relating to taboo in language, media, and audiovisual translation deserve further scholarly attention and may be considered as potentially interesting and relevant avenues for future research. In terms of taboo-related themes, for example, a number of areas – such as death, illness, disability, racism, and homo/transphobia – have only been tangentially addressed by the contributions in this collection, despite their prominence in today's society, for example in the form of discourse around terminal illness and end-of-life care, assisted suicide, and the increasing polarization of public opinion on identity issues and cancel culture. As far as contexts of application are concerned, it should be noted that while all the essays about translation in this special issue address taboos in the context of audiovisual localization, other forms of translation might be equally interesting areas of inquiry, not least the cases in which AI-assisted tools are now starting to be used in translation practice, particularly when it comes to creative texts. Moreover, further research would be welcome exploring taboos in other textual genres such as advertising[1], video games, and online communication in general, e.g., social media platforms' policies on what kind of content is considered inappropriate and/or harmful and therefore subjected to proscription on said platforms. More in general, a particularly urgent avenue for future research seems to be an analysis of taboos from a diachronic perspective. Specifically because of the everchanging nature of taboo and of its tendency to lose part of its impact through familiarization and repetition (Bucaria and Barra 2016), explorations of the evolution of what is considered taboo and of the ways in which different kinds of taboo are negotiated would be particularly valuable. In fact, research seeking to explore the shifting boundaries of the acceptability, reinforcement, and breaking of taboos in their various incarnations as produced and perceived in today's increasingly multicultural societies appears to be of extreme value.

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[1] See, for example, the use of dark humor revolving around death to promote funeral businesses, an example of which is the viral campaign for the Italian funeral home Taffo.

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