Abstract

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 refers to the forbidden sexual relationships between family members. The incest taboo is said to be universal, i.e., proscribed in every human society. As such, incest is worth exploring from a sociolinguistic perspective as it is a social taboo, due to its prohibition in society, and a linguistic taboo, as its tabooness influences how it is discussed. This has not been previously investigated in the literature.

This study analyses taboo language related to incest, focusing on the linguistic strategies used to avoid naming the taboo. Taboo language is defined here as linguistic avoidance strategies, i.e., words that are not dared to be spoken. Therefore, this study intends to analyse the unspeakable. To do this, it addresses the methodological challenges of finding absence in a corpus. This thesis suggests a methodology for investigating discursive absence, potentially applicable to other analytical frameworks. The methodology consists in combining method and data triangulations. The method triangulation relies on corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), combining corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, and the data triangulation refers to the contrastive analysis of cross-linguistic datasets. Thus, this cross-linguistic corpus-assisted discourse analysis is applied to data extracted from the French and British press between 2017 and 2022 to investigate what is said and *not* said about the incest taboo.

The findings of this study demonstrate that: (i) even though the incest taboo is common in both cultures, the perception of the taboo radically differs between the two press coverages, (ii) the triangulations of methods and data provide more robust analyses to explore discursive absence, and (iii) the incest taboo needs to be further investigated to break the taboo of intrafamilial sexual abuse. As such, this thesis aims to offer new insights into the linguistic investigation of this silenced taboo.