

Transgressions in the foreign language: taboo subjects, offensive language and euphemisms for Spanish learners of English

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La enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras y/o segundas ha desterrado de sus programas la inclusión del léxico tradicionalmente considerado ofensivo o vulgar, al tiempo que los diccionarios no incluían vocablos de este tipo. La liberalización de costumbres a partir de la década de los ochenta y el cambio en las leyes de los países occidentales ha supuesto una mayor permisividad con respecto al uso de palabras hasta entonces consideradas “tabú” en público, incluyendo los medios de comunicación. Los estudiantes de una lengua extranjera van a estar expuestos, por lo tanto, a un gran número de expresiones y vocablos que, en ocasiones, se sentirán tentados de usar, aunque no sea conscientes del efecto que puedan provocar en el oyente nativo. Este artículo presenta, en primer lugar, una encuesta realizada entre alumnos universitarios de inglés sobre su percepción de estos vocablos para, a continuación, estudiar las diferencias de uso en ambas lenguas de cara a su posible inclusión en los programas de estudio.

The number of forbidden subjects and the extent to which they are considered “taboo” vary from language to language, and, precisely for this reason, the strong relationship between a given language and its corresponding society cannot be as clearly defined as in the restrictions that the latter imposes on the former. The Polynesian word *taboo* originated in the prohibition issued by tribal religious chiefs to carry out certain activities or utter certain words (Webster 1952: 11-33). In our modern societies, although religions have lost their dogmatic momentum and the liberalization of customs has allowed speakers to be franker about certain forbidden topics, restrictions persist in languages such as English and Spanish, and, consequently, children of a given L1 must learn to decide the context or the situation when certain words or phrases can be used, first at home and then at school. As speakers acquire their own language, they learn that certain words should not be uttered in public (Jay 1991: 4) and they also realise that there are remarkable differences between speech and writing (O’Donnell & Todd 1991: 12; Quirk et al. 1985: 24-25) with their own governing rules (Quirk 1962: 218; Milroy & Milroy 1985: 64). And,

although some writers criticise the notions of correctness and standard forms (Bartsch 1987: 170ff), native speakers soon understand the need to learn the rules which make an utterance acceptable under certain circumstances but totally unacceptable in others.

The same applies to the learner of second languages¹, and, as a result, teachers of foreign languages need to present formal descriptions of the language being taught, particularly in the advanced levels of university syllabuses. The lexicon related to taboos also belongs in this area of the conventions and restrictions of a language, and, although in recent years a number of grammars have included sections devoted to the differences between the formal and informal varieties of English, very few make any reference to offensive language (e. g. Leech & Svartvik 1994: 17ff, Eastwood 1994: 64-75 avoid it, whereas Swan 1995: 573-578 does not). Thus, teachers are often faced with the dilemma of introducing words related to taboo subjects or avoiding any reference to them. Some learners can even be shocked when certain words are used, while others will disapprove of the moment the teacher has chosen to present them. Consequently, both native speakers of a given language and students of a second or foreign language must be particularly attentive, and, in the case of the latter must put aside considerable time and effort to learn not only the structures and vocabulary of an unfamiliar language, but also matters of linguistic convention (and not merely the use of a certain formula as the opening or closing phrase of a formal letter). To remove this difficult area from the teaching syllabuses can only lead to confusion or misunderstanding, as Brook points out:

Misunderstandings of words and phrases are more common than is generally realised (...) Such misunderstandings are especially common when taboos are involved. Schoolboys reading Shakespeare often have a very vague or inaccurate idea about the meaning of words like incest or bastard; they know that such words are connected with the "facts of life". (1973: 70-71)

Therefore, it is essential that second language learners become familiar both with the offensive words of that language and the precise contexts in which they are used. That is, their knowledge, or "linguistic

repertoire” in Corder’s words (1973: 64), must be sufficiently broad so as to identify those terms even if they choose not to use them themselves. Therefore, our approach to the subject in this paper will have a sociolinguistic scope, since we shall examine the relationship between Spanish and British societies and their respective taboos and linguistic conventions. But our research is also connected with comparative linguistics, since it aims to analyse differences and similarities between Spanish and English, and, additionally, is ultimately concerned with applied linguistics to language teaching since our objective is to assess the importance of introducing this type of lexicon into the teaching syllabuses. In this sense, we share Milroy & Milroy’s view that “many of the findings of sociolinguistic research are directly relevant to the formulation of educational policy and practice” (1993: 34), not only as regards the teaching of a language in its native country to native speakers, but also as a foreign language for non-native speakers. In this article, and due to the limited space available, we will focus on European Spanish and British English. We shall follow three steps: first, a definition of the terminology used will be provided; second, we shall present the results of a survey carried out among advanced students of English to decide the extent to which our students are familiar with the subject. Finally, we shall study the differences between the two languages to determine whether offensive and strong language should be included in English syllabuses.

TERMINOLOGY

Before studying attitudes to swearing by Spanish students of English as well as the forms in which the use of this lexicon varies in English and Spanish, we must be precise about the terminology we are going to use. The labels “offensive”, “strong”, “shocking”, “four-letter words”, “obscene”, “blasphemous”, “taboo” and “foul” have been used to describe language which is restricted in use to certain very informal contexts. Societies have a number of subjects which are considered taboo, that is they are not supposed to be mentioned in public and are only used in very informal and relaxed situations when the speakers feel there is enough confidence to do it, or because they need to express strong emotions such as anger or surprise. This is reflected in a number of linguistic conventions, which do not only affect taboo subjects, and, although this is a very small part of the linguistic conventions of the two languages we are dealing with, it is an extremely important one, since the

inappropriate use of certain expressions can cause serious communication problems between native and non-native speakers. As Hudson points out:

There is a very powerful convention which says that certain words, such as 'shit', ought never to be used, and many people know these words but observe the convention to the extent that from birth to death they never say them (not even to report that their children have said them) - a truly amazing fact, seen objectively. (1980: 53)

This has been so to the extent that, until very recently, publishers were not allowed to print certain words and that film-makers had to abide by certain moral codes to make their films, since otherwise their work would be censored (the turning-point was the explosion of expletives in war films of the 1970s, see Hughes 1991: 203).

However, the words and expressions generally referred to as "taboo", and avoided by some speakers of English and Spanish respectively, should not be described as such since native speakers of a given language tend to use them more often than others which are not considered so. Hudson also mentions the fact that many of these words have synonyms or near synonyms. These can be used without having the same effect on the hearer. He provides examples in connection with the previous quotation: the word 'faeces' is considered a technical term while the word 'pooh' is used by children, and neither would be regarded as taboo. This would imply that it is the word rather than the concept what arouses anger on the listener's part. In fact, some specialists on the teaching of English as a second language have labelled these words "taboo words", Michael Swan amongst them. Swan classified taboo words into three different groups: words related to the Christian religion, words related to sex and words related to bodily wastes and added that "taboo words are shocking, they are often used when people want to express powerful emotions by using 'strong language'" (1995: 589).

Other authors have spoken of two clear groups of words or expressions that tend to be avoided by our society: those which are used to express strong feelings and those which are not. Nida & Taber, writing

on the difficulties of translation, argued that there were two types of linguistic taboos: negative ones and positives ones. They wrote:

On the one hand, there are negative taboos, with associated feelings of revulsion, or disgust. Against such words as the famous four-letter words in English which refer to certain body organs and functions. The fact that the taboo is against the word and not the referent can be seen from the fact that there are quite innocent scientific terms which refer to the same things and which are perfectly acceptable. But the feeling against the words is such that even though everyone knows them, they are not used in polite society. Such words are thought to defile the user.

On the other hand, there are positive taboos, associated with feelings of fear or awe: certain words are also regarded as powerful, and the misuse of such words may bring destruction upon the hapless user. A good example is the traditional Jewish avoidance of the name God. (1969: 91)

This approach to the issue clearly reflects, in our opinion, a misconception in the definition of a certain type of lexicon as taboo. The erroneous view, which parallels Hudson's previous words, can be explicated in the fact that the concept itself is not regarded as taboo, since it is argued that the language has two, or more, different words to refer to the same concept, one of them usually considered as vulgar, another one as familiar and a final one as technical, the latter being the acceptable one. However, some technical terms have also been avoided in public until very recently, as we shall mention below.

Thus, we hold the view that taboo words do not exist as such. Speakers may feel that a number of subjects should be avoided in public in all or in some cases. Some of these subjects coincide in most Western societies, although to various degrees. In some distant societies, certain subjects avoided in Western societies are not regarded as forbidden. Two good examples are that of age and salary, which, in some oriental cultures, can *and* are used in introductions to other people, native or non-native, to show interest in the other person, whereas we would regard the very mention of them as offensive or even insulting (and, although the stigma

in the case of age might seem to be changing, if we are to judge from certain radio and television commercials, the fact is that, even in this case, the change is minimal in slogans of the type: "Over forty and proud of it", used in the commercial of a moisturising cream on British television, in which a reference to the precise age is avoided). The reaction of the speaker is basically to banish these subjects from daily speech, and, since there is no difference in both European English and Spanish, second language learners will not confront many difficulties in dealing with these subjects simply because they would not be mentioned.

More conflictive is the attitude to other subjects which both languages might find taboo, although to various degrees: religion, sex, bodily functions, illness, death and madness. These subjects give way to a number of words and expressions which provoke various reactions among listeners since the intention with which they are used vary depending on the speaker and the context. As regards religion, Christianity has a number of sacred words that should not be mentioned out of context, since this implies irreverence for God. Hugues argues that, in the past, three terms were used in English in connection with the irreverent use of Christian concepts: *blasphemy*, *profanity* or *obscenity* (1991: 246). In our study we will only use *blasphemy* or *blasphemous* since, etymologically, it is the word more directly associated with the use of religious names in non-religious contexts², such as *Jesus!* in English or "cago en San Pedro" in Spanish.

We will use the term *obscene* to refer to words related to other two taboo topics, sex and bodily functions. Although some listeners will find it unacceptable to mention these subjects in public, irrespective of whether we use neutral or very informal words, the latter can cause strong offence to a greater number of speakers. These words can also be labelled "vulgar words" and should be clearly distinguished from formal or humorous versions. Thus, "penis" is a formal word for the male sexual organ, whereas children use a humorous term, "willy." The vulgar equivalent would be "prick" or "dick." Since these two words are more likely to offend certain listeners, we should speak of "offensive language", which would also include blasphemous words. In this sense "offensive" and "shocking" language will be connected with the possible reactions the speaker may cause in the listener. We have also mentioned the word "strong", which

will be used in connection with the speaker's attitude, that is to say, with situations in which the speaker wants to express strong feelings, either as a way to release tension or with a view to offending the listener³.

A SURVEY OF SPANISH STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TO OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

In the academic session 1996-97 we carried out a survey among 108 advanced students of English taking their third university course in English language. In our study, none of the students is bilingual or has English-speaking parents. None of them has studied abroad, although most of them have spent at least three months in Britain (76%). All of them belong to the same age group, 20 to 25 years. Their social background is equally similar: they belong to middle-class families, and are supposed to study English out of interest, since tertiary education is not compulsory. The questionnaire aimed at measuring the familiarity of our students with English taboo subjects and offensive language as well as eliciting comparisons between English and Spanish. The students were required to answer the questions by a mere "Yes" or "No", except in the case of those questions where we expected them to express more precise knowledge on these issues. The results were as follows:

1. Do you ever use strong or offensive language in Spanish?
2. Are you familiar with offensive and strong language in English?
3. Have you ever heard English speakers using offensive language?
4. Have you ever read or heard offensive language in the English media?
5. Have you ever read or heard offensive language in the Spanish media?
6. Do you ever use strong or offensive language in English?
7. Have you ever been taught English offensive language in a class?
8. Which language do you think has a greater range of offensive language?
9. Do you think offensive and strong language are used in similar contexts in both languages?
10. Do you think English syllabuses should teach offensive language?
11. Do you think students should learn it only if they choose to?
12. Write the most common offensive words or expressions in English and rate them from 4 to 1 (4 meaning very offensive, 1 slightly offensive):
13. In your view, who uses offensive language in English more often:
The elderly

Middle-aged people
 Young people
 Children

	YES	NO	OTHERS
1.	84	24	-
2.	45	62	-
3.	84	24	-
4.	42	66	-
5.	108	0	-
6.	21	87	-
7.	15	93	-
8.	-	-	Spanish-78 English-21 Don't know-2 The same-3
9.	60	48	-
10.	66	39	Just to be able to recognize it-2
11.	51	57	-
12.	See comments below	-	-
13.	-	-	The elderly-0 Middle-aged people-33 Young people-69 Children-0

Students in this study openly declare that they use offensive language in Spanish (77.7% answered in the affirmative) whereas the

percentage of students who students who use strong language in English drops to 19.4%. This is quite remarkable if we take into account that over half of them believes that strong words and expressions are used in a similar way in both languages (55.5%). This could be partly due to the fact that only 41.6% declares to be familiar with strong language in English. They seem to be certain about two particular facts: Spanish has a much greater range of strong language (72.2%) and taboo language is not generally used in the British mass media (66.1%) as opposed to the extended use of it in the Spanish media, where all the students agreed. This view might be caused by the existence of the so-called “watershed”, the time before which no explicit scenes and offensive language can be shown on British television. The nine o’clock between viewing suitable for children and for adults only is, in fact, a well preserved dividing line, and the British media have been particularly concerned about whether private channels have turned the watershed into a “waterfall”⁴.

As regards speakers of English who are more likely to use offensive language, our students agreed that middle-aged people come second to the younger generations, whereas none mentioned the elderly or children. These answers clearly relate to the fact that only 13.8% had previously worked on strong language in the classroom, although 61.1% believed this lexicon should be included in English syllabuses. It is particularly noticeable that almost 40% rejected this idea, even if most students declared they use taboo words in their mother tongue.

Some of the contradictions shown above are reflected in the students’ answers to question 12. The range of words mentioned in this open question was rather limited; the word “fuck” in its various forms was mentioned in 83% of the answers, although some of the expressions were not quite English: “fuck off, get the fuck, fuck you, fuck yourself, mother fuck, fuck you off, fuck it yourself, your fucking mother...”, and, although the word was generally rated 3 or 4, there were 20 students who rated it 1 or 2. The word “bitch” and the expression “son of bitch” came second, mostly rated 3 or 4. Then there were four words mentioned in only 10 to 30% of the answers: “whore”, “shit”, “piss” and “bastard”. And finally, students also included words such as “stupid”, “bloody”, “silly” or expressions like “leave me alone”, rated in 10% of the cases as 3 or 4. Other highly offensive English words or expressions were never mentioned.

The survey points out to the need to include the teaching of this lexicon to advanced students of English, since they are more likely to understand and perhaps use the language in natural contexts. This does not mean teaching them *to use* taboo language in English, since it would imply forcing them to take a decision which should remain personal, but teaching them to recognise the contexts, the differences and the strength of the language in comparison with their own language. For this reason, we shall now move on to our next stage, that is obtaining a possible framework to be used in the English classroom, by means of dividing this vocabulary in topics and drawing comparisons between the way in which it is used in the two languages in order to avoid the pitfalls that it may give way to.

RELIGION

As countries of an ancient Christian tradition, we might believe that English and Spanish societies deal with the subject of religion in parallel ways. Both the layman and the linguist might be tempted to claim that, of the two societies, the Spanish one would be stricter as regards language and religion. However, a comparison of the way in which both languages deal with the subject will make us draw very different conclusions. Blasphemous words and expressions were supposed to be avoided in the past, since one of the commandments explicitly prohibited any unnecessary reference to God. In previous centuries, the term *blasphemy* was used to refer to curses made using the name of God or to the irreverent use of religious terms. Although Hugues claims that there has been a change in terminology (1991: 246), *blasphemy* is still used in this sense in English, in the same way “blasfemar” is used in Spanish.

However, the English language has a very short range of blasphemous terms, all of which are included by Swan in his list of taboo and swear words (1995: 574-575). Following his own system to mark the strength of these words, in which four stars would denote a highly offensive word whereas one would mark a mildly offensive one, blasphemous words are marked with one or two stars. His list includes: *damn**, *blast**, *hell**, *God**, *Jesus*** and *Christ***. We could also add *bloody* to this list, since older speakers of English still regard it as offensive, arguing that the word “bloody” originally referred to the “blood of Christ” and, consequently, its use out of context is highly offensive since it made reference to a very

dramatic episode of Christianity, the death of Christ⁵. These speakers are obviously unaware of the alleged, and otherwise rather picturesque, origin of the word (it is taken as a corruption of the expression *By our Lady*) and have their own reasons to consider it offensive, whereas Hugues points out that all these are merely anecdotal facts and he holds a very different view:

Philologists and lexicographers have spent a lot of time tracing the origins of the word 'bloody'. According to a common folk etymology, the word is a corruption of 'by our lady' (...) In fact 'bloody' comes, surprisingly, from 'bloody'. (1991:30)

Therefore, agreeing with Hugues' view on this would obviously imply that there are no reasons to consider *bloody* a blasphemous word or a swearword. However, the fact that some speakers may consider "bloody" offensive clearly reveals that, in some cases, the effect of the words used by a given speaker will depend largely on the feelings they have on the hearer rather than on the intensity put by the speaker.

All in all, the above-mentioned list is clarifying enough. English, maybe in accordance with its Puritan tradition, has very few blasphemous terms. As a matter of fact, rather than of blasphemous terms we may speak of blasphemous uses of religious words, since all of them can be used both in religious and non-religious contexts with different connotations:

FIGURE 1⁶

Religious context	Non-religious context
•With God, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26)	•My God, what a terrible shock that was!
•If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord... (Genesis 18: 3)	•Oh, Lord! I've forgotten the tickets!
•When Jesus spoke again to the people (John 8:12)	•For heaven's sake...
•Fear him who has power to throw you in to hell (Luke 12:5)	•Jesus! Just look at the mess they've made!
	•What the hell! Let's do it now!

Consequently, it can be argued that, in fact, blasphemous expressions are not taboo words or subjects. The use of these terms (*God, Jesus, Christ...*) will define both the speaker's and the listener's attitude

towards the subject as well as the relationship between the participants in the conversation, i. e., their degree of familiarity, the extent to which they shared the same attitude or hold the same views, the intention of the speakers, etc.

Religious subjects are equally blasphemous in Spanish, but to a lesser extent. In the same sense as speakers of English had to avoid uttering sacred names in public, unless in the required context, such as a religious celebration, paradoxically enough, one of the countries which had been regarded until recently as the epitome of traditional and pious religiousness has an extremely wide range of offensive words in which God and religion are involved: Spanish. In English the number of words related to religion used in offensive contexts is, as we have seen, rather limited and mild. Furthermore, their use is not as extended as in the case of Spanish and they tend to be avoided in front of older people, who might readily take offence.

There exist two facts which denote a very different attitude to religious names in Spanish. The first noticeable difference is the fact that 'Jesus' does not exist as a man's name in English, whereas it is very common among Spanish speakers. This has always shocked or surprised English learners of Spanish as a foreign language. Besides, the Spanish equivalent of *Goodbye!* is "¡Adiós!", derived from the old-fashioned expression "¡Vaya Usted con Dios!" (see Haverkate 1994: 87), very common until recent decades, when it is being gradually replaced by "¡Hasta luego!", and, finally, we could also mention the case of the use of "Jesús" after someone sneezes as an equivalent of "Bless you."

In addition to these facts, exclamations of the type "¡Dios mío!" have never caused great offence among Spanish speakers, young and old, and are, consequently, very common. The combinations of religious words, such as "Dios", with other terms are numerous in Spanish exclamations to express anger or surprise:

FIGURE 2

Religious context	Non-religious context
•Pídamos al Señor nuestro Dios por...	•¡Díos mío! •¡Santo Dios! •¡Dios Santo! •Por Dios!
•Jesucristo es nuestro Salvador. •Por Cristo, nuestro Señor...	•¡Ay, Señor, Señor! ¡Qué desastre! •¡Jesús! ¡Qué cosas dices! •¡Jesús, María y José! ¡Vaya tontería! •¡Estaba hecho un Cristo! •¡No hay Cristo que lo entienda! •¡Vaya un Cristo me ha tocado! •¡Qué diablos! ¡Déjalo ya! •¡Es un demonio! •¡Al diablo con todo! •¡Cago en los demonios! •¡Ese tío es la virgen! •Te voy a dar una hostia/hostiada
•El diablo es el ángel caído.	•Se pegó una hostia •Hostia! ¿Qué es ésto?
•Por María, la Virgen, madre de Dios... •La hostia sagrada	

As we can see in this summary of some of the non-religious contexts in which religious words are used, Spanish speakers have a wide range of possible expressions to express their anger, surprise, annoyance or relief. The words “Jesús” and “Cristo” are used in a variety of expressions which would be considered highly offensive by some speakers of English and would surprise others.

In our Table 2, we have included an example of a type of expression that is characteristic of Spanish, but non-existent in English. We will refer to it below, in the section dedicated to bodily functions. However, it is worth noticing the existence of a Spanish verb that can be combined with almost every word to produce strong or offensive language, depending on the speaker’s intention: “cagar”, literally “to shit.” The first person singular of the present tense is combined in the expression “Me cago en...”, or rather “cago en...” to release tension or to insult somebody. Although there are milder expressions, normally euphemisms of the type “me cago en diez”, “me cago en la mar”, or slightly stronger ones such as “me cago en la leche”, the strongest combinations take place with religious names, ranging from the saints to extremely offensive combinations with “Dios” or “Jesucristo.” Although it might seem that the strength of these expressions limits their use, the fact is that uneducated speakers tend to use them very often, regardless of the offence they can cause to other listeners. Therefore, foreign speakers are likely to hear them in certain situations more often than they would wish to. Under certain circumstances, even educated speakers might resort to occasional strong blasphemy. We

could restrict its use even further: young speakers in the process of becoming adults start using them randomly together with their own slang words, characteristic of that period of a person's life, a type of language which Hudson regards as semi-taboo (1980: 53)⁷. Chambers also recalls that "the transition from childhood to adulthood is often, almost characteristically, accompanied by extremism" (1995: 170). Extremism is reflected in a number of outward signs such as dress, acquisition of adult poses and language. In the case of language, both English and Spanish youngsters create their own way of expressing themselves, which attempts to be unique, although, as Chambers implies (1995: 171), this uniqueness is, in fact, a superficial way used by adolescents to distinguish themselves from adults. Slang disappears as adolescents grow older (or rather it evolves), but some of the linguistic habits acquired during this short period of time (barely five years) may be enduring, the use of strong language among them. Thus, young adults may continue to use obscene and blasphemous language once they have stopped using slang associated with that period of their lives. In English they will tend to continue using the so-called four-letter words whereas in Spanish, blasphemous expressions also remain as a feature of their rites of passage. This process, which starts in early adolescence, is consolidated in the case of Spanish youths through a marking experience: their military service. Here again we must mark a distinction between Spanish and English speakers, since while the former are obliged to spend a year of their life under the extreme conditions of military life, the latter are not. This process is characterised by peer pressure to exhibit all the qualities of manhood, including the abusive reference to figures such as God or Jesus, which have been revered or respected by tradition.

During the year 1992 we carried out a survey of the speech of Spanish young adults, aged between eighteen and twenty-three, to find evidence to support our claims. We found that there was a surprising link between military service and strong language: over 90% of 200 young men doing their military service used very strong language very often, for no reason at all: strong language had simply replaced neutral language. Additionally, we must take into consideration the fact that the majority of educated young men in Spain do not fulfill their military obligations (they choose to do a social service instead), which adds stronger support to the links between strong language and uneducated speakers. For this reason, we carried out a parallel survey among educated young men, and, although

strong language also characterises their speech, it is so to a much lesser degree and the expressions used are considerably milder, extremely blasphemous locutions were reduced by over 50%. Therefore, links between strong language and adulthood are clearly made by young speakers as well as between strong language and masculinity. This connection has already been made in English-speaking countries. Labov (1972: 249) and Trudgill (1983) have already identified this tendency to use non-standard forms of English in American and British speakers of English respectively, although these linguists refer basically to dialectal variations. Trudgill calls the effect that the use of non-standard forms of English has as "covert prestige" (1972; 1983: 169-85). The same concept can be applied to the use of blasphemous language by Spanish adolescents and young adults, even if this language is considered socially unacceptable in most situations. Spanish adolescents find the transgression of a religious code challenging, which would strengthen their newly-acquired masculine role, whereas English adolescents rely basically on transgression of social codes as regards sex and bodily functions.

The second relevant restriction concerning blasphemous language is linked to sex. Studies on gender differences are relatively new and their findings on English-speaking women versus men are inconclusive. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s the opinion was held that men use more offensive language than women, this view is being increasingly challenged. Recent studies (the one by Risch in 1987 is perhaps the turning point) claim that female linguistic habits do not match "commonly held perceptions" (De Klerk 1992: 288), and provide data to support those claims. De Klerk worked with South African women's speech whereas S. E. Hugues (1992: 291-303) studied British working-class women. S. E. Hugues also provides insights into the importance of considering other factors than sex in the speech of a given person, whether it be a male or a female, such as age, social status and education.

On the other hand, a 1995 study by Holmes holds the view that women tend to be more verbally polite than men. The researcher analysed New Zealand's women and men's speeches and found that "women agree with others, compliment others, and apologise more often than men, demonstrating sensitivity to the feelings of other people" (1995: 193), which obviously implies a limited use of strong language since its indiscriminate use would show little of the sensitivity that is claimed for women's speech.

Although more studies are needed, two points made by these researchers stand out. First that together with sex, we should take other variables into consideration when carrying out studies of this type, such as age, social status and education. And second, that even when considering other factors women tend to use forms closer to the standard language, even if we agree on the conclusion that women “as far apart as North American and South African appear to be moving in the same direction: towards increasing “freedom” in the use of impolite forms” (De Klerk 1992: 288). This does not necessarily invalidate previous studies, although it does reflect an evolution in the speech of women since the appearance of the feminist movements. This change is parallel to that of women in Spain, since after the end of General Franco’s regime in 1975, women abandoned the traditional role allotted to them and Spanish women in the 1980s and 1990s use strong language more generously than ever before as a means of ascertaining their liberation from male dominance. However, Spanish women still use less strong language than their male counterparts. López & Morant (1991) have studied these differences, and although women also use swearwords and vulgar language, both their range and its use are limited: they include comprehensive lists of expressions with sexual connotations, some of them used as very vulgar compliments to men (1991: 171-174), and of graffiti (189-207), but the fact is that both are milder and less numerous, and hardly any blasphemous expression is recorded, since women still avoid using expressions which show disrespect towards religion (maybe as a consequence of the clear connection between women and the Catholic Church in the past, which would turn a female blasphemer into a social pariah, whereas a male blasphemer would pass almost unnoticed).

Therefore, English speakers and Spanish speakers vary considerably in their use of blasphemous language. English uses a very short number of religious words in non-religious contexts and these contexts, although some speakers consider them offensive and others use them to express anger, annoyance or surprise, blasphemy in English is definitely milder than in Spanish. Additionally, two religious words are used only in Spanish in blasphemous and highly offensive contexts, one is the word “Virgen”⁸ and the other the word “hostia” (see Table 2). Although the first word, when used in a non-religious context, can be easily identified by the non-native speaker and, therefore, avoided, the second, which is very frequent and less transparent for the non-native

speaker, can be picked up, used and lead to a communication breakdown. The equivalent English word is hardly ever used, except in its appropriate context. Therefore, non-native speakers who hear it in sentences like the ones included in Table 2 might infer that it is a synonym of words like “golpe/torta”, without any other implications (e. g. “Te voy a dar un par de tortas” or “¡Se dio un golpe!”), and they may be tempted to use the new word in a similar context, which could produce a variety of reactions on the listener, ranging from humorous appreciation to strong offence.

SEXUAL ORGANS, SEX & BODILY FUNCTIONS

Sex has also been a taboo subject for British and Spanish speakers. But, as in the case of religion, the attitude of the speakers of these languages varies noticeably. We will refer to them as sexual organs rather than as parts of the body, as Swan does (1995: 575), since their strength largely depends on their sexual connotations rather than on physiological ones. These words, followed by the number of stars allotted by Swan, are: *arse****, *arsehole****, *balls****, *bollocks****, *cock****, *dick****, *prick****, *tits****, *cunt*****⁹. Some common Spanish equivalents for these words are: “culo” for the backside, “cojones” for testicles, “polla” for penis, “tetas” for breasts, “coño” for vagina. Spanish also has a greater variety of names to be used as milder synonyms, but these are the basic five. These terms are the vulgar equivalents of their corresponding technical words (“pene”, “testículos” and “vagina”), which are cognates in English and Spanish. Therefore, their use is restricted to certain circumstances, either when the speaker is in a familiar environment or when he/she is expressing powerful emotions, irrespective of the interlocutors.

However, speakers of the two languages do not use these words with the same frequency, intensity or intention. The English words are used as insults to express “hatred, anger, envy or contempt” or to express “refusal or defiance” (Swan 1995: 576-577), and, in both cases, they are very strong and have negative connotations. These words do not normally have a literal meaning in English.

Conversely, Spanish often uses the five words in very vulgar contexts with the literal meaning. In addition, “cojones” and “coño” are multiple-use terms. These two crude versions for “testicles” and “vagina” are two of the most flexible vulgar words in Spanish and they do not

always have negative connotations, in spite of their crudity. Quite the contrary, in many cases they are used with very a positive meaning and can be used to flatter the interlocutor, praise an action or an event, et cetera. They can be used with a number of suffixes in the most various contexts with the most unexpected meanings. They can be used as adjectives, nouns, adverbs, interjections. . . Let us compare the use of vulgar words for the sexual organs in English and Spanish:

FIGURE 3

Vulgar terms for the sexual organs in English used in context	Vulgar terms for the sexual organs in Spanish used in context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Prick: -He's a real prick! (negative connotations, as a noun) •Arsehole: -That guy's a real arsehole! (negative connotations, as a noun) •Balls: -Balls to the lot of you! (negative connotations, as a noun) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Cojones: -Es un tío cojonudo (positive connotations, used as an adjective) -¡No hay cojones! (negative, as a noun) -¡No tienes cojones! (very negative, as a noun) -Lo pasamos cojonudamente (very positive, as an adverb) -¡Qué cojones! (neutral, as a noun) -Estaba acojonado (negative, as an adjective) -¡Manda cojones! (negative, as a noun) •Coño: -¡Vaya coñazo! (negative, as a noun) -¡Qué coño! Vamos a dejarlo como está (neutral) -¡Coño! No lo sabía (a neutral interjection) -No sé que coño pintas aquí (negative, as a noun) -¡De qué te coñeas? (negative as a verb)

The use of these words, and more precisely the ones included in Figure 3, is so widespread in Spanish and has become so present in the mass media (even journalists and columnists in serious newspapers often resort to these two words in their reports and columns, not when reporting other people's words, but in their own texts: see Paco Umbral's columns in *El Mundo* newspaper, or Eduardo H. Tecglen's in *El País*) that very few people would feel offended nowadays. This also applies to the Spanish equivalent of what Burke defines as "probably the most vulgar synonym for vagina" (1993: 181) in English. The Spanish word "coño" may still sound vulgar in isolation or when used literally. Even educated speakers will only avoid it in those situations in which listeners might take offence. Consequently, the word is too common and will normally pass unnoticed.

Conversely, English hardly ever uses this word. In 1996, our native language assistant was shocked when, in a class dealing with colloquial language, one of our students asked him the meaning of the word "cunt."

When our language assistant, an Oxford-educated young man with no previous teaching experience, heard the word, his first reaction was to refuse to believe his ears, then he blushed and, although he eventually answered the question by saying it was a very obscene word for the female genital organs, he carefully avoided uttering it: he spelt it and wrote it on the blackboard, but he never pronounced it. The episode continued after the class was finished. Even though the student might have miscalculated the strength of the word, due to the influence of Spanish, we felt it necessary to draw to his attention the fact that English speakers tend to be less outspoken about these topics and pointed out to him that he should have asked us first. We insisted on the strength on the word in English, but the student was reluctant to see any reasons to feel sorry about the incident, in spite of the fact that the word is hardly ever printed or uttered in the English mass media, except in the “underground” press (see Hugues 1988: 140).

Therefore, it is probably the sole term to be avoided in English at present despite the fact that the late 1990s have made it possible for television writers and journalists to use it somewhat sparingly in the media. Slang used by the younger generation is also less afraid of resorting to the word “cunt” and, so, a derivative like “cunted” to imply “drunk” has been common in the second half of the 1990s. However, the controversy surrounding this word is still present: it still sounds a very aggressive term and is mostly used as a derogatory word for someone the speaker has extreme dislike: “He’s a total cunt”, or sometimes with a playful tone, although usually among male speakers: “Don’t be a cunt, John”. When the word was first used on television in 1998 (in a series shown on Channel 4) it gave way to a nationwide controversy reaching the serious press¹⁰.

As regards sex, English and Spanish have a similar range of vulgar words. Swan includes the following: *fuck****, *wank****, *bugger****, *come****, *sod***, *bitch***, *whore***, *bastard*** (1995: 575). The first word is perhaps the most flexible both in English and Spanish, as we can see in the following table, which includes the use of other vulgar or offensive words in both languages:

FIGURE 4

Vulgar terms for sexual activities in English used in context	Vulgar terms for sexual activities in Spanish used in context
•Fuck: -What are you fucking doing here? -What a fucking idiot! -Oh, fuck! I'm late! -Where the fuck have you been? -Fuck off! -I don't give a fuck!	•Joder: -¡Hay que joderse! -¡No jodas! -¡El pobre está algo jodido! -¡Deja de joderme! -¡Anda y que te jodan! -¡El jodido de él no vino! -¿Dónde está el jodido mando? -¡Está jodidísimo!
•Bugger: -Bugger it! -Bugger me! -He's a bugger! -I don't give a bugger! -You've buggered it all!	•Marica/maricón: -¡Eso una mariconada! -¡Qué maricón! -¡Deja de mariconear! •Putá/putear: -¡Qué putada me hizo! -¡Deja de putearme! Te lo advierto! -¡Todo esto es una puta mierda! -¡Cago en la puta!

As we can see Spanish uses only one verb, “joder”, to cover the range of meanings of the English verbs *bugger* and *fuck* (and also of others like *screw* and *stuff*). This is the only case in which English has a wider range of words than Spanish (although we should also mention the verb “follar”, which tends to be used with a literal meaning in vulgar contexts). However, once again we must point out that, even if English has a larger number of vulgar verbs meaning “having sex”, this does not imply that a less extensive use of this type of words in Spanish. In addition to the flexibility of the verb “joder”, Spanish also resorts to words like “puta” or “maricón” and uses them as verbs, adjectives or interjections. Since “joder” and its English equivalents appear in similar contexts, we should focus on the use of the other two words.

Prostitution. Deviation from traditional moral standards of behaviour is negatively reflected in Spanish in the use of the words “puta” (*whore*) and “maricón” (a very derogatory term for homosexual males). Grace noticed that “en español se insulta a un hombre vía una mujer, o sea que se insulta o se pone en duda la moral u honestidad de su madre” (1987: 707), that is by showing disrespect for someone’s mother, and, additionally, it is also done by casting doubts on his manhood. Thus, the word “puta” is used in the expression “hijo de puta.” Although similar in meaning to the English “son of a bitch”, it should be noticed that its strength had been greater in the past and, therefore, its public use was banned. The

expression gradually came out of the closet, together with the majority of vulgar and blasphemous language, after the liberalisation of the early 1980s. The common American insult “son of a bitch” had usually been rendered as “hijo de perra” when dubbing American films before the 1980s. The Spanish equivalent recaptures the insulting tone as well as the strength of the American one, which had gradually diminished through the years (Hugues 1991: 166-171). It was probably the only insult of this type allowed by the strict moral code that Hollywood had imposed on the film industry. A similar moral code had been enforced by General Franco’s censors in Spain and, consequently, “hijo de perra” was the accepted version. The 1980s brought about a more liberal attitude to swearing and sexual matters on both sides of the Atlantic. This change was perhaps first noticeable in French films of the 1970s, both in the use of their limited range of swearwords (namely *con, foutre, fils de pute...*) and of nudity, which gradually influenced other Western cinema industries. In Spain the gradual social acceptance of swearing was noticed in a tendency to translate the milder American *son of a bitch* into the stronger “hijo de puta”, not only in new films, but also when the old dubbed versions of American films were almost inaudible and required modern voices and, apparently, modern vocabulary. This gave way to anachronistic newly dubbed versions of Humphrey Bogart films using modern Spanish slang and swearwords, such as the abovementioned and others like the highly offensive “no tienes cojones” to translate the mild *to have no guts*, which reflects the inconsistencies of the liberalisation process of the language after the end of the dictatorial regime in Spain.

Strong sexism in Spanish is reflected in the use of the word “puta” as a very insulting noun for women, which can become stronger when combined with someone’s mother: “tu puta madre” or “cago en tu puta madre”, or can even be used in interjections to express annoyance or anger by uttering “cago en la puta”, where the speaker does not mention any woman in particular. Furthermore, “de puta madre” is paradoxically used as an extremely positive prepositional phrase which emphasises the qualities of someone or something: “es un tío de puta madre”, where the speaker’s intention is to compliment, not to insult. The flexibility of the word is also reflected in the wide range of expressions in which it appears in order to emphasise a noun (“Esto es una puta mierda”; “No tengo ni puta idea”) or to express annoyance (¡Qué putada!). And we can also alter the gender in expression like “No le ví en todo el puto día.” The masculine

“puto” can also be used to address a man, although very often without negative implications (“¡Qué puto eres!” can almost be taken a term of endearment whereas “¡Qué puta eres!” is usually a very strong insult. For different implications of Spanish masculine and feminine swearwords or insults, see López & Morant 1991: 148-149).

Another way in which a man can be insulted through a woman in Spanish is by using the term “cabrón”, literally a *cuckold*, an old-fashioned word in English, although very common in Spanish. However, this term is scarcely used with a literal meaning and it is definitely less flexible than the previous ones. The only common derivative is the word “cabronada”, used as a near synonym of “putada.”

Homosexuality. The third most common word used in Spanish related to sexual matters is “marica” and its stronger derivative “maricón.” Once again, we should clearly state the important difference between English and Spanish as regards the use of these words. English has two words that can be used as insults, although very rarely with their literal meaning: *sod* and *bugger*. As a taboo subject in Christian countries (from the Old Testament, e. g. Genesis xviii-xix, to the modern world, e. g. in the expression “the love that dare not speak its name” used in the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895, and later used to great effect by E. M. Forster in his posthumous novel *Maurice*, 1987: 156ff), homosexuality was a condition which was regarded with “hostility and abhorrence” (Hughes 1991: 228) and, therefore, both Spanish and English reflected the intolerance of their respective heterosexual societies towards homosexuals, basically towards male homosexuals, since the existence of female homosexuality was not even thought of by the majority, Queen Victoria amongst others. This has produced a large number of derogatory terms for male homosexuals and only a few for lesbians: Hugues mentions twenty-six for men and only six for women in the English language since 1300 (1991: 229).

Additionally, we have traced thirteen terms or expressions used in British English as derogatory terms for male homosexuals (including those conjuring up sexual scenes such as “shirtlifter”, “botty boy”, “bum bandit”, “bumhole engineer”, “chutney ferret”, “fudge packer”, “limp wristed”, “sausage jockey”, “pillow biter”, “uphill gardener”; terms such as “bent”; or London rhyming slang such as “stoke-on-trent” or “ginger beer” for “bent” and “queer” respectively) and only two for lesbians (“bean flicker”

and “carpet muncher”). Most of these terms were and *are* highly offensive for homosexuals so they would be only used when intending to hurt the listeners as regards their sexual condition.

However, as homosexuality has been gradually accepted in modern societies, political correctness has spread through the West and imposed its rules on the language we use. For this reason, English usually avoids their use with a literal meaning, and English-speaking homosexuals have adopted a term that had already been used with this meaning in the 1890s, and then reintroduced by the press in the 1960s (O’Donnell & Todd 1991: 91), *gay*. The use of this word to mean *homosexual* gave way to an interesting controversy (Howard 1977: 34) whose last episode has been its worldwide adoption by Gay Movements in other non-English-speaking countries, like Spain. The controversy still surrounds other terms, and in a recent demonstration of the Gay Movement in San Francisco the use of the word *queer* in the slogan “Year of the Queer” was much disapproved of.

Conversely, Spanish, less affected by the trend towards political correctness in sexual matters, still resorts to the terms “marica”, “maricón” and “mariquita” to refer to male homosexuals, not only as mere insults irrespective of the sexual condition of the interlocutor. Thus, expressions like “chistes de mariquitas” or “bares de maricones” are frequently heard, both in private conversations and in the mass media. Additionally, the word “mariconada” is still used disapprovingly to refer to something which does not have the qualities that it is assumed to have (establishing a clear parallelism between that and men who do not appear to have the macho qualities expected from them) or which sounds silly or worthless. In consequence, Spanish learners of English may be clearly influenced by their own language in the liberal use of offensive terms for homosexuals.

In fact, if we consider the English use of the terms “bugger” and “sod”, we will realize that it is generally restricted to non-literal contexts such as “Sod/Bugger off” as a stronger version than “Go away”, and similar to “Fuck/Piss off”; or as insults (“Silly sod/bugger!”) or expressions of surprise (“Bugger me!”). Homosexuality is also the origin of the English expression “Up yours”, which has been used by the most popular of the tabloids in the anti-European headline “Up Yours Delors” (*The Sun*, 1 November 1990). Its Spanish equivalents are “vete a tomar por (el) culo”

and “a tomar por (el) culo”, although in Spanish they are not always used with a literal meaning and, therefore, are not necessarily addressed to the listener: they could be used to express annoyance: “Ya se fastidió. A tomar por culo.”

This is precisely the only context in which the equivalent of *arse* is used in Spanish in an offensive or strong way. In most other cases “culo” is used as an informal word to refer literally to a person’s buttocks and in common expressions of the type “culo del vaso”, “culo inquieto”, “caerse de culo” or “con el culo al aire”. In this respect, English has a wider range of offensive contexts for “arse”, in many cases developed over the past few years, such as an exclamation of annoyance, i.e. when the speaker does something clumsy he might simply say “Arse!”, widely used nowadays in adult humour television shows. Another meaning would be to simply refer to someone as an “arse” as an insult. The verb “arse about” is used with the meaning “fooling around”, as in “Stop arsing around”, or in expressions of the type: “Look at the state of that shelf you just put up, it’s all arse about face!” (i.e. a mess) or “I got totally arseholed on Saturday night” (i.e. drunk).

Bodily functions. Swan includes four words in connection with bodily functions in his list of swearwords: *piss****, *shit****, *crap*** and *fart***. These words are used as insults or in vulgar contexts in English, whereas the equivalent Spanish terms are normally used in vulgar contexts, rather than as insults. The first one is very common on both sides of the Atlantic, although the meaning varies. Thus, whereas in American English “pissed” implies “annoyed”, in British English it is used with the meaning “drunk” in expressions such as “pissed-up”, “pissed as arseholes”, “pissed as a fart” and “pissed as a newt”. Additionally, a “piss-head” refers to a drunkard and a “piss-up” to a heavy-drinking session. “Piss” can also pre-modify an adjective in “The exam was piss easy” (i.e., very easy). The equivalent in Spanish, “mear”, although offensive in some cases, tends to be used in a shorter range of contexts and, generally, with literal meaning¹¹.

Therefore, we can argue that, although they can be offensive, these terms do not seem to have the same strength in the two languages. Let us consider some additional examples:

FIGURE 5

Vulgar terms for bodily functions in English used in context	Vulgar terms for bodily functions in Spanish used in context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Piss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -He's pissed! (vulgar equivalent for <i>angry</i> or <i>drunk</i>) -My uncle always gets pissed out of his head at weddings (vulgar equivalent for <i>drunk</i>) -Piss off! (vulgar and offensive) -It was pissing down (vulgar equivalent for <i>rain</i>) -He was pissing himself (vulgar equivalent for <i>laughing</i>) -It pisses me off (vulgar and offensive when addressed to a person) -He's got a hangover after going out on the piss last night (vulgar for drinking spree) •Fart: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Stupid old fart! (as an insult) -Fart around (vulgar for <i>waste time</i>) •Shit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -No shit! (vulgar for <i>No joking!</i>) -His books are a load of shit! (vulgar and offensive for <i>rubbish</i>) -I don't give a shit! (vulgar for <i>I don't care</i>) -Now we really are in the shit! (vulgar for <i>in a bad position</i>) -Scares the shit out of me! (crude for <i>Scares me</i>) •Crap: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -That's a lot of crap (vulgar and offensive for <i>nonsense</i>) -He's full of crap (vulgar and offensive to call someone a liar) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mear: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -¡Que me meo! (vulgar with a literal meaning) -Voy a echar una meada (vulgar with a literal meaning) -Casi me meo de risa (vulgar for "partirse de risa" or "morirse de risa") •Pedo: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -¡Vaya pedo que lleva! (vulgar for "borrachera") •Mierda/cagar <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -¡Vaya cagada de libro!/¡Vaya mierda de libro! -Estaba cagado de miedo (vulgar for "muerto de miedo") -¡La hemos cagado! (vulgar for "fastidiado") -Se cagaba uno de frío (vulgar for "moría") -¡Me cago en diez/en la mar! -Me cago en...

As Figure 5 reflects, bodily functions is the one taboo subject in which English and Spanish can compare more easily, since both give way to a wide range of expressions in which these words feature. Nonetheless, it also true, as indicated above, that the meanings vary in the two languages. Thus, the words *piss* and *fart* are more common in English with non-literal meanings, whereas *shit* in English and its Spanish equivalents are used in similar contexts in their respective languages with one significant exception: the expression "me cago en...", which can be combined with almost every noun in Spanish, producing blasphemies of the type mentioned in a previous section, extremely offensive expressions for the listener such as "me cago en tu madre" or the extremely offensive "me cago en tu puta madre", as well as milder versions like the ones included in Figure 4. Combinations of the type "me cago en..." are indeed so offensive that none of the bilingual dictionaries that we have consulted include them¹², in spite of which the learner of the second language, in this case the

English-speaking learner. must be able to recognize them if only to avoid them.

EUPHEMISMS

Up to this point we have compared how English and Spanish tackle taboo subjects and the type of vulgar, strong and offensive terms and locutions they produce. However, taboo subjects can also be the source of a very different kind of lexicon, which arises when the speakers prefer to avoid a straightforward reference to a particular subject which they or the listener may find painful to mention or hear: euphemisms¹³. Howard is rather cynical as regards the English language and its society in connection with the use of euphemisms:

The opinion that we are becoming less euphemistic as we become more civilized will not survive a moment's consideration. We may be franker about God, and religion, and excretion, and copulation. Our modern taboos are class, and race, and colour, and money, and death. (1985: 101)

Sex and diseases. This quotation will serve as a good starting-point for this section, as we introduce euphemisms related to one of the subjects about which speakers of English in recent years have been franker, i. e. the appearance in the 1980s of an unknown disease, which caused widespread concern and which required urgent measures to reduce the potential number of people that could become infected by the virus that causes it: AIDS. AIDS introduced a number of important changes in Western societies and its influence can also be traced in the language with which we refer to it. Initially, AIDS was considered a gay-related disease because it was mostly homosexual men who seemed to suffer from it.

As the disease spread it was obvious that it was necessary to take measures to avoid infection. The second important way in which the British society rejected to tackle the problem directly were the advertising campaigns to promote preventive measures against the spread of the disease. One of the main ways the HIV virus is transmitted is through anal-vaginal sex without using contraceptives. Sex, like death and other diseases, is a difficult topic to discuss frankly. As we have seen in a previous section, the words used to talk about it are just too technical or too crude and

offensive. However, under these circumstances, health campaigns had to be specific about sex if their purpose was to be achieved. The British government's early campaigns were euphemistic to the extreme. They used terms like *intimate behaviour* or *bodily fluids*. Consequently, the language did not only fail to communicate, it tended to vitiate a whole range of subtle distinctions between different types of sexual activities (oral, anal, vaginal), which should have reached the population if the proper information about HIV infection was to be transmitted. And, thus, although *intimate behaviour* is a clear euphemism for sexual intercourse, confusion arose from the fact that there was no clear reference to which types of sexual intercourse the campaigns were referring to, a fact which made many British people link it to the label "the gay plague" and believe that only homosexual men could be infected. *Bodily fluids* is another example of a phrase which was first used as a coy euphemism, even if they were not referring to such bodily fluids as tears, but to semen or blood. Another good example is the word *condom*, which was normally excluded from dictionaries because it was considered utterly obscene for inclusion. As Hugues says, "it was principally the AIDS panic of the mid 1980s which abruptly brought *condom* out of linguistic hiding and into general parlance" (1988: 28).

What our previous considerations on AIDS show is that all these words were generally avoided until very recently, as can be seen in the fact that the first advertising campaigns against AIDS did not use either vulgar or technical words to refer to semen, but spoke about bodily fluids and sexual intercourse, which were too general to arouse public anger. Therefore, the British society had imposed extralinguistic rules of where and when to use certain words which refer to certain concepts, regardless of their strength and/or the feelings of the speaker or the listener. Howard wrote in connection with this:

Euphemism is the British linguistic vice (...) [It] implies the substitution of a mild or vague periphrastic expression for a blunt or harsh or indecent one. We do it for various reasons ranging from religious reverence and common decency to prudery and genteelism. (1985: 101)

It seems to us that Howard's interpretation of euphemism stems, once again, from considering the words as previous to the concepts themselves, but his assertion has also a correct side. Euphemisms are

used to avoid offending the listeners. Therefore, they arise from taboo topics and their ultimate aim is also to avoid causing offence. Thus, they differ from offensive words in that both the speaker and the hearer, or the writer and the reader, are aware of the fact that straightforward reference to the subject is being avoided, that they are omitting direct words which might be painful or inadequate. Abbreviations are frequently used so that speakers may avoid overt reference to illness, not only in the case of AIDS, but also DTs for “delirium tremens”, TB for “tuberculosis” or, even more noticeably, the so-called “Big C” for “cancer.” None of these abbreviations exist in Spanish, a language which is far less euphemistic than English as regards illnesses. As regards mental illnesses, English and Spanish carefully avoid direct reference to the subject. A considerable number of euphemistic expressions are used to refer to the mentally unbalanced, being this one of them, of course. But English abounds in this particular field. People can be described as “unhinged”, “balmy/barmy”, “tapped”, “nooky”, “loony”, “loopy”, “nutty”, “wacky” or they can be called “a fruitcake”, “a crackpot” or “a wacko”. The expressions “He’s not all there”, “She’s a little eccentric/a little confused”, “he’s lost his marbles”, “she’s off her rocket/trolley”, or even more humorous ones such as “to be out to lunch”, “to be round the bend”, “to be two sandwiches short of a picnic” or “to have a screw loose/missing” are also used¹⁴. Spanish speakers also have a high number of expressions of this type: “No está muy bien de la cabeza”, “Le falta un verano”, “Le falta una cocción”, “Le falta un tornillo” etcetera. The use of all these euphemisms (and dysphemisms) reveals that the unknown, such as death and mental diseases, have always been taboo subjects in our societies. Non-native speakers of a language must be aware of which subjects are avoided and of the linguistic devices native speakers use to distance themselves from them.

More similar is the way in which both Spanish and English tackle another taboo subject: death. Death is equally avoided in the two languages and various expressions are used instead, as we can see in Figure 6. This fact is particularly noticeable if we take into consideration that both languages are immersed in a Christian culture, which tackles the subject of death directly, both in the Old and New Testaments, and which regards death as the ultimate goal in man’s way to heaven. Thus, language reflects the failure of the various Christian Churches failure to erase man’s fear of death.

FIGURE 6

Euphemisms for death in English	Euphemisms for death in Spanish
•If anything should happen to me	•Si me pasase algo
•He's passed away/over/on	•Ha fallecido
•He's no longer with us	•Nos ha dejado
•He's at rest/He's at peace	•Descansa en paz
•He's with the angels	•Se ha ido al cielo
•He's deceased	•Ha dejado esta vida
•He's expired	•Ha pasado a mejor vida
•He breathed his last	•Exhalar el último suspiro
•She went to a better place	•Estiró la pata
•She's departed this life	•La diñó
•She's gone to meet the Maker	
•He popped off/He checked out	
•He pooped his clogs	
•She cashed in her chips	
•He's gone west	
•He snuffed it	
•He's bought a one-way ticket	
•He kicked the bucket	
•She's pushing up the daisies	

However, English also has a more abundant range of death-related euphemisms, which parallels its shorter number of expletives. Most of them are common replacements of *death* and *die* in everyday speech, where the speaker avoids a subject that he/she fears or dislikes or which is avoided so as not to annoy the interlocutor. Both languages also have a shorter number of expressions which, according to Hugues (1988: 16), are examples of dysphemism, that is expressions which violate the taboo (“He kicked the bucket” or “Estiró la pata”). In our view, rather than breaking the rules governing taboo subjects, speakers confront the forbidden in a humorous way, as opposed to what they do when using expletives, where they normally resort to an offensive word conjuring up a taboo subject in order to shock the listener or to express strong feelings.

More problematic is the case of words related to bodily functions. In our previous section we analysed the offensive language these functions give way to. In this section we shall consider a different aspect: the euphemisms used to avoid them. Bodily secretions have also been taboo subjects to be avoided except in medical contexts, with the exception of tears. All the rest have technical, and to some extent neutral, words and offensive versions. Even in the case of sweat, English speakers avoid direct reference by using *bodily odour* or its abbreviation *BO*. The remaining ones have stronger and more offensive connotations to the extent that even the places related to them are avoided, as shown in the history of expressions used by speakers of English to refer to the toilet,

which range from “I’m going to wash my hands” to the word *lavatory*, literally a place to wash one’s hands. The modern colloquial word *loo* is taken to be a corruption of the French ‘l’eau’ (there are other less plausible explanations, although more laughable, see Howard 1985: 111-112), meaning *water*, whereas Spanish uses an English loan, “water” (pronounced “báter”) with the same meaning. Mentioning the *toilet* was taboo in English until recently, and the British used “the smallest room” whereas American English preferred a more poetic version, “the rest room” or “the comfort room”. Other euphemistic expressions are “spend a penny” and “powder their nose”, the latter used by women. The words used to avoid mentioning the unmentionable included, paradoxically, the term *the euphemism*. In recent years there has been a tendency to do exactly the opposite, that is to warn one’s guests of where the toilet is located in the house before they even ask. This tendency parallels the extended use of offensive words, which are much more commonly uttered by modern speakers, and are only likely to cause offence if used outside a homogeneous group, while within that group they will certainly pass unnoticed.

Euphemisms for expletives. Some languages, English and Spanish among them, also have words used as euphemisms, which are unrelated to the taboo subject as such, but which are used because of a similarity in their pronunciation. This is the case of “shit”, an offensive word related to a taboo subject, which is substituted by “sugar” by some speakers, with no semantic reference but the same pronunciation of the initial sound [ʃ]. Spanish also has a euphemistic word for “mierda”, although it is hardly ever used: “miércoles.”

There are also euphemistic terms for offensive words related to sex and religion. Since English had a clear tendency to avoid blasphemous use of religious word, we can mention three common replacements: “Gosh” is used instead of “God”, “Christmas” instead of “Christ” or “Jeepers” or “Jeez” instead of “Jesus”, to mention only the most common ones (see Hugues 1991: 13-14). This has been considered an effect of a 1606 English law which condemned the use of religious words in exclamations out of their adequate context, and some of the resulting words are still in use in modern English. As regards sex, and apart from the euphemisms mentioned by Hugues, we have traced others such as “chuff”, “flip” and “feck” for “fuck”, “f off” and “naff off” for “fuck off” and “beggar” for “bugger”.

The “F word” and the “C word” (as opposed to the “Big C”) are used to refer to “fuck” and “cunt” respectively.

Conversely, Spanish has very few euphemisms for blasphemous expressions, probably because most of these have been traditionally used irrespective of their strength and the effect they could have. Only the word “hostia”, when used as an interjection, can be replaced by “ostras.” However, Spanish uses two very common euphemisms for the sex-related expletive “joder”, only when it is used as an interjection to express anger or surprise: “jolín” and “jelines”, and one for “puta”, when the word is used as an adjective: “puñetera” (“¿Puedes parar de una puñetera vez?”).

CONCLUSIONS

We have examined the relevance of taboo subjects and their influence on English and Spanish. Native speakers are aware of the existence of a number of *delicate* subjects and, under certain circumstances, they may feel reluctant to refer directly to these topics or, on the contrary, they may do so if they are willing to express strong emotions or feelings. This point can be traced in the extensive use of expletives and euphemisms (and maybe dysphemisms). The traditional view, which labels these words “taboo” is, in our opinion, erroneous since it implies that the speaker considers that each term or expression is taboo in itself, which, does not correspond to the reality and origin of the words in English and Spanish.

However, we accept the fact that the hearers of either language might take offence when these topics are mentioned in public. These words can be either vulgar, familiar or neutral, but all of them can cause offence to some extent, depending on the hearer, the attitude of the speaker and the situation. In the case of religion we have one word for each concept whose effect on the hearer depends solely on the context in which it is use (e. g. *Jesus* used as an interjection as opposed to its use in a religious text or ceremony). Therefore, rather than of taboo words, we should speak of blasphemous and/or offensive language.

The other traditional taboo topic, sex, has a wider range of offensive words in both languages and, above all, of forms in which they can be used. Together with the truly strong language related to sex, both English and Spanish have equivalent technical words for each strongly offensive

word and, in some cases, familiar versions. As we have seen, all these words can be offensive in some cases or for some speakers of the language, to the extent that even the more technical ones were first avoided in English advertising campaigns aiming at promoting the use of contraceptives. This clearly shows that certain societies impose stronger restrictions on the use of certain words, regardless of whether they are expletives or technical terms, not because of the words themselves, but of the effect they have on the listeners/readers. The turning-point in the acceptance of certain words considered vulgar in English was the *The Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial, whereas the shift in the attitude towards the acceptance of the technical is a recent phenomenon which resulted from the spread of the AIDS virus and the need to speak clearly and openly about certain sexual facts which had been traditionally avoided. This change is enormous, since it has taken place in less than a decade and its importance has not been fully evaluated by linguists, nor have the effects on society itself been assessed. In Spain, the change took place in the 1980s, after the end of the dictatorial regime, and is reflected in the extended use of strong or vulgar language by the mass media.

Consequently, the taboos of a society at a given time differ from those of its ancestors and, obviously, from those of a different culture. The very origin of the word *taboo* explicits this primary concept: *taboo* in Polynesian meant a prohibition forbidding actions, contacts, relationships or words. What makes an action, a contact or a word taboo is uncertain but it seems obvious that words come as a last stage in the *taboozation* process. Besides, taboos evolve and, consequently, what might have been regarded as taboo two hundred years ago, is not any longer. Therefore, we should speak of taboo themes or topics rather than of words. Every society usually establishes an unwritten (and sometimes written by means of codes or laws) set of rules which prohibits the use of certain words or expressions inasmuch they make reference to certain concepts regarded as dirty or sacred. In our western societies sex and religion have been traditionally taboo themes, but not always. If we leaf through the pages of some of our classics, from Shakespeare to Cervantes, we might be surprised to read a considerable number of words which would be later avoided by other writers (from Jane Austen to Pérez Galdós), thus reflecting a shift in what society considered inadequate at a time. The extreme instance of this evolution was perhaps the Victorian era (when they spoke of a *lady's limb* instead of *leg*, Katamba 1994: 186) and the subsequent decades in Britain,

and the Franco years in Spain. Therefore, the use and effect of offensive language will certainly vary in two cultures and, consequently, in two languages.

Students of a foreign language, English in our case, are usually unaware of the contexts in which offensive language is and/or may be used, of the existence of taboo subjects and the changes that have occurred in recent decades, as shown in the survey carried out among advanced students at a university level. Consequently, teachers should be familiar with a new reality which demands an extra effort to tackle an area of the language which tended to be obliterated. If we choose to ignore the slippery area of taboo subjects and offensive words, non-native speakers of a language are bound to use terms or expressions in inappropriate contexts, and, consequently, a breakdown of communication between the non-native speaker and the native speaker(s) will occur. Proficient foreign speakers must have an extensive linguistic repertoire of the second language, but they must also identify other paralinguistic signs which would help them apprehend the implications of a single word/expression, since this can have an integrative positive effect or a negative isolating result. The ways in which this lexicon can be introduced in the language classroom will be the starting-point of a future paper¹⁵.

NOTES

1. We shall make no distinction between foreign and second languages in this article, since we assume that the issue being discussed requires no differentiation. Therefore, both will be used as synonyms to avoid repetition. For a discussion of both terms see Quirk et al. 1985.
2. Dictionaries provide various definitions of the words. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* includes *blasphemy* and *obscenity* as synonyms, whereas the *Collins Cobuild* links *blasphemy* to irreverent acts, although it also includes *obscenities* as a synonym. The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* also links it to language and to obscenities and *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* connects it primarily with religion and also includes a reference to swearing. As regards Spanish the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* defines 'blasfemia'

as: 'Palabra injuriosa contra Dios, la Virgen o los santos. Palabra gravemente injuriosa contra una persona.' On the other hand, 'Ofprofanidad' is defined as: 'Que es contra la reverencia debida a las cosas sagradas.' And finally 'Obscenedad' is connected basically with sex.

3. Jay makes a similar distinction, although he uses the terms *offensive* and *offensiveness*, on the one hand, and *offendedness* on the other: 'There is a distinction that needs to be made when talking about how words affect us. Offensive is a term used to denote the degree to which a certain word or concept possesses negative or aversive properties. Offensiveness is related to the concept of taboo in that the more offensive a word is the more likely it is to be taboo (...) Offendedness is a reaction to a word by a person who hears or reads the word.' (1992: 161), although once again he considers offensive words as taboo, rather than considering that offensive words stem from taboos and are restricted in use to certain contexts.
4. Articles have appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph* from 1997 onwards coinciding with the launch of the new commercial television channel Channel 5, which has notoriously resorted to sex and violence to attract the viewers. Besides, concern has been expressed by the Broadcasting Standards Commission. In a paper published in 1998 they claimed that 'A significant number of complaints arise from the impact on a group of people from watching together – different generations of a family or a mixed group of men and women. Each generation has its own language for use among its peers, often including words which if used between generations or strangers would give the deepest offence.' We are grateful to the Commission for sending the information upon request.
5. A view shared by older speakers interviewed for the BBC programme *The Language File*, 1989.
6. All the examples included in this and the following tables are extracts from modern Spanish and British films, television series, literary works or from well-known dictionaries which draw their examples from databases, such as the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* or *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*.
7. For discussions on the definitions of slang in general, and the slang of adolescents, in particular, see also Howard (1984: 23-43), Munro (1989).

8. Social and religious hypocrisy is once again reflected in the blasphemous use of the word *Virgen* in a society whose religious dogmas make its speakers believe in the Virgin Mary and her immaculate conception of Jesus Christ. This belief and the reverence felt by believers towards her is reflected in the great number of Madonnas and shrines existing in Spanish-speaking countries. However, this contradiction is not characteristic of Spanish only. Hugues quotes Italian blasphemies of this type too (1991: 249) together with some English ones, although these are less frequent and are restricted in use to certain English-speaking societies, such as Australia (1991: 250-251).
9. Although rating of expletives according to the country and institution or researcher that classifies them, the variations are minimal. Goldenson & Anderson quote a study conducted by Timothy B. Jay at Kent University, USA, in which three other words were regarded as more offensive than *cunt*. These three words are American swearwords, only recently introduced in the UK by the mass media, notably the cinema industry (1994: 256).
10. See *The Guardian* March 23 1998. The article in which the use of the word was commented upon ended with a sentence where the term was used to great effect: "Perhaps it's time to start talking, pace Freud, about the terrible problems men have in overcoming their cunt envy?"
11. The entries *meard* and *meada* in the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Real Academia, 1992) only make reference to their literal meanings.
12. See, for example, the *Spanish-English Oxford Dictionary*, published in 1994, or *Collins Spanish-English Dictionary*.
13. In our view, Katamba's distinction between the desire not to hurt people's feelings and matters of decency or prudery as regards the use of euphemisms is irrelevant, since taboos emerge when certain subjects must be avoided in public (1994: 185-187).
14. For madness, see Hugues 1988: 18-19, where he lists the whole range of English expressions related to madness, both euphemistic and dysphemistic.
15. The author wishes to acknowledge the support of the *Vicerrectorado de Investigación* from the University of Oviedo, which financed this paper through Project DF-96-503-7.

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Dictionaries of slang and offensive terms in the web:

American slang: <http://www.slanguage.com/>

American slang: <http://eslcafe.com/slang/>

British slang: <http://www.peevish.u-net.com/slang/index>.

British slang: <http://toronto.planeteer.com/~rsmith/phrases.htm>

Irish slang: <http://www.geocities.com/ResearchTriangle/8662/irish.html>

London slang: <http://www.geezer.demon.co.uk/>

Scottish slang: <http://www.paidmyre.demon.co.uk/>