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TABOOS IN KYRGYZ, RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH

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ТАБУИРОВАННЫЕ СЛОВА И ФРАЗЫ НА КЫРГЫЗСКОМ, РУССКОМ И АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКАХ

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Abstract. This work explores the concept of taboos, their role in society, and their variations across different cultures. Taboos are social, cultural, and religious prohibitions that regulate behavior and communication. While some taboos maintain order and preserve traditions, others may seem outdated or restrictive. The study focuses on taboos in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English, analyzing their differences and significance. In Kyrgyzstan, taboos emphasize respect for elders, family honor, and religious beliefs. In Russia, many taboos are linked to superstition and politics, while in Great Britain, they are mostly related to politeness and personal boundaries. The paper also discusses the evolution of taboos, highlighting how societal changes influence their relevance. The analysis concludes that while taboos play an important role in shaping cultural identity, they should be reconsidered when they limit personal freedom or hinder progress. Understanding taboos helps improve cross-cultural communication and promotes tolerance.

Аннотация. Данная работа посвящена изучению табу, их роли в обществе и различиям в разных культурах. Табу — это социальные, культурные и религиозные запреты, регулирующие поведение и общение. Некоторые из них помогают поддерживать порядок и сохранять традиции, в то время как другие могут казаться устаревшими или ограничивающими. В исследовании рассматриваются табу в кыргызском, русском и английском языках, их особенности и значение. В Кыргызстане табу связаны с уважением к старшим, семейной честью и религией. В России они включают суеверия и политические ограничения, а в Великобритании касаются вежливости и личных границ. Работа также анализирует изменения табу со временем и их влияние на общество. В заключение подчеркивается, что, несмотря на важность табу в формировании культурной идентичности, их следует пересматривать, если они ограничивают свободу личности или препятствуют развитию.

Keywords: Taboo, language, culture, religion, profanity, insults, politics, physiology, death, etiquette.

Ключевые слова: табу, язык, культура, религия, мат, оскорбления, политика, физиология, смерть, этикет.

Taboos are deeply embedded in human culture, regulating behavior, speech, and even thoughts across societies, religions, and historical periods. A taboo is a system of prohibitions that dictate what is considered inappropriate, impure, or dangerous within a specific community. These restrictions apply to various aspects of life, including social norms, religious practices, linguistic expressions, and even food consumption. The word “taboo” originates from the Polynesian tapu, meaning “forbidden” or “sacred”. British explorer James Cook introduced this term to Western discourse in the 18th century when describing the customs of Pacific islanders. However, taboos have existed in all societies throughout history, even if they were known by different names. In Ancient Egypt, mentioning the pharaoh’s name without proper titles was forbidden, while in medieval Europe, discussing certain topics was considered heresy [10].

There are several categories of taboos that shape human interaction. Cultural and social taboos regulate interpersonal communication, often dictating what topics are appropriate in different settings. For instance, discussing personal income, a woman’s age, or religious beliefs is often discouraged in formal contexts. Some taboos are specific to certain cultures; in Japan, talking about death is avoided, while in Western countries, commenting on someone’s weight can be considered impolite. Religious taboos, rooted in spiritual beliefs, dictate prohibitions such as the consumption of pork in Judaism and Islam or the reverence for cows in Hinduism. Linguistic taboos include restrictions on profanity, blasphemy, and racial slurs. Political taboos, particularly in authoritarian regimes, can limit discussions about sensitive topics, such as government criticism in China or political repression in the Soviet Union. Other taboos include sexual prohibitions, food restrictions, ethical constraints in medicine and science, and social norms surrounding death and illness [6].

Taboos serve important functions in society. They help regulate social behavior, maintain cultural identity, provide psychological protection, reinforce religious beliefs, and prevent harmful actions. By establishing moral boundaries, taboos contribute to social stability and cohesion. In India, for example, the caste system imposes strict rules on interactions between different social groups, reinforcing a unique cultural identity. Additionally, some taboos shield individuals from uncomfortable or distressing topics, such as death and violence. Religious taboos, meanwhile, strengthen spiritual connections and help followers adhere to doctrinal teachings [3]. However, breaking taboos often carries consequences, ranging from social condemnation and legal punishment to psychological distress. In some cases, violating taboos can lead to cultural shifts, as seen in the gradual acceptance of same-sex marriage in societies where it was once considered unacceptable. Over time, taboos evolve — some disappear, while new ones emerge. For instance, while it was once considered improper for women to wear trousers, this norm has long since faded in most societies.

Language plays a significant role in expressing and enforcing taboos. Every language has words and expressions that are considered inappropriate due to cultural, religious, or social norms. In Kyrgyz, Russian, and English, linguistic taboos reflect societal values and influence communication. Religious taboos are particularly strong, as sacred terms should not be misused. In Kyrgyz, using words like Аллах (Allah) or пайгамбар (prophet) disrespectfully is highly offensive, while in Russian, exclamations like Господи! (Oh Lord!) can be seen as inappropriate among religious individuals. Similarly, in English, phrases like Jesus Christ! or Oh my God! may be considered blasphemous in religious communities [8]. Profanity is another universal linguistic taboo, although its intensity and focus vary by culture. In Kyrgyz, the most offensive insults involve attacks on family honor, while Russian profanity (мат) is notorious for its vulgarity. English profanity often revolves around bodily functions and sexuality, making it unacceptable in professional and formal settings [7].

Ethnic and racial slurs are among the most strongly condemned linguistic taboos across cultures. In Kyrgyz, derogatory terms for different ethnic groups are highly offensive and discouraged. Russian has a long history of racial and ethnic slurs, some of which persist in casual speech despite widespread condemnation. In English, racial slurs such as the n-word are strictly prohibited in most social and professional settings, with political correctness playing a significant role in modern discourse [8]. Political taboos also shape language use, particularly in countries with restricted freedom of speech. In Kyrgyz culture, discussing tribal affiliations (ypyy) or criticizing the government can be sensitive, while in Russia, conversations about Soviet-era repression or current political events can be controversial. In English-speaking countries, political correctness influences discussions on colonialism, race relations, and social justice, often leading to the avoidance of certain terms and expressions [6].

When comparing the prevalence of taboos in Kyrgyz, Russian, and English-speaking cultures, it becomes evident that Kyrgyz culture has the most restrictive set of prohibitions, particularly in social and cultural contexts. Rooted in nomadic traditions, Islam, and strong respect for elders, Kyrgyz society enforces many taboos regarding speech, behavior, and gender roles. Informal speech with elders is discouraged, and discussions of sex, relationships, or women's independence are often considered inappropriate. Since Kyrgyz culture is more collectivist, breaking taboos can lead to social exclusion or severe condemnation [2]. Russian culture also has many taboos, though fewer than Kyrgyz culture, especially in urban settings. Political taboos are particularly strong in Russia, where criticizing the government or discussing Soviet repression remains sensitive. The infamous Russian profanity system (mat) is strictly prohibited in formal environments, and superstitions influence daily life — for example, whistling indoors is believed to bring financial misfortune [4].

English-speaking cultures, particularly in Western countries, have fewer linguistic and social taboos than Kyrgyzstan or Russia. However, political correctness is a dominant force in shaping modern English discourse. Racial and gender-related language is heavily regulated, and swearing in formal settings is discouraged. Religious discussions can be sensitive, particularly in societies like the United States, where beliefs vary widely [1]. British culture, in particular, emphasizes politeness and social etiquette, making certain topics — such as income, politics, and religion — taboo in casual conversation. Queue-jumping, discussing salary, and asking overly personal questions are seen as major social offenses [1].

Taboos are a crucial part of human culture, reflecting societal values, traditions, and historical developments. While some taboos serve an essential role in maintaining social order and respect, others may become outdated or unnecessary over time. In my opinion, taboos should be evaluated critically — while prohibitions against racism, hate speech, and violence are necessary for a just society, excessive restrictions on language and personal expression can hinder open communication. In Kyrgyzstan, taboos related to respect for elders and family honor help preserve cultural identity, but traditional gender roles may limit personal freedom. Russia's strong political taboos can restrict freedom of speech, while British social etiquette, though promoting politeness, sometimes discourages meaningful discussions. As societies evolve, taboos will continue to change, reflecting shifting norms and values. Understanding these prohibitions is essential for cross-cultural communication, as it helps individuals navigate different social environments with respect and awareness.

Taboos exist beyond religious, linguistic, political, and social prohibitions, extending into areas such as technology, economics, death and mourning, food and consumption, and medicine. Each of these categories reveals how cultural attitudes shape prohibitions, reinforcing social norms

and influencing behavior. In Kyrgyz, Russian, and English-speaking cultures, these taboos manifest in different ways, reflecting distinct historical, religious, and societal influences.

Technological taboos are an emerging phenomenon, with privacy, surveillance, and artificial intelligence being highly sensitive topics across different cultures. In Kyrgyzstan, discussions about government surveillance are uncommon, and many people avoid openly criticizing digital monitoring practices. The government controls online spaces to some extent, particularly regarding politically sensitive topics, though digital censorship is not as severe as in countries like China [8]. In Russia, technological taboos are much stricter, with significant state surveillance and strong prohibitions against discussing cybersecurity breaches or government espionage. Many Russians self-censor their online activity due to fears of repercussions, making open criticism of digital monitoring taboo [3]. English-speaking cultures, especially in the UK and US, place a strong emphasis on digital privacy, but new taboos have emerged around issues like “doxxing” — the practice of exposing private information about individuals online. While freedom of speech is highly valued, the ethical use of artificial intelligence, including deepfakes and AI-generated content, has sparked heated debates, with some arguing that AI should be regulated to prevent abuse, while others believe excessive restrictions could hinder technological progress [9]. Unlike in Kyrgyzstan and Russia, where technology taboos are often imposed by the state, in English-speaking countries, these taboos are largely enforced through social norms and ethical debates rather than legal restrictions.

Economic taboos vary significantly between Kyrgyz, Russian, and English-speaking cultures, particularly regarding wealth, salary transparency, and certain industries. In Kyrgyzstan, openly discussing personal finances is considered impolite, especially in rural areas, where financial disparities are stark. Asking someone about their income can be perceived as intrusive, though younger generations in urban areas are becoming more open to discussions about salary equality [8]. In Russia, discussing personal wealth remains highly sensitive, as economic disparity is a lingering issue from the Soviet era. Russians often avoid direct conversations about money, though displays of wealth, such as luxury cars or expensive clothing, are common in urban centers [4]. In contrast, English-speaking cultures exhibit a complex relationship with financial taboos. In the UK, openly discussing salary is frowned upon, reflecting a broader cultural emphasis on privacy [1]. However, in the United States, there is a growing movement toward wage transparency to address income inequality, particularly regarding gender pay gaps. Additionally, industries such as gambling, sex work, and weapons manufacturing are legal in some English-speaking countries but remain socially taboo, whereas in Russia and Kyrgyzstan, discussions about these industries are often avoided due to moral and legal constraints.

Death and mourning taboos reflect cultural attitudes toward mortality and the afterlife, influencing funeral customs and social behaviors. In Kyrgyz culture, death is treated with deep respect, and there are strict prohibitions on discussing death lightly. Wearing bright colors to a funeral is seen as highly inappropriate, and mourning rituals are deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, emphasizing prayers and commemorative ceremonies [8]. In Russian culture, similar prohibitions exist, though there are also strong superstitions related to death. For instance, leaving an empty bottle on a table is considered bad luck, as is talking about death during celebrations. Russians often use euphemisms to refer to death, reflecting an underlying cultural discomfort with the subject [5]. In English-speaking cultures, death is often avoided in casual conversation, and people frequently use indirect phrases such as “passed away” instead of “died” [2]. Unlike Kyrgyz and Russian cultures, where collective mourning is common, English-speaking societies tend to emphasize personal grief and individual ways of coping. Funeral traditions are less rigid, with some families opting for informal memorial services rather than traditional ceremonies. However, the topic of

assisted dying remains highly taboo in many English-speaking countries, with ongoing debates about euthanasia and end-of-life care.

Food and consumption taboos are among the most culturally specific prohibitions, shaped by history, health beliefs, and social norms. In Kyrgyz culture, food taboos are strongly influenced by Islamic dietary laws, with pork consumption strictly forbidden among practicing Muslims. Additionally, some foods are considered inappropriate for women or the elderly, such as certain types of raw meat, based on traditional beliefs about health [8]. Russian culture also has food taboos, many of which stem from historical periods of scarcity. For example, wasting bread is frowned upon, as bread has long been seen as a symbol of survival. Russians also have strong beliefs about food pairings, such as avoiding drinking milk with fish, which is thought to cause illness [4]. In English-speaking cultures, food taboos tend to be less rigid but still present. Eating insects, for example, is considered highly unusual in the UK and US, despite their nutritional benefits [9]. Meanwhile, certain food preferences, such as eating horse meat, are widely accepted in some European countries but remain taboo in English-speaking nations. Unlike Kyrgyz and Russian cultures, where food taboos are often linked to religion or tradition, in English-speaking societies, they are frequently driven by ethical concerns, such as the rise of vegetarianism and veganism.

Medical taboos impact healthcare, shaping public discussions around menstruation, mental health, and controversial medical practices. In Kyrgyz culture, menstruation is rarely discussed openly, particularly among men, leading to a lack of awareness and limited access to menstrual hygiene products in rural areas [8]. Mental health is also a sensitive topic, with many people reluctant to seek therapy due to societal stigma. In Russia, similar taboos exist, especially regarding psychological disorders. During the Soviet era, mental health issues were often dismissed as Western concepts, and even today, many Russians are hesitant to seek psychiatric help [3]. In contrast, English-speaking cultures have made significant progress in destigmatizing mental health, though challenges remain. While discussions about therapy and psychiatric treatment are more accepted, certain topics, such as suicide and eating disorders, remain taboo in public discourse. Additionally, ethical debates around euthanasia and organ donation are ongoing, with differing views depending on religious and legal perspectives. Unlike Kyrgyz and Russian cultures, where medical taboos are often reinforced by traditional beliefs, in English-speaking societies, they are frequently shaped by contemporary ethical debates and medical advancements.

The psychology of taboos suggests that these prohibitions serve as mechanisms of social control, influencing behavior through fear and social conditioning. Freud (1913) argued that taboos are rooted in deep-seated psychological fears, often connected to childhood experiences. Jung (1953) expanded on this by suggesting that taboos form part of the collective unconscious, shaping cultural behaviors across generations. Modern studies support these theories, demonstrating that violating a taboo can trigger psychological distress. The “forbidden fruit” effect, for instance, suggests that restricting certain topics or behaviors can increase curiosity and desire to engage in them [2]. This is evident in all three cultures — whether in the way young people in Kyrgyzstan question traditional gender roles, Russians navigate political censorship, or English-speaking societies debate the limits of free speech and cancel culture.

Taboos are an essential aspect of human culture, shaping social norms, regulating behavior, and preserving traditions. However, their role is complex, as some taboos protect societies from harm while others suppress progress and free expression. In Kyrgyz culture, respect for elders and conservative gender norms remain deeply ingrained, reinforcing social cohesion but also limiting individual freedoms. Russian society, influenced by historical censorship and political restrictions, continues to uphold taboos that discourage open discussion of sensitive topics, particularly in politics and mental health. In contrast, English-speaking cultures, particularly in the West, have

shifted towards greater openness, yet the rise of political correctness has created new taboos surrounding language and identity. While taboos are necessary for maintaining order, they should be critically examined — those that reinforce inequality or hinder necessary conversations should be challenged, while those that promote ethical values and mutual respect should be preserved. In an evolving world, societies must find a balance between respecting traditions and embracing progress.

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