Taboo in Japanese: verbal classification and social context

Murniati Br Barus[1], Mhd. Pujiono[2], Nurlela[3], and Mahriyuni[4]
[1,2,3,4]Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Cultural Science, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

Abstract. This paper examines the classification of verbal taboos in Japanese and the role of social context in determining the taboo status of an utterance from a sociopragmatic perspective. A qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach was used, drawing on Hymes' (1972) communication ethnography. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with ten native Japanese speakers residing in Japan and Indonesia. Data analysis followed the Interactive Model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) using source, technique, and time triangulation techniques to ensure data validity. The results of the study identified four main categories of verbal taboos, namely (1) existential taboos (death and misfortune, such as *shinu*, *jisatsu*, *kiru*), (2) scatological taboos (feces and bodily functions, such as *kuso*, *oshikko*, *unchi*), (3) sexual and gender taboos (sexual organs, identity, stereotypes, such as *okama*, *chinpo*, *onna nan dakara*), and (4) social-interpersonal taboos (insults and abuse, such as *baka*, *aho*, *urusai*). A total of 48 taboo expressions were identified across these categories. While the qualitative findings from ten participants provide in-depth sociopragmatic insights, they represent specific contextual patterns rather than absolute generalizations for the entirety of Japanese society. The findings show that the taboo status of a word is not intrinsic, but is determined by three pillars of social context: hierarchy and power relations between participants, the level of familiarity reflected in the *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) dichotomy, and the level of formality of the situation. The word *baka*, for example, can be a fatal insult in hierarchical relationships but functions as a marker of solidarity in intimate relationships. The word *kuso* undergoes semantic bleaching.

Keywords: verbal taboo; Japanese language; social context; sociopragmatics; classification

1 Introduction

Language is not merely a tool of communication, but rather an arena for negotiating the most fundamental cultural values. Every word spoken carries with it the historical heritage, social hierarchy, and moral boundaries of the community that speaks it. In this context, the

[1]Corresponding author: murni3498@gmail.com

phenomenon of linguistic taboo emerges as a paradox: on the one hand, it represents a collective value system, but on the other hand, it creates "dark zones" in language, namely spaces of meaning that are deliberately obscured, avoided, or even forbidden to be spoken. Mengxun (2020) defines taboo as a mechanism for standardizing speech behavior rooted in a society's value system. Meanwhile, Allan and Burridge (2006) define linguistic taboo as a prohibition born of social norms, in which certain words are considered potentially embarrassing, offensive, or hurtful to certain individuals or groups. Taboo is a complex concept that describes an emotionally charged lexicon that has psychological consequences when used. (Jay, 2018; Shafto et al., 2024)

In Japanese society, which highly values *wa* (harmony) and *keigo* (polite language), the concept of linguistic taboos finds its most distinctive and complex expression. The foundation of these values is rooted in Confucian philosophy, which has shaped Japanese social structure for centuries. Specifically, the five ethical relationships or *gorin*, which emphasize hierarchical and reciprocal relationships between superiors and subordinates, parents and children, husbands and wives, older and younger siblings, and friends, form a moral framework that governs social interactions, including linguistic behavior (Chen, 2023). Compliance with this hierarchy is manifested in the entire Japanese honorific system (keigo), in which the choice of vocabulary and sentence patterns strictly reflects the social distance and relative status between speakers. These Confucian values are then operationalized through various *girei* (rituals or manners) in everyday life, which serve to maintain social order. One of the most crucial rites of passage, laden with linguistic norms, is the *sousou girei* (death and funeral rites), where taboo language reaches its greatest complexity. In this mournful and sensitive context, words that directly refer to death, such as *shinu* (to die), are considered a serious violation of politeness because they are thought to disturb the peace of the deceased's soul and hurt the feelings of the family.

The concrete phenomenon of taboo in Japanese can be observed in various areas of life. First, in media discourse and public conversation, the topic of suicide (*jisatsu*) is a highly sensitive issue and is often avoided (Mckenna, 2015; Okuyama, 2013). This reflects the existence of deep social stigma, a sense of embarrassment (*enryo*), and a collective desire not to raise issues that are considered "dark" and potentially disruptive to the surface of social harmony. Second, in marriage rites (*kekkon shiki*), the verb *kiru* (to cut) is taboo because of its strong association with "breaking off a relationship" (*en o kiru*). Similarly, the word *owaru* (to end) is avoided because it is feared that it implies the "end" of the marriage itself (DUNN, 2004). This avoidance shows how strong the belief in the power of words (*kotodama*) and superstition still is in contemporary Japanese society. Third, in the nonverbal realm, the behavior of *futaribashi* or *yosebashi*, in which two people pinch the same piece of food with their respective chopsticks, is a serious taboo because it visually mimics the ritual of *kotsuage* (the transfer of the deceased's bones after cremation) in Buddhist funeral ceremonies. These phenomena show that taboos in the Japanese language not only cover the verbal realm but also manifest in nonverbal behavior laden with symbolic meaning.

Studies on language taboos have developed rapidly in various disciplines and cultural contexts. In Indonesia, Laksana (2009) conducted a pioneering study on taboos in the Balinese language through his dissertation, revealing that Balinese people manifest verbal behavior regarding taboos through various linguistic strategies such as metaphors, metonymy, euphemisms, paraphrases, code-switching, and technonyms. Barus (2018) continued this tradition of study with an anthropological approach to the Karo language, finding that the Karo language has three categories of taboo: taboo expressions in the context of kinship, in specific contexts, and in general. In a more contemporary context, Nasution et al. (2023, 2025) examined taboo in the Angkola language using a sociopragmatic approach, revealing that social components such as gender, age, religion, social status, occupation, and region are closely related to linguistic taboo, and found that taboo words can function as

expressions of admiration, tools of persuasion, and forbidden communication in family relationships. Pujiono et al. (2026) in their study of taboo in the Deli Javanese language found that taboo functions as a cultural marker and social regulator, but also revealed a decline in taboo knowledge between generations, with the younger generation remembering only 42% of taboo terms compared to the older generation, who remembered 89%. Meanwhile, in the context of the Japanese language, Sakaba and Habib (2025) have analyzed taboo words related to death, finding that many words are replaced with euphemisms to avoid negative connotations. While Sakaba and Habib provided valuable linguacultural insights into death-related euphemisms, their scope is restricted to a single existential domain and does not address the interactional pragmatics of shifting taboo statuses across different social contexts. Zhang (2018), in his study of the current situation of Japanese taboos, concluded that although modern society tends to regard taboos as uncivilized customs from the past, in reality, taboos still exist and play a role in contemporary Japanese society, with root causes that can be traced through linguistic and folkloric approaches.

Based on the previous study map, a significant research gap can be identified. Specifically, the dynamic shift of taboo status dictated by the interaction of hierarchy, uchi-soto relations, and situational formality in contemporary, everyday Japanese interactions remains significantly underexplored. Previous studies tend to focus on specific areas of taboo (such as death), or use different approaches (such as anthropological linguistics or folklore), and have not systematically integrated the analysis of taboo classification with the role of social context in determining taboo status. In fact, as emphasized by Haruhito (2018), taboos in Japan can be understood as a set of subtle, ambiguous, contextual, and often unconscious social restrictions that powerfully regulate individual behavior in everyday life. Taboos in Japan do not always take the form of strict prohibitions or written rules, but rather exist as a "sense of impropriety," a necessity to read the situation, and compliance with collective customs that change depending on space, time, and social actors. Therefore, it is very important to conduct studies on the classification of verbal taboos and the role of social context in determining taboo status.

Based on this background and identification of gaps in the study, this paper was formulated to answer two main questions, namely

1. How are verbal taboos classified in Japanese society?
2. What is the role of social context (hierarchy, familiarity, formality) in determining the taboo status of a statement?

The first question aims to identify and classify words, phrases, and topics considered taboo into systematic categories based on the sensitive themes they violate and the cultural values they undermine. The second question aims to analyze in depth how contextual variables such as hierarchical relationships between participants, the level of familiarity reflected in the *uchi-soto* (inside-outside) dichotomy, and the level of formality of the situation together activate and regulate the gradation of taboo of a word or behavior.

By achieving these two objectives, this study can make a significant contribution to the development of sociopragmatic studies, particularly in the unique context of Japanese culture, and provide practical insights for Japanese language learners and cross-cultural communication practitioners in navigating this complex linguistic terrain.

2 Method

This study uses a qualitative paradigm chosen for its ability to explore complex socio-cultural phenomena holistically and from the emic perspective of the actors (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The approach applied is sociopragmatic, which, according to Leech (2016), is "the sociological interface of pragmatics" or the meeting point between pragmatic studies that

focus on the speaker's intention and sociological analysis that considers social norms, hierarchies, and power relations that frame every speech act. This approach is highly relevant for examining the phenomenon of taboo because it allows researchers not only to identify what is taboo but also to examine how, by whom, to whom, in what context, and for what purpose a statement is considered taboo. The design of this study is descriptive-analytical, using a communication ethnography framework developed by Hymes (1972), which is designed to examine how a speech community communicates. This framework, particularly through the SPEAKING model, provides comprehensive analytical tools for dissecting contextual elements such as Setting (place and atmosphere), Participants (relationships between participants), Ends (purpose of speech), Act Sequences (form and content of messages), Key (tone or manner of delivery), Instrumentalities (communication channels), Norms (interaction norms), and Genres (discourse types). The combination of a sociopragmatic approach and a communicative ethnography framework enables this study to produce a contextual and in-depth analysis of how social factors shape the manifestation of linguistic taboos in Japanese society.

The data in this study were sourced from native Japanese speakers. The data was collected directly by the researcher in 2025 through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires involving 10 native Japanese speakers. Informants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) born and raised in Japan, (2) aged between 25 and 70 years old, (3) with a minimum high school education or equivalent, (4) physically and mentally healthy, and (5) preferably able to communicate in Indonesian or English for the smooth running of the interviews. To obtain a variety of perspectives, the informants comprised 5 people residing in Japan and 5 in Indonesia. A sample of ten participants was deemed sufficient for this qualitative study, as data saturation regarding the primary sociopragmatic patterns and categorical boundaries was achieved at this number. Furthermore, the age distribution across generations (25 to 70 years old) was intentionally designed to capture intergenerational shifts in taboo perceptions, particularly regarding evolving gender and sexual norms. This diversity was important to capture possible differences in perceptions of taboo that may be influenced by experiences of living outside Japan. The data collected consisted of informal dialogue that contained verbal taboo meanings, as well as the informants' perceptions, understandings, and attitudes toward taboo words and avoidance strategies.

The demographic profiles of the ten informants, designed to represent the diversity of perspectives in contemporary Japanese society, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent profiles

No.	Respondent Code	Age Range	Gender	Profession	Region of Origin (Cultural Background)
1	R1	40–49 years	Female	Company Employee	Kanto (Metropolitan)
2	R2	30–39 years	Female	Company Employee	Kanto (Metropolitan)
3	R3	40–49 years	Female	University Lecturer	Chuugoku (Urban)
4	R4	50–59 years	Female	Entrepreneur	Kyushu (Regional)
5	R5	50–59 years	Male	Entrepreneur	Shikoku (Regional)
6	R6	40–49 years	Female	Company Employee	Kansai (Urban)
7	R7	25–35 years	Male	Employee	Tokyo (Metropolitan)
8	R8	60–69 years	Male	Retired Civil Servant	Hokkaido (Regional)
9	R9	50s	Female	Master's Student	Kansai (Urban)
10	R10	30–39 years	Female	Teacher	Touhoku (Regional)

The diversity of age, gender, profession, and regional background among the respondents enables this study to capture potential generational, gender-based, professional, and regional variations in the understanding and perception of linguistic boundaries. Primary data collection was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved a structured online questionnaire containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions concerning categories of taboo language, contexts of use, and strategies of avoidance. The second stage consisted of in-depth online interviews conducted via Zoom to elaborate on questionnaire responses and explore more detailed personal experiences.

The data analysis in this study follows the Interactive Model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which comprises three interrelated, iterative stages. The first stage is data condensation, namely the process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data into meaningful forms. At this stage, all interview data and observation notes were fully transcribed, followed by initial coding (open coding) based on the parameters of taboo language categories proposed by Allan and Burridge (2006) and Jay (1992), as well as the components of Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model. The second stage is data display, presented as analytical matrices to visualize patterns of relationships among categories. Each speech data item is presented in a four-line interlinear gloss format based on the Leipzig Glossing Rules, consisting of (1) the original text in Japanese script, (2) Romanized transliteration, (3) morphosyntactic analysis using standard abbreviations (such as TOP for topic marker, NOM for nominative, ACC for accusative, and COP for copula), and (4) a free translation in Indonesian. The third stage involves conclusion drawing and verification, which are carried out continuously throughout the analysis process. To ensure the validity of the data, this study applies source triangulation (comparing data from interviews, anime, and news sources), technique triangulation (collecting the same type of data through both interviews and questionnaires), and time triangulation (analyzing media data from the period 2020–2024 and conducting interviews with informants at different time intervals). The media corpus comprised 20 hours of selected anime and news broadcasts, serving as a comparative baseline for public and fictional discourse. Triangulation validated the categories by cross-referencing self-reported interview data with actual media usage patterns. Additionally, coding reliability was ensured through peer debriefing and cross-checking the initial categorizations with independent language experts. Through these procedures, the study is expected to produce findings that are valid, credible, and academically accountable.

3 Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the data analysis on the classification of verbal taboos in Japanese and on the role of social context in determining the taboo status of particular utterances. Based on data from in-depth interviews with 10 native-speaker informants and media corpus data from 2020–2024, this study identifies four major categories of verbal taboo within the linguistic awareness of contemporary Japanese society. These four categories are presented as follows:

Table 2. Four categories of verbal taboo.

No	Category	Focus	Example	Violated Value
1	Existential	Death, misfortune	*shinu, jisatsu, kiru*	*Omoiyari, sonkei*
2	Scatological	Excrement, bodily functions	*kuso, oshikko, unchi*	*Ken'o, reigi*
3	Sexual & Gender	Sexual organs, identity	*okama, chinpo, onna nan dakara*	*Puraibashii, wa*
4	Social–Interpersonal	Insults, harassment	*baka, aho, urusai*	*Mentsu*, hierarchy

Beyond mere categorization, this study also analyzes the specific contexts that activate and reinforce the taboo force of words within each category. Using a sociopragmatic framework and Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model, the discussion demonstrates that the "taboo" status of a word is not an intrinsic property attached to the lexical item itself, but rather a relational attribute that emerges from the interaction between linguistic form and specific configurations of social context. These configurations include hierarchical relations among participants, degrees of familiarity (*uchi–soto*), and the level of situational formality.

The classification of words into specific categories was based on their primary semantic domain and the core cultural value they violated. For words exhibiting categorical overlap—such as sexual terms used as social-interpersonal insults—classification was determined by their primary illocutionary intent in the observed context. Furthermore, taboo intensity (categorized as HIGH or LOW/NEUTRAL in subsequent analyses) was empirically determined based on respondents' severity ratings from the questionnaires and qualitative evaluation of the Face Threatening Act (FTA) severity in the interview scenarios.

3.1 Existential taboos: death and misfortune

In Japanese society, the existential domain associated with death, misfortune, and endings represents one of the most sensitive linguistic zones and is heavily regulated by taboo. This type of taboo, referred to as existential taboo, is not merely a matter of etiquette but reflects a broader worldview that seeks to manage the anxiety surrounding impermanence through linguistic regulation. Data from this study identify three primary contexts in which existential taboos manifest: funerary rituals (*sousou girei*), wedding ceremonies (*kekkon shiki*), and public media discourse.

Within funerary rituals, the verb *shinu* ("to die") is considered highly taboo, particularly when spoken in the presence of bereaved family members. Its usage is perceived as excessively blunt, direct, and potentially aggravating grief because it brutally emphasizes the finality of biological death. This prohibition is closely linked to the cultural values of profound respect for the deceased (*sonkei*) and deep empathy toward the bereaved (*omoiyari*). Within the politeness theory framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (2015; 1987), the use of *shinu* in such contexts constitutes a severe Face Threatening Act (FTA) against the positive face of the bereaved family, namely their desire to be respected and not emotionally harmed. Instead, sociopragmatically competent speakers typically employ euphemisms such as *nakunaru* ("to pass away"), which literally means "to disappear" or "to be gone," a metaphor that is considerably softer and more aligned with the cultural value of *omoiyari*.

Table 3. Forms and contexts of existential taboo.

Context	Taboo Word	Meaning	Reason for Taboo
Sousou girei (funeral)	shinu	die	Considered harsh and lacking empathy (omoiyari)
Kekkon shiki (wedding)	kiru	cut	Associated with severing relationships
Media/general discourse	jisatsu	suicide	Social stigma: a "difficult" topic

In the context of wedding ceremonies (*kekkon shiki*), which are imbued with hopes for enduring love and happiness, vocabulary associated with "separation," "termination," or "ending" is strictly avoided. The verb *kiru* ("to cut") represents one of the principal taboos because of its strong association with the expression *en o kiru* ("to sever a relationship"). During the ceremonial cutting of the wedding cake, the word *kiru* is avoided and replaced

with descriptive expressions such as *keeki o osabun suru* (“to divide the cake”). Similarly, the verb *owaru* (“to end”) is not used to signal the conclusion of a speech; instead, it is replaced with *ohiraki ni suru*, a phrase derived from the tradition of formally concluding gatherings within tea ceremony culture.

This pattern of avoidance demonstrates that the belief in the power of words, known as *kotodama* **(言霊)**, remains influential in contemporary Japanese society. The concept of *kotodama* refers to an ancient belief that words do not merely represent reality but also possess spiritual power capable of shaping it: auspicious words bring blessings, whereas negative words may invite misfortune. From a sociopragmatic perspective, this practice can be interpreted as a strategy for managing symbolic risk in speech events perceived as having serious social and spiritual consequences. An analysis using Hymes’ (1972) SPEAKING model indicates that, within wedding contexts, the Ends component (the goal of sustaining the marriage) and Norms (norms that avoid bad omens) jointly confer taboo status on words such as *kiru* and *owaru*, which are otherwise neutral in other contexts.

The phenomenon of existential taboo also extends into broader public discourse, particularly concerning the topic of suicide **(***jisatsu***)**. Data from informants explicitly highlight the sensitivity surrounding this topic:

自殺というテーマは…難しい話題です
jisatsu to iu teema wa… muzukashii wadai desu
suicide QUOT topic TOP … difficult topic COP.POL
“Suicide as a topic is… a difficult subject.”

This shows a sentence structure that emphasizes the topic through the particle *wa*, with the predicate *muzukashii wadai desu* marking the topic as “difficult.” This difficulty reflects more than mere discomfort; it signals the presence of deep social stigma (*shakaiteki na shuuchishin*)**,** a sense of restraint (*enryo*), and a collective inclination to avoid raising issues perceived as “dark” and potentially disruptive to the surface harmony of society. Within the framework of Allan and Burridge (2006), suicide-related taboo belongs to the category of death-related taboos, in which linguistic avoidance functions as a protective mechanism against both collective and individual trauma. One respondent in this study (R1) explicitly noted that the word *jisatsu* requires “consideration for the deceased and their family” (*kojin ya izoku e no hairyo*), confirming that the taboo here lies primarily in the social impact of the utterance rather than its lexical meaning alone.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of existential taboo in Japanese is its extension into the phonological level through what are known as *imikotoba* (“inauspicious words”). A well-known example is the number *shi* (四, four), which is avoided because it is homophonous with *shi* (死, death)**.** In hospitals across Japan, many facilities omit room or floor numbers containing the number four; gifts consisting of four items are often avoided; and in everyday conversation, the pronunciation *yon* is frequently used instead of *shi* when referring to the number four. This phenomenon illustrates how fear of existential misfortune has become embedded in linguistic behavior even at the level of sound, creating a comprehensive system of linguistic caution.

From a semantic perspective, this represents a case in which paradigmatic relations between words (homophony) generate strong negative connotations for a linguistic form that is otherwise unrelated to death at the denotative level. Within face theory, the avoidance of the number *shi* may also be interpreted as an effort to protect the collective negative face, namely the desire to remain free from disturbances associated with misfortune or reminders of death. This phenomenon further demonstrates that the existential taboo in Japanese operates not only at the lexical level but also within the phonological system, continuing to

shape linguistic behavior in contemporary Japanese society despite its existence in a modern, largely secular context. This finding supports Zhang's (2018) argument that although modern societies often regard taboos as remnants of the past, they in fact remain active and influential in structuring everyday linguistic practices.

3.2 Scatological taboos: bodily functions and excretion

Scatological taboos, which include words related to bodily waste and biological functions considered disgusting or private, occupy a unique position within the hierarchy of taboo expressions in Japanese. Unlike existential taboos that are surrounded by notions of sacredness and empathy, scatological taboos are more frequently associated with feelings of disgust (*ken'o*) and social impropriety. However, their strength lies precisely in their ability to traverse the boundary between avoided literal meanings and pragmatic functions as outlets for emotional release. Data from the informants indicate that the word *kuso* (糞/くそ) represents a paradigmatic example of this category. Lexically and denotatively, *kuso* means "excrement" or "feces," with semantic components [+MATTER], [+EXCRETION], [-CLEAN], and [+DISGUSTING]. Respondent R2 explicitly stated that *kuso* is "a word with a dirty meaning" (*kitanai imi o motsu kotoba*), confirming the negative affective load attached to it. From the perspective of Allan and Burridge's (2006) theory, scatological expressions fall within the category of body-related taboos, in which direct reference is considered a violation of public politeness norms because it evokes physical and moral discomfort.

Table 4. Functional duality of kuso.

Context	Function	Example	Analysis
Intimate (uchi)	Intensifier emosi	Kuso muzukashii! (Damn, this is difficult!)	Semantic bleaching, a marker of solidarity
Formal (soto)	Completely avoided	Replaced with *mazui, shimatta*	Menjaga wa dan norma kesopanan

The most interesting phenomenon associated with the word *kuso* is the shift and generalization of its pragmatic meaning, in which the strength of the word no longer depends entirely on its original literal meaning. This process, which in historical-pragmatic linguistics is known as semantic bleaching followed by pragmatic strengthening, transforms *kuso* from a marker of a disgusting object into a flexible expressive tool. In informal conversations among close friends, *kuso* is frequently used as an emotional intensifier, as in the utterance "*Kuso muzukashii*!" which literally means "Shit, it's difficult!" but pragmatically conveys "Damn, this is hard!" or "This is extremely difficult!" At this stage, the referential meaning of kuso has faded, replaced by its illocutionary function as an intensifier of negative emotions such as frustration, anger, or disappointment. Within the framework of Searle's (1976) speech act theory, the use of *kuso* in this context constitutes an expressive speech act, in which the primary function of the utterance is to express the psychological state of the speaker. The emotional charge of disgust associated with the literal meaning "excrement" is metaphorically transferred into anger toward a situation beyond the speaker's control, thereby producing a strong cathartic effect.

Analysis using Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model reveals how social context enables this transformation of function. In an informal post-examination setting at a café or campus corridor (Setting), two close friends (Participants) engage in conversation. When one of them complains about the difficulty of the exam, the other responds with "*Kuso muzukashii yo na*!" expressing both personal frustration and emotional solidarity (Ends). The relaxed, sharing tone of delivery (Key), together with norms of familiarity (Norms) that permit casual language within the inner circle (*uchi*), makes violations of lexical politeness norms tolerable

and even expected as a marker of intimacy. From the perspective of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face theory, the use of *kuso* in this context represents an intentional Face Threatening Act (FTA) with relatively low risk, because in close relationships, threats to positive face can be negotiated and may even function to reinforce group solidarity. This strategy violates Leech's Tact Maxim through the use of vulgar vocabulary, but simultaneously complies with the Sympathy Maxim by expressing emotional solidarity.

Table 5. SPEAKING analysis of *kuso* in an intimate context.

Components	Analysis
Setting	Informal post-examination situation
Participants	Two students (close friends)
Ends	Expression of frustration, solidarity
Key	Frustrated, relaxed, sharing tone
Norms	Violates public norms but is consistent with intimacy norms

Conversely, in formal contexts and interactions with socially distant interlocutors (*soto*), the word *kuso* has no place and reaches its maximum taboo force. Respondent R1 stated that words such as *oshikko* (urine/pee) and *unchi* (feces) become taboo "when used toward adults with whom one is not close" (*amari shitashikunai otona ni taishite tsukau toki*). In a workplace meeting situation, for instance, an employee would never say "ちょっとおしっこしてきます" (*chotto oshikko shite kimasu* – "I will go pee for a moment"), but would instead use the euphemistic expression "トイレに行ってきます" (*toire ni itte kimasu* – "I will go to the restroom") or an even more indirect form such as "席を外させてください" (*seki o hazusasete kudasai* – "Please allow me to step away from my seat"). In this context, *kuso*, which has undergone semantic bleaching in intimate conversation, suddenly reactivates its literal connotation of *kegare* (impurity) if used. This phenomenon demonstrates that semantic bleaching is neither permanent nor irreversible, but rather contextual; taboo words retain an "affective memory" that can be reactivated in inappropriate contexts. This observation confirms Jay's (2009) finding that taboo words carry negative emotional consequences stored within the collective memory of speakers, and their activation is highly dependent on social context. The functional duality of *kuso* therefore provides strong empirical evidence that the meaning of taboo expressions is dynamic and relational, and that sociopragmatic competence in Japanese requires the ability to accurately interpret context and select the appropriate register, both in the use and avoidance of scatological expressions.

3.3 Sexual and gender taboos

Sexual taboos represent one of the strictest linguistic boundaries in everyday communication within Japanese society. This category encompasses three primary domains: pejorative terms referring to sexual identity, rigid gender stereotypes, and vulgar vocabulary referring to sexual organs and activities. The strength of this taboo derives from strongly maintained values of public politeness (*reigi tadashii*), respect for privacy (*puraibashii*), and the fundamental principle of not disturbing social harmony (*wa*) by introducing matters considered overly intimate into the public sphere. Respondent *R1* firmly stated that the word *okama* constitutes a taboo, particularly when uttered by individuals outside the community concerned, because it feels degrading. The statement by *R1* that "当事者以外が使うことを当事者があまりよく思っていない" (its use by individuals other than those directly concerned is not viewed positively by the group itself) reveals an important dimension of this

taboo: the taboo status is determined not only by the lexical meaning of the word but also by who uses it and within what power relations it is used. Within the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) face theory, the use of *okama* by outsiders constitutes a double Face Threatening Act (*FTA*): first, it threatens the positive face of the individual being referred to by degrading their identity; second, it threatens the positive face of the broader community associated with the term. This observation aligns with Matsumoto's (1988) critique of the universality of Brown and Levinson's theory, which argues that in collectivist cultures such as Japan, face is often collective and group-related rather than purely individual.

Table 6. Forms of sexual taboos.

Category	Examples	Context of Prohibition
Pejorative terms	*okama*	Use by people outside the community (*R1*)
Gender stereotypes	*onna nan dakara*	Considered outdated and uncomfortable (*R2*)
Vulgar vocabulary	*chinpo, manko*	Only in adult media /R8

A more complex phenomenon appears in the domain of gender stereotypes, where the taboo is no longer attached to an individual word but rather to the underlying mindset and social assumptions conveyed by a particular phrase. Respondent *R2* identified the expressions *onna nan dakara* ("because you are a woman") and *dansei nan dakara* ("because you are a man") as forms of modern taboo. *R2* explained: "『女なんだからもっと家事をしなさい』とか『男性なんだから泣くんじゃない』という言い方は、今の時代では相手を嫌な気持ちにさせる可能性が高いです" (Expressions such as "do more housework because you are a woman" or "don't cry because you are a man" in the present era have a high likelihood of making the interlocutor feel uncomfortable). This statement illustrates the dynamic evolution of taboo, in which new social norms concerning gender equality create taboo restrictions on stereotypical discourse that may have been more acceptable in the past. From a sociopragmatic perspective, this phenomenon can be understood as a shift in interactional norms within *Hymes'* (1972) *SPEAKING* model. Interactional norms that previously allowed gender stereotypes to function as forms of "advice" or "guidance" are now increasingly considered to violate the principle of *omoiyari* (empathy) and respect for the individuality of the interlocutor. Within the framework of *Leech's* (2016) politeness theory, the use of expressions such as *onna nan dakara* violates the *Tact Maxim* because it imposes gender roles on the interlocutor without considering their feelings or personal choices, and it also violates the *Approbation Maxim* because it implicitly devalues the individual beyond the gender stereotype imposed upon them.

Vulgar vocabulary referring to sexual organs, such as *chinpo* (penis) and *manko* (vagina), occupies the most strongly taboo position within this hierarchy. Within the strict norms of public politeness, there is virtually no space for such expressions in ordinary conversation. Their use is considered a serious violation that can immediately damage the speaker's social image and generate feelings of embarrassment (*hazukashii*) and deep discomfort for the interlocutor. A componential analysis of these expressions reveals semantic features such as [+VULGAR], [+PRIVATE], and [+DISTURBING HARMONY], which render them highly inappropriate for public discourse. Within the framework proposed by *Allan and Burridge* (2006), these expressions fall into the category of the strongest sexual taboos because they refer directly to sexual organs and acts, which are universally regarded as among the most private aspects of human life. However, these expressions find an outlet in media contexts explicitly targeting adult audiences, such as certain anime, manga, and film genres. One informant who enjoys *manga* commented: "成年漫画とかでは『ちんこ』とか『まんこ』って言葉がそのまま出てくることもありますよね。 でも、それはあくまでフィクションの世界での話で、実際に人に使う言葉じゃないという意識はみんなあ

ると思います” (In adult manga, words such as *chinko* or *manko* sometimes appear directly. However, everyone is aware that this is language belonging to the fictional world and not language used toward real people). While traditional views often frame Japanese society as culturally homogeneous, responses from different age groups and regions in this study revealed subtle variations in taboo tolerance. Furthermore, the inclusion of anime and manga data serves specifically to illustrate the dichotomy between accepted fictional taboo usage and real-world linguistic restrictions, acting as a comparative tool rather than a reflection of everyday speech. This statement highlights the collective understanding of a “fictional agreement” that clearly separates language used in entertainment media from language used in real social interaction, indicating that sexual taboos are managed and contained rather than eliminated.

The phenomenon of sexual and gender taboos in Japan also reveals an interesting historical and evolutionary dimension. Comparisons with previous studies indicate that taboos in this domain are not static but continue to change alongside shifts in social values. *Pujiono* et al. (2026), in their study on taboo language in *Javanese Deli*, found a generational decline in taboo knowledge, with younger generations remembering only 42% of taboo terms compared to older generations who recognized up to 89%. A similar pattern is observed in the present study, where younger respondents (R7, 25–35 years old) show different levels of awareness of gender taboos than older respondents (*R8*, 60–69 years old). For example, *R7* appears more critical of gender stereotyping and tends to avoid expressions such as *onna nan dakara*, whereas *R8* may still perceive such expressions as reasonable forms of advice. This finding indicates that sexual and gender taboos are continuously renegotiated in response to changing values concerning equality and individuality in contemporary Japanese society. *Zhang* (2018), in a study on the contemporary situation of Japanese taboo language, concluded that although modern societies often perceive taboos as relics of the past, they continue to exist and play significant roles, albeit in transformed forms. In the context of sexual and gender taboos, this transformation can be seen in the shift from prohibitions on mentioning bodily organs to prohibitions on stereotypical discourse considered to violate individual rights. Thus, sexual and gender taboos function as guardians of the boundary between the private and public spheres while simultaneously reflecting the evolving dynamics of social values. Understanding this map of taboos, along with its significant pragmatic consequences, constitutes a crucial aspect of sociopragmatic competence in Japanese language use, particularly in an era where boundaries between communicative domains continue to shift and evolve.

3.4 Social–interpersonal taboos

Social–interpersonal taboos, represented by words of insult, ridicule, and verbal harassment, constitute the most dynamic category within the hierarchy of Japanese taboo language because their level of taboo depends heavily on the relationship between the speech participants. Words such as *baka* (馬鹿, “stupid”) contain a serious potential threat to social harmony; however, unlike existential or sexual taboos that tend to be universally avoided, this type of taboo can dramatically shift in status from a highly offensive insult to a playful expression of intimacy, depending entirely on the configuration of the social context. This dynamic nature makes it an ideal case for sociopragmatic analysis, particularly through the lens of *Brown and Levinson’s* (1987) Face Theory and *Hymes’* (1972) *SPEAKING* model. Within a rigid social hierarchy, such as the relationship between a subordinate and a superior, the use of the word *baka* constitutes a serious violation of politeness norms. An utterance such as “課長、この企画書は全然ダメですよ。 馬鹿じゃないですか” (*Kachō, kono kikakusho wa zenzen dame desu yo. Baka ja nai desu ka* – “Section Chief, this proposal is

completely useless. Are you stupid?") is not merely impolite; it represents a direct and severe Face Threatening Act (*FTA*) toward the superior's positive face. Such an act directly damages the superior's *mentsu* (面子, social face or dignity) in front of others. It may be interpreted as a rejection of the hierarchical order highly valued in Japanese society, which historically draws upon *Confucian* philosophy concerning the five ethical relationships (*gorin*).

Conversely, in close friendships, the same word may lose much of its taboo force. An utterance such as "え、また財布忘れたの？ お前、ほんとにバカだな" (*E, mata saifu wasureta no? Omae, hontō ni baka da na* – "What? You forgot your wallet again? You're really such an idiot!") spoken between close friend's functions as a *solidarity marker*. Within the framework of *Brown and Levinson's* theory, the use of *baka* in this context may be categorized as a form of *positive politeness* through playful teasing (*banter*), where the threat to face is minimal because, within intimate relationships, "face" is less fragile. Mild verbal attacks may actually strengthen bonds of solidarity. Analysis using *Hymes' SPEAKING* model reveals the contrasting contextual configurations that determine this transformation of function. In hierarchical contexts, the *Participants* consist of a superior and a subordinate with a clearly vertical relationship; the *setting* is the workplace in a formal situation; the *Ends* involve criticizing or even insulting the superior; the *Key* reflects a challenging or insulting tone; and the *Norms* being violated include hierarchical etiquette and *keigo*. In contrast, within an intimate context, the *Participants* are peers with equal status; the *setting* is informal and relaxed; the *Ends* involve expressing mild reproach or playful teasing; the *Key* is irritated yet friendly; and the *Norms* follow familiarity norms that permit rough humor. This comparison empirically demonstrates that "taboo" is not an intrinsic property of a word but rather an evaluative status emerging from the specific configuration of elements within a speech event.

Table 7. Contrast in the use of baka in two contexts.

Aspects	Hierarchical Context (Superior–Subordinate)	Intimate Context (Friends)
Example	*Baka ja nai desu ka*? (Apa Anda bodoh?)	*Hontou ni baka da na*! (You're really stupid!)
Function	FTA berat, penghinaan	Solidarity marker, Joke
Impact	Damages *mentsu*, social sanctions	Strengthens intimacy
Taboo Status	HIGH	LOW/NEUTRAL

A more subtle yet equally important phenomenon emerges from the statement of respondent *R3*: "『ひどい』とか『ありえない』って言う時も、相手が本当に傷つかないか考えます" ("When I say *hidoi* or *ari enai*, I also consider whether the other person might truly be hurt"). This statement implicitly acknowledges the principle of *omoiyari* (empathy), which forms the foundation of Japanese communicative ethics, and demonstrates that sociopragmatically competent speakers continuously evaluate the variables of *Participants* and *Ends* before selecting lexical items, even when dealing with expressions that lie on the borderline of taboo such as *hidoi* ("cruel," "terrible") or *ari enai* ("unbelievable," "impossible"). From the perspective of *Leech's* (2016) politeness theory, this practice reflects the application of the *Tact Maxim*, which minimizes harm to others, and the *Sympathy Maxim*, which maximizes sympathy between speakers. Interestingly, *R3* positions *hidoi* as a euphemistic alternative to harsher criticism, suggesting gradations of sensitivity within the Japanese lexicon of criticism. This observation confirms the findings of *Sakaba* and *Habib* (2025) that, in Japanese culture, even words that are not lexically categorized as taboo must be carefully considered for their potential emotional impact on interlocutors, a communicative practice deeply rooted in the value of *omoiyari*.

The implications of this dynamic social–interpersonal taboo are highly significant for understanding communicative competence in Japanese. The findings confirm that

sociopragmatic mastery of Japanese requires not only the recognition of taboo expressions but also the ability to accurately map how and for what purposes such expressions function within specific networks of social relationships. Errors in evaluating context may transform friendly teasing into an offensive insult that damages relationships, or, conversely, prevent individuals from expressing necessary criticism in hierarchical interactions. Furthermore, these findings engage critically with universal theories of politeness. *Matsumoto* (1988) and *Ide* (1989) have long challenged the universality of *Brown and Levinson's* theory, arguing that the concept of face in collectivist Japanese culture is inherently interpersonal and closely tied to one's position within a group rather than to individual desires for approval. This study provides additional empirical support for that critique by demonstrating that the use of *baka* threatens not only the individual's face but also the group's collective harmony (*wa*), particularly within hierarchical contexts. Conversely, in intimate contexts, the same expression may strengthen group cohesion. Thus, social–interpersonal taboos function as an important mechanism for negotiating and maintaining the boundaries of social relationships while simultaneously reflecting the value structure of Japanese society, which prioritizes collective harmony over individual expression. The ability to navigate these dynamics represents the culmination of communicative competence and serves as a marker of full membership within the Japanese cultural community.

3.5 The role of social context in determining taboo status

One of the most fundamental findings of this study is the confirmation that the "taboo" status of a word or utterance does not inherently reside in the linguistic form itself; rather, it is entirely constituted by the configuration of the social context surrounding the speech event. This finding both confirms and deepens the theoretical understanding that linguistic taboo is relational and dynamic rather than absolute and static. As emphasized by Haruhito (2018), taboo in Japan can be understood as a set of subtle, ambiguous, and highly contextual social constraints that manifest as a sense of "inappropriateness" and the need to read the situation, rather than as explicit prohibitions or written rules. Within a sociopragmatic framework, this perspective is crucial for explaining why lexically identical words, such as *baka* or *kuso*, can possess dramatically different, sometimes even opposing, pragmatic forces when used within different contextual configurations. The analysis of the research data identifies three principal pillars of social context that systematically determine the gradation of taboo status in an utterance: social hierarchy, the level of intimacy reflected in the *uchi–soto* dichotomy, and the degree of situational formality. These three pillars do not operate independently; rather, they interact to form a complex contextual matrix in which any change in one variable can significantly shift the taboo status of an utterance.

The first pillar, social hierarchy and power relations among participants, emerges as the most powerful determinant of the severity of Face Threatening Acts (FTA) associated with taboo expressions. In Japanese society, whose social structure has been strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy, particularly the concept of *gorin* (the five ethical relationships), which emphasizes hierarchical relations between superiors and subordinates, parents and children, and elders and juniors, the use of taboo words within vertical relationships carries far more serious consequences than within horizontal ones. The data consistently show that the word *baka*, uttered by a subordinate toward a superior, constitutes a severe violation that attacks the superior's positive face (the desire to be respected) and symbolically rejects the legitimacy of the hierarchical order that underpins Japanese society. Respondent R3, a university lecturer in her forties, explicitly noted that direct criticism toward superiors requires extreme caution and must be framed through sophisticated strategies of indirectness. Conversely, the same word used among colleagues of equal status, although still capable of creating tension, lacks the same destructive force because it does not threaten the power

structure underlying the interaction. This finding aligns with the arguments of Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989), who assert that the concept of *face* in Japanese collectivist culture cannot be understood solely as an individual property; rather, it is closely linked to one's position within networks of social relationships and the obligation to maintain group harmony (*wa*). Thus, social hierarchy functions as a multiplier variable that amplifies or diminishes the threatening force of taboo expressions: the greater the power imbalance, the greater the destructive potential of a taboo violation.

The second pillar, the level of intimacy reflected in the *uchi–soto* (内/外, inside–outside) dichotomy, is the primary determinant of social tolerance toward taboo violations. The *uchi–soto* concept represents one of the most fundamental cognitive frameworks in Japanese culture, sharply distinguishing between the inner circle (family, close friends, one's own group) and the outer circle (strangers, acquaintances, outsiders). The present study systematically maps how this dichotomy transforms the function of taboo words. The word *kuso*, for instance, within a *uchi* context, such as conversations among close friends, is not only acceptable but may also function as a marker of solidarity and an effective emotional intensifier. Respondent R2, while acknowledging that *kuso* is "a word with a dirty meaning," also observed that it frequently appears spontaneously in informal situations, such as when a train is delayed or when losing a game, especially among peers. In this context, the violation of lexical politeness norms is tolerated, and even expected, as part of the dynamics of intimacy and the expression of strong emotions. In contrast, within a *soto* context, such as conversations with unfamiliar individuals or in professional settings, the use of the same word is considered a serious violation, reflecting an inability to read the situation (*kūki o yomenai*) and a lack of *enryo* (restraint). Respondent R1 explicitly stated that words such as *oshikko* and *unchi* become taboo "when used toward adults who are not close acquaintances" (*amari shitashikunai otona ni taishite tsukau toki*). This reveals that intimacy does not eliminate the taboo; rather, it temporarily suspends it through a fragile micro-social contract. Violating this contract, for example, by using crude expressions toward new members who have not yet been fully accepted into a group, can quickly restore the word's offensive taboo force.

The third pillar, the level of situational formality, plays a crucial role in determining which communication strategies are considered appropriate and the threshold of tolerance for direct expression. In formal and public situations, such as official ceremonies, business meetings, or interactions in public spaces, the demand to adhere to politeness norms peaks, and the use of taboo expressions, even those that may be neutralized in informal contexts, becomes entirely unacceptable. Data from *Mainichi Shimbun* (2022) regarding the sensitivity surrounding discussions of suicide (*jisatsu*) in public discourse illustrate how formal media contexts necessitate extreme caution when addressing existential topics. Similarly, in wedding ceremonies (*kekkon shiki*), words that are otherwise neutral, such as *kiru* (to cut) and *owaru* (to end), become strongly taboo because the formal context is imbued with sacred expectations and symbolic meanings. Conversely, in informal and private situations, such as conversations at home or in cafés among close friends, the threshold of tolerance becomes considerably more flexible, allowing discussions of sensitive topics to occur more openly, albeit still within certain limits. Respondent R8, a retired civil servant in his sixties from Hokkaido, noted that, within close family circles, even discussions about serious illness can be conducted more directly than when speaking with outsiders. These findings indicate that situational formality functions as a kind of "switch" that activates or deactivates particular politeness norms. Within the SPEAKING model proposed by Hymes (1972), the components of Setting (the physical and psychological environment) and Norms (rules of interaction) interact closely to determine what language is considered appropriate. Formal situations activate explicit norms that demand the avoidance of taboo and the use of sophisticated euphemistic strategies, whereas informal contexts allow greater flexibility in negotiating those norms.

The interaction of these three contextual pillars generates a complex contextual matrix in which the taboo status of an utterance is determined by the specific configuration of hierarchy, intimacy, and formality. For instance, the use of the word *baka* in a situation involving a superior (high hierarchy) and a stranger (*soto*) within a formal context (an official meeting) result in an extremely high taboo status, with maximal potential for conflict and social sanctions. Conversely, the same word used among peers (low hierarchy) who share close intimacy (*uchi*) in an informal setting (casually meeting in a café) results in a low taboo status and may even function as a marker of solidarity. Between these two extremes lies a gradient of situations in which contextual configurations produce moderate taboo status, for example, when a subordinate must convey criticism to a superior in a semi-formal setting, requiring careful euphemistic strategies and high degrees of indirectness. This finding carries important implications for understanding sociopragmatic competence in Japanese. Such competence does not merely involve knowledge of taboo vocabulary and their euphemistic equivalents; rather, the more crucial skill lies in accurately reading the contextual configuration involving participant hierarchy, levels of intimacy, and situational formality, and subsequently selecting appropriate linguistic strategies based on that reading. This ability, often referred to in popular Japanese discourse as the capacity to "read the air" (*kuuki o yomu*), is widely regarded as a marker of social maturity and cultural competence.

Table 8. Three contextual pillars determining taboo status.

Contextual Pillar	Variable	Example	Impact
Social Hierarchy	Superior–subordinate vs. equal status	*Baka* addressed to a superior = high taboo	Determines the severity of the FTA
Intimacy (*Uchi/Soto*)	Inside (*uchi*) vs. outside (*soto*)	*Kuso*: among close friends (neutral) vs. unfamiliar people (taboo)	Determines tolerance toward violations
Situational Formality	Formal/public vs. informal/private	*Jisatsu*: taboo in public discourse, discussable in private	Determines communication strategies

The findings regarding these three contextual pillars collectively construct a conceptual model explaining the mechanism by which taboo status is activated in Japanese language use. The model can be formulated as follows:

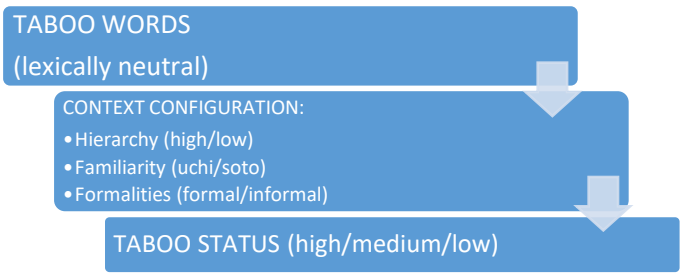


Fig. 1. A conceptual model of taboo status.

Every taboo word at the lexical level is essentially neutral, containing a potential meaning and threatening force that become actualized only when the word is placed within a specific contextual configuration. This configuration, comprising social hierarchy (high/low), intimacy (*uchi/soto*), and situational formality (formal/informal), functions as a kind of

"prism" that refracts this potential meaning into an actual taboo status with a certain gradation (high, moderate, or low). This model explains the dynamics observed in the research data, such as the transformation of the functions of *baka* and *kuso* across different contexts, and it provides an analytical framework capable of predicting how other words may behave in different communicative situations. Furthermore, this model engages productively with broader theoretical frameworks. It confirms the validity of Hymes' SPEAKING model (1972) as an analytical tool for dissecting contextual complexity while simultaneously contextualizing Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of face, demonstrating that, in collectivist cultures such as Japan, *face* is not merely individual but also collective. Consequently, threats to face are determined not only by the type of speech act but also by the configuration of the surrounding social relationships. Thus, these findings enrich our understanding of Japanese linguistic taboo and contribute significantly to the broader development of sociopragmatic theory by proposing a contextual analytical model that may be replicated to examine similar phenomena in other cultures.

4 Conclusion

This study has conducted an in-depth examination of the classification of verbal taboo in Japanese and the role of social context in determining the taboo status of utterances from a sociopragmatic perspective. Based on analysis of primary data from interviews with 10 native-speaker informants, this research yields four principal conclusions that address the proposed research questions.

First, this study identifies and classifies verbal taboo in Japanese into four main categories, each characterized by distinct focuses, features, and the cultural values they violate. The first category is existential taboo, which includes vocabulary related to death (such as *shinu*), suicide (*jisatsu*), and expressions associated with misfortune or the termination of something (such as *kiru* and *owaru* in the context of weddings). This category is grounded in the values of *omoiyari* (empathy) and *sonkei* (respect), in which the direct mention of death is considered likely to hurt the feelings of grieving families and disturb the peace of the deceased's spirit. The second category is scatological taboo, which includes words referring to bodily waste and functions, such as *kuso*, *oshikko*, and *unchi*. This category is closely related to feelings of disgust (*ken'o*) and norms of politeness (*reigi*), and it is influenced by the cultural concept of *kegare* (impurity), which regards bodily excretions as matters that should be concealed from the public sphere. The third category is sexual and gender taboo, encompassing pejorative terms for sexual identity (*okama*), rigid gender stereotypes (*onna nan dakara*), and vulgar vocabulary for sexual organs and activities (*chinpo*, *manko*). This category violates the values of privacy (*puraibashii*) and social harmony (*wa*), while also reflecting the evolving dynamics of taboos as gender-equality values develop within contemporary Japanese society. The fourth category is social–interpersonal taboo, consisting of insults, verbal harassment, and profanity such as *baka*, *aho*, and *urusai*. These expressions directly threaten the *interlocutor's mentsu (face or self-esteem) and have the potential to disrupt the hierarchical relationships that underpin* Japanese social structure.

Second, this study reveals that the taboo status of a word is not determined by its intrinsic properties but by three interacting pillars of social context. The first pillar is **s**ocial hierarchy and power relations among participants**,** which determines the degree of threat posed by an utterance in terms of Face Threatening Acts (FTA). In vertical relationships such as those between superiors and subordinates, the use of taboo words like *baka* constitutes a severe violation that attacks an individual's positive face and symbolically rejects the legitimacy of the hierarchical order. In contrast, within horizontal relationships among colleagues of equal

status, the same word carries significantly less destructive force. The second pillar is the **level** of intimacy reflected in the *uchi–soto* (inside–outside) dichotomy, which determines the level of social tolerance toward taboo violations. Within the inner circle (*uchi*), such as conversations among close friends, the word *kuso* may be acceptable and even function as a marker of solidarity or an emotional intensifier. However, within the outer circle (*soto*), such as interactions with unfamiliar individuals, the same word is considered highly vulgar and offensive. The third pillar is the degree of situational formality, which determines which communication strategies are considered appropriate. In formal and public situations, such as official ceremonies or media discourse, the demand to adhere to politeness norms is at its highest, and the use of taboo expressions is entirely unacceptable. Conversely, in informal and private situations, the threshold of tolerance becomes much more flexible. These three pillars operate not independently but interactively, forming a complex contextual matrix in which changes in any single variable may dramatically shift the taboo status of an utterance.

Third, the findings of this study emphasize the relational nature of linguistic taboo, in which lexically identical words may have significantly different taboo statuses depending on the social context. This phenomenon is most clearly illustrated by the word *baka*. In hierarchical contexts, such as when used by a subordinate toward a superior, it constitutes a severe Face Threatening Act (FTA) that may result in serious social sanctions. However, within close friendships, the same word may function as a solidarity marker, even strengthening interpersonal bonds through playful teasing (*banter*). Similarly, the word *kuso* demonstrates an extreme functional duality: in intimate contexts, it undergoes semantic bleaching, losing much of its literal lexical meaning and functioning primarily as an emotional intensifier, whereas in formal contexts, it reactivates its literal association with *kegare* (impurity) and becomes strongly taboo. These findings empirically demonstrate that "tabooness" is not a property inherent in the word itself, but rather a relational attribute emerging from the interaction between linguistic form and specific social configurations. This understanding has significant implications for sociopragmatic studies, as it confirms that the analysis of linguistic taboo cannot be separated from the surrounding social context, and that generalizations about the taboo status of a word must always account for contextual variability.

Fourth, this study reveals that behind each category of taboo and each contextual mechanism regulating its use lie fundamental cultural values of Japanese society that actively shape and regulate linguistic behavior. The value of *wa* (harmony) explains why the avoidance of taboo expressions becomes so crucial; any utterance that has the potential to generate conflict is perceived as a threat to group harmony that must be preserved at all costs. The value of *omoiyari* (empathy or consideration) explains why euphemisms are not merely used but carefully selected, with sensitivity to the interlocutor's feelings and face; this empathetic competence is continuously cultivated through linguistic socialization and becomes a marker of social maturity. The value of *enryo* (restraint or self-limitation) helps explain why strategies of indirectness and avoidance are often preferred over direct expression, even in situations where criticism or rejection must be conveyed; *enryo* teaches individuals not to impose their feelings or intentions on others. Finally, the value of *kotodama* (belief in the spiritual power of words) explains why expressions associated with death or misfortune, such as the homophonic association between the number four and the word for death, are strictly avoided. The ancient belief that words possess the power to shape reality persists and actively influences linguistic practices even in the modern era. These four values do not merely function as a cultural background but are actively "invoked" and "performed" through highly specific linguistic choices. This demonstrates that sociopragmatic competence in Japanese is not merely the ability to choose the correct words, but rather the ability to orchestrate linguistic resources in ways that enact and display the cultural values that form the collective identity of its speakers.

Despite these findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. The conclusions drawn are based on a small-scale qualitative sample of ten participants, which, while sufficient for deep contextual analysis, limits the generalizability of the claims. Contemporary Japanese society is not entirely homogeneous, and regional or generational variations may exist beyond the scope of this dataset. Future research should address these limitations by involving larger, statistically representative samples using quantitative methods and extensive corpus linguistics to further validate and expand upon these sociopragmatic categories across more diverse demographics."

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