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NEGOTIATING LANGUAGE BOUNDARIES: GENERATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON TABOO WORD USAGE IN ENGLISH

(Jelena Ilić Plauc, *The Attitudes of Newer Generation of English Students Towards Taboo Word Usage*, OFF-SET, Tuzla, 2025)

Jelena Ilić Plauc's book *The Attitudes of Newer Generation of English Students Towards Taboo Word Usage* is an ambitious and timely contribution to sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and language and cultural studies. At first glance, the subject of taboo words may appear marginal or even mischievous, but as the author convincingly demonstrates, it proves to be a revealing resource for understanding changing social values and attitudes, communication norms, and linguistic creativity. Grounded in classical politeness theory and contemporary pragmatic thought, this book focuses on an area that remains surprisingly under-researched in South-East Europe and offers an insightful empirical perspective to linguistic scholarship. One of the author's biggest strengths is the way she keeps theory and reality in dialogue. She rationally constructs her assumptions across nine chapters that serve as conceptual building blocks of the entire book.

The opening chapters lay out a sound theoretical framework. Jelena Ilić Plauc provides a meticulous overview of the classical models of politeness theory, supported by an impressive number of sources, including Grice, Lakoff, Leech, Brown and Levinson, and many others, as well as later critiques by more modern scholars like Watts and Spencer-Oatey. The readers are also introduced to key notions such as *Politeness*₁ and *Politeness*₂, *the Politeness Principle*, *the Rules of Politeness*, *New Max-*

ims, and the concept of *Face*, which help to understand why people avoid certain words or deliberately use the others. By summarising the ideas of various discussed scholars, Ilić Plauc acknowledges that “politeness is not inherent within a human being ... it needs to be taught by parents, teachers and mentors, and therefore needs to be acquired ...” (17).

Equally significant is how the author treats the phenomenon of *Impoliteness*, based on the ideas of Culpeper, Bousfield, and Mills. She defines impoliteness not simply as the absence of politeness but as a strategic communicative act that can serve multiple purposes: “It is certainly not a deviant, abnormal, or irrational counterpart of politeness” (48). Impoliteness, as the author further explains, can be purposeful or unintentional, offensive or humorous, destructive or bonding, depending on the speaker’s goals, the relationship between participants, and the surrounding context.

The next chapters (particularly Chapters Four to Six) focus on taboo language and locate it within the sociolinguistic context. The first part of Chapter Four provides a systematic clarification of what is meant by *bad language* in relation to the current study. Ilić Plauc makes a distinction between several closely related but not interchangeable concepts, such as *slang*, *jargon*, *offensive language*, including *foul language*, *coarse language*, *swearing*, *cursing*, *cussing*, as well as *political correctness*, *insults* and *maledictions*. While she attempts to clarify them and explain their differences, she finally concludes that “the boundaries among the categories of bad language are not clear and precise ... varying in the degree of offensiveness, acceptance, and tolerance shown by language users” (68).

In the same chapter, Ilić Plauc brings another important sociolinguistic issue and discusses how attitudes towards swearing are conditioned by variables like age, gender, social background, and environment, highlighting that taboo expression is not randomly created but rather socially patterned. Younger speakers tend to see such language as natural and spontaneous communication, while older generations have a more conservative stance. The author’s interpretation of this tendency is well-reasoned because, instead of presenting youth as linguistically rebellious, she sees them as pragmatically pliable, i.e., they are aware of context but less constrained by an archaic moral framework.

Gender also receives special attention. Ilić Plauc argues that swearing, once strongly linked with masculinity and social dominance, has gradually become a mode of self-expression for both genders. However, by referring to McEnery’s (2006) classification, she concludes that men still tend to use stronger expletives, while women more frequently choose milder forms.

Education and social class are also discussed with insight. Ilić Plauc resists the popular belief that swearing belongs to “the language of the gutter” (72), revealing that upper social classes, too, have often used rather colourful or even rude expressions.

Similarly, the discussion of geographical variation reveals that attitudes towards swearing are culturally bound. They are linked to different concepts of politeness, privacy, and emotional openness throughout Europe. As the author writes, “being polite in Germany varies from being polite in Norway, Estonia or Greece (75)”, and points out that “it is not just a behaviour that varies from country to country, from culture to culture, but it is also the way that particular behaviour is assessed and perceived in relation to the value system that one culture or country supports” (75).

When discussing the phenomenon of swearing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ilić Plauc admits that research on the topic is scarce but revealing. She refers to accounts shared by Ignacije Gavran (1962), who described swearing in the Balkans as widespread and culturally ubiquitous, given the harsh living conditions, social frustrations and occasional inconvenience of life. With this in mind, later research, as noted by the author, suggests that swearing has become frequent and even more prevalent in Bosnia than just a very ordinary greeting. By relying on these and other perspectives, Jelena Ilić Plauc presents swearing as a social phenomenon deeply ingrained with one’s history, culture, and identity rather than simple vulgarity.

In addressing sociolinguistic factors, Ilić Plauc also turns to censorship as another important consideration in the regulation of language and morality within society. Indeed, as she demonstrates, censorship is as pervasive as attitudes towards swearing by nature and, thus, mirrors larger cultural values and power relations. While its function has previously suppressed linguistic disrespect, the author suggests that censorship merely modifies rather than eliminates taboos, as people are always able to come up with unique and creative ways to express what is officially forbidden. In this sense, she concludes that “... forbidden words continue to be perennial” (79).

In the final chapters of the theoretical part, Ilić Plauc discusses the attitudes of younger generations towards taboo language, bringing together many of the ideas developed earlier in the book. She finds that most students have moved beyond the view that swearing is entirely vulgar and have a role in spontaneous, emotionally open dialogues, regarding it no longer as offensive *per se*. For them, the use of taboo words might be associated with closeness, humour, or authenticity, though they still recognise that appropriateness depends on context. The author refers to it as *a pragmatic understanding of language usage*, noting that awareness of boundaries has not been lost, as young people adapt their language to the situation.

To deepen her analysis, Ilić Plauc also considers perceptions of how politeness and impoliteness manifest in language, connecting them with a broader debate around taboo and social behaviour. She notes that no linguistic act is inherently polite or impolite: “there is nothing in the utterance itself that signals its politeness or impoliteness” (96). Its interpretation depends on context, intention, and shared cultural norms. This view reinforces one of the central ideas of the book – linguistic meaning is constantly changing and is inseparable from the social values behind it. Ilić Plauc also emphasises the influence of stereotypes and formulaic expressions, arguing that much of what we label “polite” or “impolite” is the result of culturally learned rituals rather than objective standards. Her discussion of “politic behaviour” (98) as a balance between social harmony and individual expression provides a relevant conclusion to the theoretical framework. By linking attitudes, social values, and pragmatic choices, the author effectively laid the ground for the empirical part of the study, showing how politeness, like taboo, reflects the ongoing relationship between linguistic freedom and social expectation.

In the empirical section of the book, Ilić Plauc presents a detailed and convincing analysis of the data collected from 328 English students across four Bosnian universities – Tuzla, Banja Luka, Zenica and Mostar. The methodology is explained with commendable transparency, where questions address both the frequency of use and attitudes towards taboo expressions in different contexts. The author’s discussion of the findings is analytically detailed and demonstrates how the language of the university undergraduates reflects deeper cultural and generational dynamics. The data reveal clear contextual and gendered tendencies. Bosnian students use taboo language primarily among friends, much less with family members, and least in academic settings, highlighting the fact that they are very sensitive to situational appropriateness. Interestingly, the findings suggest that women in the study appear more open to discussing taboo topics in informal contexts, while men, on the other hand, show slightly higher restraint, a pattern that challenges traditional assumptions about gender and swearing. The dominance of sexual taboo words confirms that certain themes carry more emotional and cultural weight, though even these may be interpreted by younger generations as playful rather than grotesque.

This entire empirical part is impressive because the author combines quantitative data with sociolinguistic understanding with great ease. With remarkable precision and a clear analytical eye, she interprets patterns of usage not simply as numbers but as reflections of identity, power, and emotion. Also notable is the impact of global English, with many participants reporting that swearing in English feels “lighter” or less offensive than in their native language.

Overall, Ilić Plauc's analysis portrays a generation grappling with inherited norms and contemporary models of expression that involve being aware of the boundaries, yet increasingly confident in bending them. This balance of empirical precision and cultural understanding gives the study both scientific credibility and human depth, confirming the author's thoughtful and insightful approach to a socially sensitive subject. The extensive conclusions do not simply restate the results; they contextualise them within broader sociolinguistic debates.

Finally, the author deserves praise for the clarity of style and the structure of her book. The writing is consistently precise and easy to follow, even when addressing complex theoretical models. Ilić Plauc demonstrates a command of both classic and modern scholarship, drawing on a wide range of academic sources. The inclusion of examples, tables, graphs, footnotes and carefully selected references lends depth and authenticity, reflecting her academic rigour and interdisciplinarity. Each chapter flows logically into the next, with theoretical arguments consistently backed by empirical evidence. The author writes with both authority and curiosity – never sensationalising nor moralising, but inviting the reader to reflect on how words reveal changing identities.

In short, this book deserves serious attention, as it manages to be both informative and genuinely engaging. It reminds us that language behaves very much like its users. For students, linguists, educators, and anyone interested in the cultural psychology of language, Jelena Ilić Plauc's book *The Attitudes of Newer Generation of English Students Towards Taboo Word Usage* is a valuable asset, as it is both a solid academic reference and a delight to read.

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