

Unveiling Cultural Perceptions: Scatological Language of Diarrhea and Vomiting

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1. Introduction

Currently, there is a lack of systematic study on scatological language that incorporates recent insights from linguistic research. Analyzing these linguistic phenomena through a cross-linguistic and intercultural lens is of paramount sociolinguistic importance, as it allows for a deeper understanding of their universality and uniqueness.

The genesis of this study was rooted in an initial fascination with scatological language. The study commenced by systematically collecting a comprehensive range of English toilet slang, encompassing expressions for various bodily functions and related activities. Through categorization of these expressions based on their underlying conceptual metaphors, a discernible thematic thread emerged over time, centering on the emotions of disgust and fear.

This study will be focusing on the euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions related to diarrhea and vomiting in the English language.

2. Theoretical Background and Previous Studies

In comparing taboos and offensive language in English, this study employs the conceptual metaphor theory, proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980 and widely applied since (Lakoff & Johnson (2003)). Furthermore, the usage-based

theory of language, advocated by scholars such as Langacker (1988, 2000), Tomasello (2003), and Bybee (2010) claims that linguistic knowledge is constructed through the repetition of actual linguistic usage events. This makes it particularly relevant for examining the dynamic and context-dependent nature of taboos and offensive language.

Allen (2019) posits that taboos are behavioral prohibitions stemming from social constraints, aimed at preventing potential discomfort, harm, or injury to individuals. The term *taboo* originated from the Tongan word *tabu*, which gained prominence in the late eighteenth century. The author elaborates that linguistic taboos encompass various aspects, including death, disease, and bodily functions associated with sex, urination, and defecation, often categorized under the umbrella of *uncleanliness taboos*.

Pizarro Pedraza (2018) describes the reasonings behind linguists' exploration of taboo language:

Studying linguistic taboo means understanding the systems of beliefs, the regimes of language, truth and knowledge (Irvine (2011)) regarding the immorality or inappropriateness of what cannot be said, and why these topics (or particular words) produce strong reactions in some speakers. It also means understanding the linguistic resources for veiling or disguising the forbidden, or on the contrary, for enhancing it with the purpose of using its powerful affective meanings for a variety of purposes. (pp. 2–3)

O'Driscoll (2020) delves into the intricate relationship between language, power dynamics, and social control, highlighting how offense stemming from language usage can mirror underlying power structures. This phenomenon can inadvertently foster a culture of surveillance, monitoring, and sanctions. The consequences of designating and labeling offensive language stretch beyond mere linguistic or interpersonal impacts, potentially impeding free speech and hindering public discourse. This insight holds relevance across various spheres of everyday communication and academic analysis.

According to slang lexicographer Green (2015), slang, often referred to as *the language of the streets*, defies easy definition but remains ubiquitous in linguistic

discourse. It serves as a rebellious *counter-language*, challenging societal norms with impertinence and mockery. Originating in marginalized communities, slang embodies resistance to established rules and ideologies. Despite its marginalization, slang thrives as a vibrant and creative form of expression, reflecting cultural struggles and rebellions. It encapsulates the essence of humanity, offering insights into societal dynamics and cultural identity (pp. 5–6).

While this study will not include metaphorical expressions related to sex due to other themes lacking in research, it acknowledges the importance of metaphor in understanding sexual taboos within specific cultural contexts, as emphasized by Crespo-Fernández (2008), whose methods this study plans to adopt. Additionally, Chamizo Domínguez (2007) highlights the scarcity of research on euphemism (indirect or polite speech) and dysphemism (offensive speech) compared to the extensive literature on metaphor and metonymy produced by linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists since 1950. This underscores the need for further investigation into the dynamics of polite and impolite speech acts. Furthermore, Allan & Burridge (2006) delve into the intricacies of politeness and impoliteness, exploring the nuances of orthophemism (direct speech), euphemism, and dysphemism. Their examination encompasses a wide array of linguistic phenomena, including “sexual and scatological obscenities, ethnic-racial slurs, insults, name-calling, profanity, blasphemy, slang, [and] jargon” (p. 250), as well as various forms of vulgar language, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of taboo discourse.

There do exist several scholarly references addressing scatological language. Disgust, a complex emotion closely linked to taboo language, is based on the premise that certain substances, such as food, are considered contaminated when they come into contact with substances perceived as *dirt* or *filth*, such as feces (Jay, 2000). Understanding the psychological underpinnings of disgust is crucial for analyzing how language reflects and shapes cultural perceptions of cleanliness and contamination. Turunen (2016) has amassed a significant amount of data while examining slang expressions centered around the words *shit*, *piss*, and *blood*, indicating that both *shit* and *piss* are predominantly employed to denote negative traits.

In a survey conducted by Allan & Burrige (1991), it was found that excretory substances such as feces and vomit are commonly perceived as revolting. Additionally, gender differences in the perception of bodily fluids were observed, with men more likely to rate menstrual blood as repulsive compared to women. Joffe (1948) conducted a comprehensive study on menstruation, revealing that a significant portion of collected American expressions referred to menstruation as an “illness, inconvenience, or disability” (p. 184). This highlights the societal taboos and stigmas surrounding menstruation and its representation in language.

Levin (2014) conducts a corpus-based study of the Bathroom Formula, which refers to the phrases speakers use to express their need to excuse themselves from any ongoing activity in order to visit the restroom.

3. Methodology

The next section explores scatological language, specifically focusing on euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions related to diarrhea and vomiting in the English language. Building upon Jay’s (2000) concept of *body products* (p. 201), the research aims to compile a comprehensive collection of such expressions and analyze their metaphorical categorization. Through meticulous data gathering, a wide range of slang expressions used to describe these bodily functions were collected. These expressions have been categorized based on their metaphorical associations, offering insights into the underlying conceptual frameworks and cultural understandings associated with diarrhea and vomiting.

4. Analysis

Investigating metaphorical categories associated with diarrhea and vomiting reveals intriguing similarities and differences, illuminating how these bodily functions are conceptualized and communicated. Such categorizations provide a nuanced framework for discussions encompassing cultural influences, symbolism, psychological and physiological implications, and language dynamics. (Note that

[CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS] are only included when relevant, and many expressions belong to more than one category.)

While examining metaphorical categories for diarrhea and vomiting, several parallels and distinctions become apparent. Both bodily functions metaphorically evoke physical discomfort and hardship, evident in expressions like *ring stinger* or *shitting through the eye of a needle* [DIARRHEA IS DISTRESS] for diarrhea and *hiccup from hell* [VOMITING IS TORMENT] for vomiting, emphasizing their painful and uncomfortable aspects. Both are depicted as involuntary and disruptive, depicted vividly through terms like *anal leakage* [THE HUMAN BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR FECES] or *liquid lava* for diarrhea and *spraying McDonalds* for vomiting, highlighting their uncontrollable and forceful nature. These bodily functions are often linked to release or expulsion, depicted through phrases like *fecal fountain* for diarrhea and *turn one's guts inside-out* for vomiting, portraying them as processes of eliminating unwanted substances from the body.

Food-related metaphors are common for both diarrhea and vomiting. Expressions such as *green apple splatters* and *the Hershey squirts* are used for diarrhea, while terms like *air the diced carrots* and *toss a sidewalk pizza* [VOMITING IS COOKING] are employed for vomiting. The extent to how strong of a connection there is between vomiting and the creation of pizza was confirmed upon encountering a Japanese variation, likely coined by an American expatriate: *ramen pizza*, a term referring to vomit. We can observe that these food-related metaphors graphically illustrate not only the visual appearance of the bodily waste being expelled, but also its texture and consistency.

In terms of consistency, diarrhea is often depicted through expressions like *the splatters* and *piss out of one's ass* [DIARRHEA IS LIQUID]. On the other hand, metaphors for vomiting tend to emphasize its sludginess or the mixture of liquid and solid components, as seen in terms like *New England Clam Chowder* or *protein spill* [VOMIT IS SLUDGE]. Diarrhea is commonly portrayed in monochromatic terms, typically depicted as being brown, as in *Hershey highway squirts* and *brown rain*. In contrast, vomiting is described with a broader spectrum of colors, as evidenced by phrases like *thunder-chunder rainbow parfait* [VOMIT IS POLYCHROME].

Animal-related metaphors also play a significant role in describing diarrhea and vomiting. For diarrhea, expressions like *hot snakes* or *the trots* are commonly used. The former emphasizes the sensation of hot, writhing movements in the bowels during the experience, while the latter underscores the urgency, likening it to the swift movement of a horse trotting. On the other hand, vomiting is metaphorically described using phrases like *be the mother bird* or *feed the fish* [VOMITING IS NURTURING]. While the former highlights the act of regurgitation as a nurturing or caring action, the latter is particularly used to describe the act of vomiting when seasick. These animal-based metaphors provide vivid imagery, capturing not only the physical sensations associated with these bodily functions but also the emotional and cultural nuances they carry.

Slang expressions such as *Ralping* and *calling Huey on the commode-a-phone* illustrate the use of sound-related metonymies in descriptions of vomiting. *Ralping*, a slang term for throwing up, creatively associates the name “Ralph” with the retching or gagging noises from vomiting. Similarly, *calling Huey on the commode-a-phone* conjures a striking image of using a toilet “the commode” as a telephone “phone” while experiencing nausea, playing on the phonetic resemblance between the name “Huey” and the sound of vomiting. Additionally, terms like *bubbleguts* and *thunder from down under* [NOISE FOR ACTIVITY] for diarrhea exemplify the gurgling, bubbling, and rumbling sounds that can be heard in the stomach or intestines.

While both vomiting and diarrhea have cultural references and historical contexts associated with them, they do appear to differ. There are instances where vomiting is linked with notorious locations like the Bronx in New York (e.g., *Bronx’s nightmare*) and states of intoxication (e.g., *singing psychedelic praises to the depths of the china bowl*). In fact, there are quite a few metaphorical expressions for vomiting that are associated with intoxication, such as *McDonald’s Special* and *waste good beer*, suggesting a notable connection between drinking, recreational drug use, and vomiting. Meanwhile, diarrhea is often linked to vacation experiences, with colloquial terms like *Montezuma’s revenge* and *Havana omelet* [DIARRHEA IS A TRAVELLER’S DILEMMA] commonly used to describe the condition. These

expressions underscore the prevalence of food poisoning, a frequent occurrence for travelers.

Diarrhea is depicted as a distressing and urgent bodily function, with metaphors like *backdoor trots* [DIARRHEA IS AN EMERGENCY] emphasizing the sense of urgency. The frequent emphasis on time sensitivity in metaphorical expressions for diarrhea suggests a compelling reason: not reaching a toilet in time is far less forgivable compared to vomiting. Diarrhea is commonly associated with destruction, war, and emergencies, as seen in expressions such as *acid bombs* [DIARRHEA IS WAR] and *assquake* [DIARRHEA IS DESTRUCTION], which convey a chaotic and intense experience. Slang expressions for diarrhea often emphasize messiness and filth, underscoring the velocity of expulsion and even the color of the excreted content, as seen in expressions like *chocolate laser*. Additionally, these expressions often focus on physical sensations like stomach rumbling, as illustrated by the phrase *whistle belly thumps*.

Metaphors related to diarrhea often place a strong emphasis on impact, velocity, and spread, providing vivid and sometimes graphic imagery to describe the experience. For instance, phrases such as *AK-47 action* and *arseplosion* [DIARRHEA IS WAR] depict the forceful and abrupt impact of the bowel movement, likening it to an explosive event or military action. Expressions like *arse blast* and *firehose ass* [DIARRHEA IS AN OUTBURST] not only convey the speed and force at which the bodily contents are expelled but also highlight the watery consistency and uncontrollable nature of the diarrhea. Additionally, metaphors such as *carpet bomb* and *spray-painting* emphasize the extensive spread that often occurs during a bout of diarrhea. These phrases suggest that the effects of diarrhea are not contained but rather spread out over a wide area.

Vomiting frequently involves actions of reversal, emphasizing the expelling of contents from the body, such as *eat backwards* and *tossing one's lunch*. They often evoke movement, cycles, and journeys, as seen in expressions like *ride the regurgitron* and *round-trip meal ticket* [VOMITING IS A JOURNEY]. Furthermore, phrases like *driving the Buick to Europe* or *driving the porcelain bus* [VOMITING IS DRIVING] vividly illustrate the action many people take when vomiting. This illustration

conjures the image of leaning over the toilet bowl with arms resting on the seat, mirroring the posture of a person driving a vehicle. Similarly, vomiting is often associated with actions like bending forward, as depicted in *kneel before the porcelain throne*. Vomiting is also linked with acts of worship, intimacy, and creativity, with expressions like *make an offering to the porcelain gods* [VOMITING IS WORSHIP], *kiss the can* [VOMITING IS AN ACT OF INTIMACY], and *painting gastric graffiti* [VOMITING IS ART], reflecting a diverse range of symbolic associations.

Many vomiting expressions highlight the opening of one's mouth during the act. For instance, phrases like *cry Ruth* or *talking on the porcelain telephone* [VOMITING IS CALLING], *shout at your shoes* [VOMITING IS SHOUTING], *liquid laugh* [VOMITING IS LAUGHING], *Technicolor yawn* or *yawn for the hearing impaired* [VOMITING IS YAWNING], and *yodel groceries* [VOMITING IS YODELING] illustrate the varied and sometimes creative ways language represents this unpleasant experience.

In the realm of metaphorical expressions related to vomiting, it is not uncommon to encounter combinations that draw upon multiple categories, adding layers of meaning and nuance to the act. One such example is the expression *hug the throne*, which combines the categories of intimacy and worship: [VOMITING IS AN ACT OF INTIMACY] + [VOMITING IS WORSHIP]. This metaphor suggests a deeply personal and reverential relationship with the act of vomiting, perhaps highlighting the physical closeness and private nature of the experience, as well as the ritualistic or ceremonial aspect that some may associate with it. Similarly, the expression *kiss Ralph* employs a combination of intimacy and phonetic resemblance to the sounds made during the act of vomiting. This combination of categories adds a creative and imaginative twist to the language used to describe the act of vomiting, showcasing the versatility and ingenuity of metaphorical expressions in capturing the diverse experiences and perceptions associated with bodily functions.

In summary, both vomiting and diarrhea are often depicted as unpleasant and involuntary bodily functions, both metaphorically and, in some cases, metonymically. However, the specific themes, actions, and cultural associations attributed to each

differ. This diversity offers a wide range of expressions and interpretations to describe these taboo events.

5. Concluding Remarks

The exploration of metaphorical expressions related to diarrhea and vomiting has unveiled a rich tapestry of linguistic representations deeply embedded in cultural, psychological, and physiological contexts. As the analysis delved into the intricate categorizations and interpretations of these bodily functions, a clearer understanding emerged regarding their conceptualization across different cultural landscapes and linguistic traditions. This study serves as a foundation for broader inquiries into how language reflects and shapes our perceptions of the world. Moving forward, the study aims to expand its scope by examining metaphorical expressions from diverse themes such as disability, disease, and death, which all evoke emotions of fear and disgust. This exploration will further deepen our understanding of the intricate relationship between taboo themes and these adverse emotions.

Notes

All euphemistic and dysphemistic expressions pertaining to diarrhea and vomiting in this study have been retrieved from the following resources:

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