George Rossolatos*

Holy Shit: Taboo Speech Acts as Self-Consumption

Abstract: This paper addresses the scarcely scrutinized topic in the consumer culture literature regarding how a social actor consumes himself through speech acts. More specifically, by introducing a new type of speech act, viz. the taboo speech act, and by effectively differentiating it from expletives, slang, and swearing words and expressions, I outline how subjectivity appropriates and individuates its systemic underpinning as *other* or linguistic system (Saussure) and wall of language (Lacan) in linguistic acts of transgression. Taboo speech acts do not merely express emotions, such as anger and frustration. They also seek to contain a linguistic system as an ideational totality of acts of parole in a *primus affectivus* that is incumbent on the inverse sublimation of epithets and cultural symbols standing synecdochically in a *pars pro toto* relationship for the limits of what is culturally/linguistically sanctioned. The subject consumes/annihilates and institutes itself at the same time in taboo speech acts whose mission may not be fully accounted for through conversational pragmatics, insofar as they perform at a more foundational level a social ontological function. The offered analysis aims at contributing to the extant literature in consumer cultural theory, applied linguistics, and social theory.

Keywords: conversation analysis; psychoanalysis; selfhood; social ontology

━━━━━
*Corresponding author, George Rossolatos: University of Kassel, Kassel, Germany,
e-mail: georgerossolatos123@gmail.com

1 Introduction: Aims and scope of this study

Taboo is an allegedly catch-all concept (*mot-valise*) with multiple and multifariously negotiated meanings (Sabri, Manceau, and Pras 2005) that have been assigned by scholars working in various traditions spanning a diverse spectrum of social sciences and the humanities, such as theology, psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, literary studies, philosophy, and linguistics, to name a few. In common parlance, it is used in both form and content terms to designate prohibited words or phrases (e.g. swearing) and

topics that are vaguely prohibited from open discussion, most often associated with death (see Turley 1997), sexuality, and menstruation, among others.

Indeed, as noticed repeatedly in the relevant literature (see Sabri, Manceau, and Pras 2005; Simoes and Freitas 2008), although the meaning of taboo was quite strictly demarcated in its original conceptualization, its scope has been steadily expanding through multiple recontextualizations in its scholarly elaboration and circulation in discrete cultural and communicative settings. "Taboos indicate or represent social control, especially with regard to class, gender, and race, cultural hegemony, the norms and values of legal cultures, or they can express the attitudes and mentalities of subcultures and countercultures" (Boker 2010: 26).

This paper responds to the call issued by Sabri, Manceau, and Pras (2005) for enlarging the scope and depth of taboo-related marketing research by considering a specific research avenue among the plethora identified by the authors. In broad terms, this conceptual study is situated in the sociological/conversational (linguistic) dimension identified by Sabri, Manceau, and Pras (2005: 61), perhaps the most underexplored among the remaining avenues identified by the authors, with a view to enhancing our understanding of the communicative function of "taboo" in consumer cultural terms (Sabri, Manceau, and Pras 2005: 80).

To this end, two novel conceptualizations are put forward: First, I define "taboo" from a linguistic point of view as a specific speech- act type by drawing on its original definition, that is, prior to the concept's polysemous dissemination. Second, I analyze the communicative function of this speech act from the point of view of self-consumption, not as is usually considered in consumer behavior (Solomon et al. 2006), either in terms of time-hallowed theories such as the extended self or as regards self-identity construal through symbolic consumption, but with regard, literally, to what it means for oneself to consume oneself. This theorization of self-consumption, which has been marginally scrutinized in the consumer culture literature (see, for example, Rindfleish 2005), is effected by drawing on Mead's phenomenological approach to selfhood, while bearing in mind that the study's objectives are optimally met by anchoring it in the consumer cultural stream, which has been favoring the proliferation of inroads with diverse social scientific perspectives, as against the more disciplinarily constrained consumer behavior. Subsequently, this study places at the epicenter of its conceptual exploratory the content and the form of the taboo speech act, its satisfaction conditions, and its communicative function by inviting us to reconsider who is the subject (self) of taboo utterances and who is the recipient of taboo utterances, against the background of an initial problematization of what is a "taboo."

The original meaning of taboo, as put quite succinctly by Freud in his monograph *Totem and Taboo* (2001: 26; also see Rossolatos and Hogg 2013), "includes alike 'sacred' and 'above the ordinary', as well as 'dangerous', 'unclean' and 'uncanny'." Simoes and Freitas (2008: 25) highlight this intricate relationship between sacrality and uncleanness quite emphatically: "The concept of taboo in Polynesia does not correspond alternatively to prohibited, sacred or defiled, as some dictionary definitions might tell us. Rather, it combines all of them, establishing a relationship between prohibition and sacredness, and making some kinds of impurity or defilement derive from that connection." And for good reason, as employing the term "taboo" in any other manner than originally intended not only risks diluting the term, but rendering it pleonastically synonymous with swearing or with a set of moral prohibitions.

In fact, the moral implications of taboo have been a focal area in consumer research over the past few years (see, for example, McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock 2012; Gollnhofer 2015). It is precisely with a view to appreciating its differential function in ordinary communication (compared to a set of swearing words and expressions aimed at offending an interlocutor or to a set of culturally frowned upon prohibitions) that I retain here the original meaning of taboo, while elucidating how popular phrases that combine the element of sacrality and of defilement (e.g. *Holy shit*, *Fuckin' Jesus*) differ from mere swearing words and expressions (e.g. *go to hell*, *asshole*), and concomitantly how such taboo expressions function in communicative settings.

Having, thus, clarified in a preliminary manner how "taboo" is operationalized in this conceptual exploration, the second point that merits highlighting is that taboo words and phrases are not approached here as mere expressions of emotions, such as anger and frustration (Yu 2011), or disgust and contempt (Haidt 2003), but as speech acts that perform a special task that transcends emotional expressivity and, in fact, underpins it. This task is further elucidated in the following section in the context of discussing the intricate relationship between profanity, holiness, and the utterance of "profanely holy" speech acts.

In line with the transcendental meaning of taboo speech acts, as contrasted with mere emotive expressivity, I then proceed with opening up their function as affording transgressive self-consumption. This is attained by problematizing the notion of "self" from linguistic agency that formulates utterances to what is instituted through the taboo speech act. This problematization is enacted against the background of an expansive notion of selfhood alongside Mead's conceptualization as "I," "me," and "generalized Other." Broadly speaking, the focus in consumer cultural research has been progressively shifting from ego-centric approaches in self theorization to other-oriented ones (cf. Bajde 2006).

Finally, in continuation of this ontologically inclined reading of the constitutive role of taboo speech acts with regard to subjectivity, I conclude their conceptualization by addressing their social ontological mission, rather than merely pragmatic function in conversational settings.

2 Shit, fine, but why holy? Introducing the taboo speech act

Holiness, as a concept, denotes a superhuman condition or a condition that transcends the scope of human capabilities. At the same time, this limit metaphor for what is humanely possible draws on the divine as *a priori* transcendental with regard to human capabilities and transports linguistic subjects to a realm where the human has managed to attain divine status. Thus, by definition, the paratactic intertwinement in an elocutionary context of the divine, as a denotatum of the suprahuman, with *shit*, as a denotatum of subhuman waste, constitutes at best an oxymoron. Yet, this oxymoronic coexistence of a suprahuman epithet with a subhuman noun in the context of a quite popular slang phrase is amply encountered in the popular culture medium of cinematic discourse, but also in popular sitcoms such as *Friends* (with the replacement of *shit* with *crap* due to broadcasting restrictions, as noted by Quaglio 2009; also see Ljung 2011: 177). It partakes of the top 10 equally "prohibited" expletives (Jay 2009), while it (*shit*) constitutes the second most often employed swearing word in conversation (Quaglio 2009).

The incidence of a profane noun alongside its "divine" correlate infuses the requisite transgressiveness into the utterance. By dint of this lexical coexistence, the speaker (subject of the utterance) is equipped with the transgressive requirement for accessing the condition of subjectification as the other within an utterance. However, before proceeding with further discussion of how *Holy shit* functions as a speech act type, let us compare and contrast it with other types of profane expression in order to appreciate its distinctive status.

Allan and Burridge (2006) identify three broad categories of expressions in a continuum that stretches from merely fending off others through a linguistic device that demarcates an exclusionary collective identity (a "we" or an "us") to the farthest extreme that aims at offending an interlocutor outright. At the "mild" end of this continuum we encounter "jargon," such as legalese. "For in-groupers (insiders) jargon is a kind of glue between different members of the same profession" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 61). However, jargon also attains to alienate out-groupers "who find it abounding in uncommon or unfamiliar

words, and therefore unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing; gibberish" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 65), and is hence potentially offensive by dint of its unintelligibility. Further removed in the continuum and towards the outright offensive end we encounter "slang," "a highly colloquial and contemporary type, considered stylistically inferior to standard formal, and even polite informal, speech. It often uses metaphor and/or ellipsis, and often manifests verbal play in which current language is employed in some special sense and denotation" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 69). Playfulness is an integral stylistic element of slang. Just like jargon, it is a marker of in-group solidarity. Finally, at the very end of the continuum towards the outright offensive limit we encounter cursing and swearing words and expressions.

Although the authors note the specific type of swearing called "blasphemy," that is, obscene expressions that contain religious figures, they do not go to any length in further differentiating them from swearing words that may contain "holy" descriptors, yet which are not uttered with the intent of blaspheming (such as *Holy shit*). Thus, they treat all swearing expressions as "insults that are normally intended to wound the addressee or bring a third party into disrepute, or both. They are therefore intrinsically dysphemistic, and so typically tabooed and subject to censorship" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 79). However, this *en masse* treatment of swearing expressions containing religious figures or religion-related epithets fails to recognize that the elliptically formulated *Holy shit* does not contain a transitive verb that might underlie an offensive and/or blasphemous intentionality (such as "may you be covered in...").

Holy shit, inasmuch as other interchangeably employed phrases (Mohr 2013), does not constitute simply an expletive or what has been termed in pragmatics "an emotive marker," that is, a special class of discourse markers that convey emotions in the context of a conversational predicament (such as the exclamation *Aaahhh*). Pragmatic markers (Schiffrin 1987; Blakemore 2002) in oral discourse are linguistic devices that signal the speaker's intention, convey the required illocutionary force to utterances, and facilitate shifting. "Following Gricean pragmatics, these lexical pieces facilitate the inferences and, thus, help the listener interpret the message intended by the speaker. In this respect, they fulfill a functional task" (Gonzalez 2004: 12).

Quite otherwise, the evocation of a taboo transcends any emotions that emanate *from within* a subject, in acts of linguistic transgression. In these transgressive acts, the subject affords a glimpse beyond itself at the secularly posited divine as the totality of acts of parole that make up a language as system (Saussure 1966), that is, as the totality of conventions adopted by a social body that allow individuals to exercise the faculty of speech or speech as wall of

language (Lacan 1988). Thus, the object of the taboo does not express a subjective emotion, but speaks for the system of language that conditions the subject and that allows for its subjectification as such.

The taboo *vis-à-vis* the subject of the utterance as its other (wall of language, *pace* Lacan 1988), may only be glimpsed in an act of transgression. At the same time, the evocation of the subject's other is accomplished by deifying or sublimating (Kover 1998; Arnold Costa 1998) absolute exteriority, absolute unknowability, what can only surprise a subject, but cannot be known. This sublimation is performed as defilement of absolute exteriority, of what cannot be used due to its being unknown, in essence being equivalent to an excremental entity. "The identification of the anal object is especially illuminating... as produced at the site of the body's orifices, as a function of the organs that possess a rim, [where] what is inner is separated from what is outer and other" (Boothby 2003: 166–167). This otherwise unsublatable alterity is performatively introjected in the taboo speech act by accommodating it under some sort of *divinely unusable* feces.

 From a conversational analytic point of view, taboo utterances are phrasal TCUs (turn construction units; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) that do not disrupt the flow of a conversation, and hence do not pose a threat to the cooperativeness principle that sustains friction-free turn-taking, thus rendering it unrepairable (Schegloff 1988; Wooffitt 2005). Additionally, it does not disrupt a conversation by offending an interlocutor, as is the case with swearing (although swearing is not always offensive, as, depending on context, such as a conversation among friends, it may on the contrary enhance bonding – which has been called the "positive effects" of swearing as in-group slang [Jay 2009], despite the institutionally received impression that a language of power is by default intertwined with lexical "purity" [Douglas 1966; McEnery 2006]). Taboo utterances establish common ground among interlocutors, in the same vein, if not in the same modality, as lexical markers of common ground (e.g. the marker *OK*; Condon and Cech 2007), and hence promote cooperativeness by virtue of opening up through transgression a transition relevance place (TRP; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) as an ontological space of unconditional being-with, as will be shown in greater detail later on when discussing the social ontological implications of the taboo speech act.

Having thus far established the distinction between taboo utterances and jargon and slang, as well as having briefly distinguished them from expletives and emotive markers, there is merit in dwelling on some fundamental principles and components of speech act theory at an introductory level in order to ensure that all readers share the same vantage point when discussing the meaning of

taboo speech acts, but also for the sake of establishing continuity with their theoretical offshoots, as will be discussed in ensuing sections.

The pragmatic turn of Austin (1952), the initiator of speech act theory, essentially revolutionized and freed linguistics from truth (verification) in favor of felicity conditions. Whereas truth-conditions-oriented linguistics sought to verify a propositional content by recourse to a corresponding extra-linguistic state-of-affairs, felicity conditions must be fulfilled in order to perform meaningful linguistic acts. According to Austin, and his successor John Searle (1969), social reality is construed through the performance of speech acts rather than constituting their extra-linguistic counterpart. At least in its inception (and regardless of Searle's later turn to neuroscience and the revival of the heavily criticized correspondence theory of truth), speech act theory emphasizes the role performed by the situational context of utterances in the projection of meaning over and above a pre-given linguistic code. Therefore, it is of functionalist orientation. Searle (1995) sought to balance the role performed by individual intentionality as the motivating principle behind the utterance of speech acts (the "agency" side of the ubiquitous agency/structure problematic) and a subject's habitual conditioning as a set of behavioral dispositions that he calls "background." In this manner, he eschewed criticisms of being either an extreme determinist or an exponent of a naïve sort of voluntarism.

Three broad types of speech acts were identified by Austin, viz. locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary speech acts are equivalent to uttering sentences with standard meanings; illocutionary speech acts consist of utterances which have a conventional force, such as warning or ordering; perlocutionary speech acts concern what actions are performed by saying something (e.g. marriage vows). Thus, the institutional social reality of marriage is fleshed out in the utterance "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Despite the analytical clarity of these types, their boundaries are quite tenuous in practice, as has been noted repeatedly in the respective literature (cf. Lanigan 1977: 68: "all speech acts produce some effect upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of those involved in such acts, and, therefore, *all speech acts are perlocutions*").

The institutive role of speech acts is also reflected in Searle's (1969) distinction between regulatory and constitutive speech acts. Whereas the former are responsible for regulating existing behaviors, the latter are responsible for the emergence of new ones. The illocutionary force of utterances is incumbent on an underlying intentionality whose content it seeks to fulfill. Intentionality is an integral component in Searle's social ontology that is incumbent on speech acts. Furthermore, speech acts were classified by Searle under the following types: "*assertives* (statements, averrings) have a word-to-

world direction of fit; *directives* (commands, requests, entreaties) have a world-to-word direction of fit, as do *commissives* (promises), which bind the speaker to perform a certain action in the future; *expressives* (congratulations, apologies, condolences) have no direction of fit; they simply presuppose the truth of the expressed proposition; *declaratives* (appointings, baptizings, marryings), by contrast, bring about the fit between word and world by the very fact of their successful performance" (Smith 2003: 9).

Speech act theory constitutes a dominant perspective with a stellar record of cross-disciplinary applications, such as the sociologically inclined perspective of collective speech acts (Meijers 2007), phenomenological accounts of speech acts (Lanigan 1977; Smith 1990, 2003), social ontological (Konzelmann and Schmid 2014) and gender-oriented applications (Butler 1988, 1993), some of which will inform our ensuing discussions.

Having thus outlined the basic principles and types of speech acts, I now proceed with an anatomy of the taboo speech act in terms of type, constitutive character, mode of performance, and felicity conditions. Generally speaking, swearing expressions were categorized by Austin (1952) under the *commissives* type insofar as they concern a promise as insult launched against an interlocutor. However, taboo speech acts, by virtue of their intransitivity in the *hic and nunc* of the utterance are constitutive, *pace* Searle (also see Bornedal [1997: 188] on the self-referentiality of performative speech acts), and perform the content of the utterance as they are uttered. Hence, they should be accommodated under the *declaratives* type. Yet, at the same time, the felicity or satisfaction condition for effectively performing the taboo speech act rests with an act of transgression whereby the speaking subject reaches beyond its finite boundaries in an attempt to encapsulate lexically the content of a pre-emotive "surprise" that threatens its integrity. This threat of surprise is interiorized as motive (intention) for engaging in a transgressive act (coexistence of divinity and waste in the flow of a uniform syntagm) which is exteriorized communicatively in the form of the taboo speech act.

The surprise that inflicts the subject is reducible neither to a specific emotion nor to a specific lexical form. The subject of the taboo speech act does not assert the existence of a determinate object or state-of-affairs in this utterance, but reflects what "hit" him. The force of the utterance is indeed there, yet not as the outcome of an intentional calculability, but as a preconscious force that ruptures subjectivity. The force of the taboo speech act is the articulation of the preconscious force that impinges on and ravages the speaking subject, due to its surprising non-localizability, in terms of both physical space and rhetorical *topos*. It suspends the subject's judgment as to the optimal expression that might encapsulate it, and within this momentary

suspension whose resolution is radically uncertain, it finds expressivity in the taboo speech act. The speech act, in this manner, communicates "a force with the impetus of a mark" (Derrida 1982: 321).

This rupture of subjectivity is reflected in a rapturous bringing-forth of the indeterminate object of rupture, as coupling with the limit of possible determinations, that is, as a system of language in its impossible totality. Transgression as felicity condition for the effective performance of the taboo speech act results in self-consumption as self-annihilation, as will be shown in greater detail in the following section.

Transgression is performed in the utterance of specific words and expressions, hence the object of the taboo speech act is reducible to the perlocutionary effect of the utterance. It is an instance of glimpsing through the veil of the signifier while reaching as if through a wormhole for the signified as linguistic system that lies by definition impossibly at the end of the deployment of every act of parole (or the totality of all possible sentences uttered *ad infinitum*). This double movement of transgression as an essential act for glimpsing at the ideational totality of a linguistic system, and the impossibility of articulating the content of the speech act also inheres in the very etymology of swearing an oath, as shown by Allan and Burridge (2006: 76). To "swear an oath" means both to take an oath and to defile an oath.

In the light of the above, Allan and Burridge's (2006: 28; also see Hughes 2006: 463) implicit imbrication of taboo with prohibition: "we shall focus upon attitudes to language expressions that are regarded as subversive of the common good, and therefore subject to taboo" appears to be couched in terms far too broad to effectively address both the form and the function of taboo utterances. An expression, or a cultural practice to the same end, is not subject to taboo, but invented as taboo in its performance within context. In other words, the "object" of a taboo's transgression is laid bare in the act of transgression. The tabooed object is not simply or generically a prohibited object, but an object that is posited as prohibited in an act of transgression.

In order to render the relationship between prohibition and taboo more palpable, let us consider the case of a criminal act. Criminal acts are prohibited outright because they are detrimental to the well-being of a community in pragmatic terms. A murder is prohibited, but not necessarily tabooed. A murder does not need to be enacted in order to be prohibited. On the contrary, the object of a taboo is only brought into existence as such by virtue of its transgression, whence the need for inscribing in ordinary communication "taboo" utterances, precisely in order to remind an audience of the sacred as object of transgression. Taboo is a special case of prohibition, a discursive

semiotic construal of purely symbolic value, as against prohibitions that deal with the regulation of ordinary affairs.

Coming back to Allan and Burridge's (2006) importation of the term "taboo," both taboos and generic prohibitions concern a community's common good; it is just the degree of relationship of the taboo with sacral dimensions and its purely invented character that set it apart from common prohibitions. This is evidenced quite strikingly in the authors' exemplification of a tabooed practice with reference to impoliteness. By equating impoliteness with dysphemism (a synonym of defamation which in its original conceptualization [a composite word consisting of the Greek *dys* – 'badly' – and *fhmi* – 'to utter'] denotes "to speak of something or someone badly"), they contend that "dysphemism is the opposite of euphemism and, by and large, it is tabooed" [Allan and Burridge 2006: 93]). In this instance, they conflate the taboo with a mere prohibition in terms of what counts as good manners and a deviation thereof. This conflation underplays what I tried to elucidate earlier as constituting the territory of a taboo, that is, the two conditionals of being concerned with symbolic community boundaries of transcendental, sacral dimensions and secondly of being a purely linguistic/semiotic con[in]vention. Impoliteness fulfills the second conditional in this instance, but not the first, while not being of the same social ontological *gravitas* as that of transgressing a taboo, although both taboo and impoliteness do imply a notion of prohibition. The difference in this similarity may be appreciated if we compare and contrast impolite expressions such as *mad cow* and *holy shit*. The former is prohibited from the lexical inventory of good manners and constitutes a stylistic deviation therefrom. However, it does not constitute a taboo, as what is laid bare in the utterance does not necessitate the transgression of the sacred symbolic boundaries of a community (unless, of course, this community does employ "cow" as a sacred symbol, as is the case with Hinduism).

Taboo is a speech act that purports to encapsulate a *primus affectivus* as the sedimented analogon of a once inspired awe and terror of the divine (Bataille 1962). The psychic correlate of this *primus affectivus* is usually the element of surprise at its most primordial as what endangers the integrity of a subject by dint of its unknowability. The divine, in this instance, is propagated as a highly abstract schema, as noted by Douglas (1966) or, rather, as a structural unconscious in a secular conversational predicament. The taboo, thereby, has been transposed to the "secular" dimension of ordinary communication. However, it has not been freed from its religious yoke, but simply survived *ab inverso* from a euphemistic phrase to a dysphemistic one. As "they" say, negative publicity is better than no publicity! The secular propagation of the divine as limit metaphor for the totality of language as system is approached

here as sheerly a communicative *sine qua non* in the face of its intended function. This is in contrast to Bataille's (1962) theorization of taboo cultural practices, such as the orgy, that aim at disrupting a proclaimed "discontinuity of finite beings" and to reinstate them in a self-alleged continuity of Being. Bataille's interpretation essentializes the ontological function of taboo, while reinstating its primitivist reified/objectified overtones. This communicative function of the taboo speech act is evinced as a correlate of the conative engulfing of the plenum of acts of parole that would (ideally) attain, at the limit, to give corresponding expressiveness to the "divine" that subsists below discourse as ideational totality in the form of a system of language (Saussure 1966) or wall of language (Lacan 1988). Hence, it is an immanentized, communicative form of "divinity," albeit ideational insofar as it still points to a totality, in the same fashion that properties such as omniscience and omnipotence have been predicated of the transcendentally divine in theological discourse.

3 Beyond conversational pragmatics: Consuming oneself through taboo speech acts

Pursuant to the delineation of the taboo speech act, this section further elucidates who the subject of this speech act type is, as well as how the subject of taboo speech acts consumes itself in their utterance. To this end, I am drawing on Mead's phenomenological theory of self, as well as on phenomenological elaborations of speech acts, thus safeguarding the conceptual continuity with the preceding analysis, while enlarging the scope of inquiry.

Whereas traditional speech act theory, couched in a pragmatically oriented philosophical context, ascribes intentionality to the speaking subject that is placed in the driving seat of utterances, it says little about how subjectivity either *in toto* or with regard to some aspects, such as gender, are in fact linguistic construals that are fleshed out performatively. In order to examine how the subject is consumed in taboo speech acts, as well as which parts of a self are consumed and how, it is essential that we enrich the spectrum of speech acts' functions with an approach on the performative constitution of subjectivity as such. In these terms, Butler (1988: 519) rightly contends that "though phenomenology appears sometimes to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of

constitution that takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts." The phenomenological stream Butler seeks to overcome, although not mentioned explicitly, is largely of Husserlian persuasion. An exemplary manifestation of this stream is encountered in Lanigan's (1977) phenomenological construal of speech act theory, according to which "the speech act is the reflective act of translation of experience into consciousness and consciousness back into experience" (Lanigan 1977: 104).

For Butler, an identity is construed over time through the ritualized/stylistic repetition of the same speech acts, a quite invariably recurring standpoint in her ongoing oeuvre, and not through the diachronic subsistence of a transcendental consciousness. However, while working within a broader phenomenological speech act paradigm, she problematizes the element of intentionality as interwoven, according to Searle (1995), with the subject of the utterance. In other words, Butler (1988, 2003) challenges the subject as originator of speech acts, rather than a "competent" language speaker who absorbs and regurgitates phrases based on normative expectancies about their proper contextual use. By subscribing to a Derridean line of argumentation, Butler recognizes the existence of some sort of intentionality in the subject, albeit not one that is capable of controlling the system of the utterance. This argument is in line with the analytic I pursued in the previous section, while bringing a new dimension into play. This dimension concerns the constitutive character of the speech act not simply in the face of the materialization of specific aspects of social reality (the Searlian approach), but of subjectivity *in toto*, over which the "subject" has relative control, as selector among a limited set of codified expressive possibilities for discrete social situations.

The relative control over the available scope of expressive possibilities rests with the Derridean argument for the, by definition, non-mastery of the system of utterances (what I called in the preceding section the "ideational totality of acts of parole"), if not the ability to exercise one's intentionality in the selection of speech acts by performative occasion. In fact, this argument was formulated by Heidegger as follows: "Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man" (Heidegger 1971:146, cited in Macey 1995: 73).

But the most important part of Butler's argument, for our purposes, is what appears to be not one, but several dimensions in the subject of speech acts, insofar as the constitution of subjectivity in a speech act underlies another sort of agency, yet whose bonds have not been severed from the subject of the utterance.

In order to appreciate what this subject might be, I now turn to Mead's phenomenological account of the multilayered constitution of selfhood. Mead's

tripartite conception of self consists in an *I*, a *me*, and a *generalized Other*. The I is the equivalent to a stable center of utterances, yet without empirical continuity. It is the ideal self as continuous presence to oneself and as condition for speaking, yet without being invested with meaning. The me is the empirical part of oneself, the recipient and inventory of the I's utterances over time. "The 'I' and the 'me' are locked in a dialectical interrelationship, the self-conscious person able to switch between the two stances and hold conversations between the two: the 'me' as the self 'I' look upon, the 'me' who listens when 'I' speak" (Burkitt 2008: 39). "Mead's theory of the alternating phases of the 'I' and the 'me' has produced a conception of self that embodies a duality of both process and structure" (Boyns 2006: 256).

The generalized Other is the symbolic system of a given culture that allows the me's utterances to be communicable to other selves and hence a self to be constituted as cultural self. "The generalized other represents the rules, laws and moral standards of society, or a section of it, which also becomes part of our self from the earliest years, as caregivers pass judgment on our behaviour" (Burkitt 2008: 42). According to this conceptualization of selfhood, we may now unpack how oneself is affected by the other as ideational totality or as system of language that emerges rapturously in transgressive taboo speech acts.

The generalized Other is an ideational totality, impossible of being presenced in a single utterance as such, and yet conditioning of the lexicogrammatical choices made by a subject in situated communication by virtue of functioning as a codified system of background expectancies. What is summoned and transgressively presenced in a taboo speech act is the generalized Other by the I as potentially reducible to me, that is, as an empirical instance in situated discourse. The, by definition, impossibility of this presencing may only be effected in the transgressive act of a taboo utterance. It is the moment where the empirical self becomes one with its "divine" other, on the sole condition that its *sacrality* be defiled by the paratactic coexistence with a linguistic descriptor of waste. In other words, **only insofar as the transcendental aura of the general Other is wasted can the I utter it in the place of me.**

In recapitulation, the containment of the divine in a profane utterance that features a swearing word essentially transposes rhetorically the utterer to the place of the divine as the wall of language that conditions both the I and the me. At the same time, it transposes the individual me to the realm of the generalized Other, in Mead's terms, that binds the individual utterer with a community of utterers. It is a holy alliance instituted in an unholy taboo utterance.

This is the meaning of self-consumption, that is, the performance of the self-annihilation of one's individuality in an unholy taboo speech act that

reinstates the individual transgressively to the place of the divine. According to Merriam-Webster, 'to destroy,' 'to waste,' and 'to devour' constitute dominant meanings of the verb *to consume*. Consumption denotes the total annihilation of an object (e.g. through devourment) or of a subject (e.g. by fire). This performatively accomplished annihilation also institutes (invents) the distance between the me and the generalized Other, in Mead's terms, or between the individual utterer of the taboo speech act and the other as system of language. This standpoint is quite different, almost the contrary, to Bergson's postulate (cited in Sabri, Manceau, and Pras 2005: 63) that the sacred nature of a prohibited object is a precondition for the genesis of a taboo. Rather, sacrality is produced by virtue of positing and transgressing a taboo. This constructivist reading of taboo undercuts any metaphysical pretensions as to the existence of a transcendental "object" outside of the performative act that spawns it. What we are left with, *pace* Derrida, is a transcendental signified as rhetorically posited originary locus. As noted by Simoes and Freitas (2008: 30), "taboos have the function of somehow establishing a boundary where there is none, in order to minimise the risk implied in the crossing of borders." The self is consumed at the moment it crosses this border. The price the subject pays for hubristically (so to speak) transgressing its finite subjectivity consists in its annihilation as self-consumption. Yet, contrary to primitive tribes' sacrificial habits, which objectified and reified the systemic need for annihilation in ritualistic acts, glimpsing through the secularized, immanentized "divine" is nowadays attained through ordinary ritualistic acts (interaction rituals [IRs] as quite aptly postulated by Collins [2004]), such as the taboo utterance.

But what about "others" present in a conversational predicament that features taboo speech acts? As importantly as the establishment of an ontologically resonating relationship between the individual I, the me, and the generalized Other wherein the individuality of the utterer is consumed, annihilated while reaching transgressively for his other as system of utterances, there emerges the virulently contagious transgression of the utterer's interlocutors in the common space that opens up in between. Subsequently, the analytical focus now turns to the examination of the social ontological function of the taboo speech act that transcends the limited pragmatic context of situated conversational turn-taking.

4 The social ontological dimension of self-consumption through taboo speech acts

Earlier it was stressed that taboo utterances establish common ground among interlocutors, in the same vein as lexical markers of common ground (e.g. *OK*), albeit not in the same modality. In order to understand this crucial difference, I will attend to the actions customarily performed by the employment of markers such as *OK*. This marker is usually employed by interlocutors either cataphorically or anaphorically in conversational settings with a view to signaling and establishing agreement with the content of interlocutors' locutions. Thus, *OK* usually has a specific content in situated discourse that is rooted either in preceding or in following sentences. It is thematically constrained. On the contrary, the content of taboo speech acts is indeterminate, pre-thematic, and moreover not expressive of a concrete emotion. As already highlighted, it constitutes an articulation of a *primus affectivus* in the face of a surprising element (event, state-of-affairs, etc.), that may not be accommodated under a habitual response pattern. Hence, the force of this utterance reflects the crude force of what "hits" its utterer from a non-localizable and highly indeterminate source. As an expressive correlate of a *primus affectivus*, it voices precisely the purportive encapsulation of a highly indeterminate phenomenon, while not being reducible to an *affectus*. This mode of utterance effectively brings about an *affective communitas* whereupon a social ontological space is construed.

Secondly, the utterance of the marker *OK* promotes cooperativeness among interlocutors, while facilitating the frictionless deployment of a conversation. In contrast, *prima facie* the taboo speech act disrupts cooperativeness by virtue of its excessive illocutionary force that overwhelms its utterer and sweeps an interlocutor. The overwhelming overtaking of the utterer results from the transgressive act whereby the performance is accomplished, while the shattering effect on the interlocutor is accomplished due to the indeterminate content and the force of the utterance, which imbue the discussion with considerable uncertainty as to next topic selection or to the possibility of repairing the sequential moving forward of the dialogue. Yet, it is precisely due to this rapturous discontinuity in the smooth deployment of a conversation that an unconditional being-with is promoted. In other words, the thematic dissolution of the content of the speech act furnishes the very felicity condition for judging its effective performance by opening a social ontological space of unconditional being-with. The communicative ether in this instance consists in the "loss-for-words" that is commonly experienced by the interlocutors.

In essence, then, the common ground instituted in taboo speech acts from a social ontological point of view consists in fulfilling three conditions, its being pre-thematic, pre-emotive, and purely affective. "The involved individuals may be correct in pre-thematically understanding themselves as individuals that constitute a sort of community of affective experience" (Guerrero 2014: 178).

As regards complementary aspects of the social ontological function of taboo speech acts, we should note the following: First, in terms of intentionality, rather than employing swearing words that are intended to offend an interlocutor, the performer of taboo speech acts affirms his partaking of a community's ontological ethos through transgression. Merely impolite utterances have an ontic bearing in terms of expressing emotive states or communicating pejorative judgments. No specific intention underlies taboo utterances, in ontic terms, that stretch over a horizon of intentionality in the flash of the utterance.

The second point concerns the what and the how of transgression in a taboo performative utterance. What is transgressed ideationally is not simply one's own limits and radical finitude in an act of appropriation of a system of language, but the symbolic contours of a community of speakers with whom I am ontologically co-habituated. In the taboo utterance I consume, i.e. annihilate, the ineffable boundary of the symbolic substrate whereby I am ontologically conditioned with others, while being consumed in the utterance at the same time. This materially impossible appropriation is only afforded by being momentarily transported at the limit of a community's symbolic boundaries (even synecdochically in the paratactic employment of a "sacred" figure or a superhuman adjective with waste), while being consumed in the taboo utterance.

Third, the repetition of the speech act is what confers ritualistic status to the utterance, but also the usually interactive context wherein it is embedded. In Collins' (2004) microsociological terms, we are concerned with an interaction ritual wherein the sacred status of symbols is constituted by virtue of the convergence of the interacting social actors within an affective economy and around common symbols that are invested with high affectivity levels. The interaction ritual of the taboo speech act employs either sacred symbols (e.g. Jesus) or epithets of divine status (e.g. *holy*). Who utters the speech act *Holy shit*? The generalized Other as part of oneself that constitutes the common ground between oneself and others. It is the cultural protocol as the me's and others' other that unites us in a singular act of transgression (by a me). By the time the speech act has been uttered, it has saturated contagiously the space that separates me and other, while instituting a we that is transported

transgressively to the ideational totality of the linguistic system in the flash of the utterance.

5 Conclusions and directions for future research

By attending to the original definition of taboo, an attempt was made to outline how a self consumes itself through the unique type of taboo speech acts. This does not imply that any other signification of "taboo" that has been assigned to it in culturally situated use is erroneous, simply that the hermeneutic disentanglement and specification of the identified special class of speech acts such as *Holy shit* may be fruitfully enacted by recourse to the concept's original definition. In line with Sabri, Manceau, and Pras' (2005) proposed research guidelines, primary consumer research into the perceptions of the employment of the descriptor *holy* may point to discrete meanings among culturally constrained individuals. The same holds for the distinctive modes whereby the notion of divinity is understood by identifiable consumer segments alongside a continuum that stretches from strong religious beliefs to highly tenuous and secular.

Furthermore, there is ample scope for extending research into the largely underexplored modes of self-consumption by drawing on the Median multidimensional concept of selfhood as regards occasions such as prayers, soliloquy, or masturbation.

Finally, the conceptual exploration undertaken here identified the conditionals of the newly coined taboo speech act type and examined its communicative function over and above pragmatic terms and alongside ontological and social ontological dimensions. Going forward, it would be particularly illuminating to identify through empirical ethnographic research in the form of participant observation, either in physical or netnographic settings, which phrases are used in taboo utterances and in what communicative settings, as well as further explore how common spaces are opened up in the utterance of such transgressive speech acts.

References

Allan, Keith & Kate Burridge. 2006. *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arnold, Costa. 1998. Sublimating the sublime: Cultural considerations. *Consumption, Markets & Culture* 2(1), 99–104.

Austin, John Langshaw. 1962. *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bajde, Domen. 2006. Other-centered behavior and the dialectics of self and other. C*onsumption, Markets & Culture* 9(4), 301–316.

Bataille, George. 1962. *Death and sensuality: A study of eroticism and the taboo*. New York: Walker and Company.

Blakemore, Diane. 2002. *Relevance and linguistic meaning: The semantics and pragmatics of discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boker, Uwe. 2010. Taboo and transgression: A socio-historical and socio-cultural perspective. In Stefan Horlacher, Stefan Glomb, & Lars Heiler (eds.). *Taboo and transgression in British literature from the renaissance to the present,* 23–48. London: Palgrave.

Boothby, Richard. 2003. Figurations of the *objet a*. In Slavoj Zizek (ed.), *Jacques Lacan: Critical evaluations in cultural theory Vol. II*, 159–191. London: Routledge.

Bornedal, Peter. 1997. *Speech and system*. Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Boyns, David. 2006. *Emotion-based self theory*. In Jan E. Stets & Jonathan Turner (eds.), *Handbook of the sociology of emotions* Vol. I. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Burkitt, Ian. 2008. *Theories of self and society*. London: Sage.

Butler, Judith. 1988. Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal* 40(4). 519–531.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. London: Routledge.

Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction ritual chains*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Condon, Sherri L. & Claude G. Cech. 2007. Ok, next one: Discourse markers of common ground. In Anita Fetzer & Kerstin Fischer (eds.), *Lexical markers of common ground,* 17–46. Amsterdam: Elsevier

Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Margins of philosophy*. Chicago: Harvester.

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and danger* London: Routledge.

Freud, Sigmund 2001. *Totem and taboo*. London: Routledge.

Gollnhofer, Johanna F. 2015. Taste the waste – Constructing new moralities through taboo consumption. In Kristin Diehl & Carolin Yoon (eds.), *NA Advances in Consumer Research* 43, Duluth: Association for Consumer Research.

Gonzalez, Montserrat. 2004. *Pragmatic markers in oral narrative: The case of English and Catalan*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Guerrero, Andres Sanchez H. 2014. Feelings of being-together and caring-with. In Anita Konzelmann Ziv & Hans Bernhard Schmid (eds.), *Institutions, emotions, and group agents: Contributions to social ontology*, 177–194. New York: Springer.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2003. The moral emotions. In Richard Davidson, Klaus R. Scherer & Harold Hill Goldsmith (eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences,* 852–870. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, Geoffrey I. 2006. *The social history of oaths, profanity, foul language, and ethnic slurs in the English-speaking world*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Jay, Timothy. 2009. The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Association for Psychological Science* 4(2), 153–161.

Konzelmann Ziv, Anita & Hans Bernhard Schmid. 2014. Introduction: Institutions, emotions, and group agents. Contributions to social ontology. In Anita Konzelmann Ziv & Hans Bernhard Schmid (eds.), *Institutions, emotions, and group agents: contributions to social ontology*, 1–18. New York: Springer.

Kover Arthur J. 1998. The sublime and consumer behavior: Consumption as defense against the infinite. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 2(1), 57–98.

Lacan, Jacques. 1988. *The seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II. The ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton.

Land, Nick. 1992. *The thirst for annihilation*. London: Routledge.

Lanigan, Richard. 1977. *Speech act phenomenology*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Ljung, Magnus. 2011. *Swearing: A cross-cultural linguistic study*. London: Palgrave.

Macey, David. 1995. On the subject of Lacan. In Anthony Elliott & Stephen Frosh (eds.), *Psychoanalysis in contexts paths between theory and modern culture*, 72–88. London: Routledge.

McEnery, Tony. 2006. *Swearing in English: Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*. London: Routledge.

McGraw, Peter, Janet Schwartz & Philip Tetlock. 2012. From the commercial to the communal: Reframing taboo trade-offs in religious and pharmaceutical marketing. *Journal of Consumer Research* 39(1), 157–173.

Meijers, Athonie. 2007. Collective speech acts. In Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ed.), *Intentional acts and institutional facts: Essays on John Searle's social ontology,* 93–112. Amsterdam: Springer.

Mohr, Melissa. 2013. *Holy sh*t: A brief history of swearing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Quaglio, Paulo. 2009. *Television dialogue: The sitcom Friends vs. natural language.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Rindfleish, Jennifer. 2005. Consuming the self: New age spirituality as "social product" in consumer society. *Consumption Markets & Culture* 8(4), 343–360.

Rossolatos, George & Margaret K. Hogg. 2013. *Fetish, taboo, simulacrum: An applied psychoanalytic/semiotic approach to the experiential consumption of music products.* Proceedings of the 12th International Marketing Trends Conference, Paris, France, 17–19 January. http://www.marketing-trends-congress.com/archives/2013/pages/PDF/770.pdf.

Sabri, Ouidade, Delphine Manceau & Bernard Pras, 2010. Taboo: An underexplored concept in marketing. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing* 25(1), 59–85.

Sacks, Harvey, Emanuel A. Schegloff & Gail Jefferson. 1974. A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language* 50, 696–735.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1966. *Course in general linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schegloff, Emanuel A. 1988. Presequences and indirection: Applying speech act theory to ordinary conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics* 12, 55–62.

Schiffrin, Deborah. 1987. *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John R. 1969. *Speech acts. An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, John R. 1995. *The construction of social reality*. New York: Free Press.

Simoes, Elsa & Lucas Freitas. 2008. *Taboo in advertising*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Smith, Barry. 1990. Towards a history of speech act theory. In Armin Burkhardt (ed.), *Speech acts, meanings and intentions: Critical approaches to the philosophy of John R. Searle*, 29–61. New York: de Gruyter.

Smith, Barry. 2003. John Searle: From speech acts to social reality. In Barry Smith (ed.), *John Searle*, 1–33. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Solomon, Michael, Gary Bamossy, Soren Askegaard and Margaret K. Hogg. 2006. *Consumer behavior: A European perspective*. London: Prentice-Hall.

Turley, Darach 1997. A postcard from the very edge: Mortality and marketing. In Stephem
    Brown & Durley Turley (eds.), *Consumer research: Postcards from the edge*, 342–369.
    London: Routledge.
Wooffitt, Robin. 2005. *Conversation analysis and discourse analysis: A comparative and
    critical introduction*. London: Sage.
Yu, Changrong. 2011. The display of frustration in arguments: A multimodal analysis. *Journal of
    Pragmatics* 43. 2964–2981.

Bionote

George Rossolatos
George Rossolatos (b. 1975) is an academic researcher, marketing practitioner, and the editor
of the *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics* (Department of English, Kassel University,
Germany). Major publications include *Handbook of Brand Semiotics* (2015, ed. and co-author),
Semiotics of Popular Culture (2015), and *Brand Equity Planning with Structuralist Rhetorical
Semiotics* (2012, 2014). His research interests include cultural consumer research,
branding/advertising, and new media, spanning various disciplines such as rhetoric,
semiotics, phenomenology, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and communication theory.