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DISCURSIVE BOUNDARIES OF VERBAL PROHIBITION AND INDIRECT EXPRESSION IN FAMILY COMMUNICATION: ENGLISH AND UZBEK EVIDENCE

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Abstract. This article investigates how family interlocutors repair interaction after a sensitive topic has crossed an acceptable verbal boundary. The focus is not a lexical classification of taboos or euphemisms, but the sequential work that follows an intrusive question, an over-explicit nomination, or an unsuccessful hint. English and Uzbek micro-dialogues are analysed through conversation-analytic notions of self-repair, other-initiated repair, account, reformulation, and topic closure. Four repair trajectories are distinguished: anticipatory calibration, immediate reformulation, negotiated clarification, and retrospective ratification. The comparison suggests that English exchanges frequently formulate privacy and consent as explicit metapragmatic rights, whereas Uzbek exchanges often restore equilibrium through kinship address, deference, temporal postponement, and collectively framed proposals. These are tendencies rather than fixed cultural oppositions. The central finding is that indirectness becomes communicatively effective only when the addressee retains the right to request clarification or refuse the topic.

Keywords: family interaction, verbal boundary, indirectness, repair sequence, metapragmatics, English, Uzbek.

1. Introduction

Family interaction combines extensive shared knowledge with unequal rights to activate that knowledge in talk. A diagnosis, marital disagreement, debt, reproductive decision, or earlier family conflict may be known to several participants, yet its public formulation can still be treated as premature or intrusive. The analytical problem is therefore not simply whether a word is prohibited. It is how participants display that a boundary has been crossed and what they do to restore a workable interactional order. This question separates the present study from semantic inventories of taboo vocabulary and from broad descriptions of euphemistic substitution. Goffman's account of face-work explains why an interlocutor may redesign an utterance after recognising its interpersonal cost [1]. Conversation analysis adds a sequential perspective: repair identifies a source of trouble and reorganises the turn so that intersubjectivity can be recovered [2; 3]. In sensitive family talk, the trouble is not always a misheard word or a grammatical error. It may concern entitlement: the speaker has named too much, asked too early, involved an unintended audience, or placed the addressee under an obligation to disclose. Repair consequently operates at the level of social action. The article asks three questions. First, which conversational signals reveal that a verbal boundary has been breached? Second, how do English and Uzbek speakers reformulate the problematic move? Third, when does indirectness facilitate repair and when does it merely conceal unresolved disagreement? The aim is to develop a compact typology of boundary-repair sequences rather than reproduce the dissertation's semantic, lingvopragmatic, or culture-wide classification of taboo and euphemism.

2. Material and method

The study uses qualitative contrastive microanalysis. The unit of analysis is a three-part sequence: boundary-crossing move, recipient response, and remedial move. The English and Uzbek exchanges below are constructed minimal pairs designed to isolate pragmatic variables; they are not presented as corpus frequencies or authentic

private recordings. This allows the analysis to test the explanatory model without inventing empirical statistics. The interpretation draws on turn design, preference organisation, repair, face-work, and contextualisation cues [2–5]. Five parameters are applied: the sensitivity of the topic; the speaker's relational entitlement; the presence of third parties; the explicitness of the initial formulation; and the recipient's opportunity to accept, clarify, or reject the reformulation. Functional comparison is prioritised over literal translation. An English privacy formula and an Uzbek deferential postponement can perform the same repair function while distributing agency differently.

3. Boundary crossing as an interactional event

A verbal boundary is observable when participants orient to it. Such orientation may appear through a pause, minimal answer, avoidance of eye contact, topic shift, explicit objection, laughter, downgraded response, or a request such as "Why are you asking?" The boundary is thus not inferred solely from the analyst's cultural expectations. It becomes analytically relevant because one or more participants treat the preceding move as requiring adjustment. For example, the question "Are you two separating?" may contain no taboo lexeme, yet it can violate a sibling's right to control disclosure. The response "We are not discussing that yet" identifies both the sensitive proposition and the temporal limit. Uzbek "Ajrashmoqchimisizlar?" may be met with "Bu masalani hozir ochmaylik" ("Let us not open this matter now"). The hortative form reduces open confrontation, but it still performs a refusal. In both cases, prohibition is accomplished sequentially rather than encoded in a particular word.

4. Four trajectories of boundary repair

Anticipatory calibration occurs before the sensitive proposition is produced. The speaker requests permission or limits the audience: "Can I ask something personal?"; "Faqat o'zimiz qolganimizda bir gap so'rasam maylimi?" ("May I ask something when we are alone?"). This pre-sequence allows the addressee to regulate access before disclosure begins. It is not merely polite decoration; it redistributes the right to launch

the topic. Immediate reformulation follows visible discomfort. English: “Did the treatment fail? – Sorry, that was too blunt. What did the doctor say about the next step?” Uzbek: “Davolanish foyda bermadimi? – Uzr, noto‘g‘ri so‘radim. Shifokor keyingi bosqich haqida nima dedi?” The remedial move retracts the presupposition of failure and replaces it with an open question. The repair is successful because it changes both wording and epistemic stance. Negotiated clarification appears when an indirect expression is not sufficiently recoverable. “Things have become difficult at home.” – “Do you mean financially or between you two?” The recipient offers alternative interpretations rather than forcing one conclusion. Uzbek: “Uyda vaziyat biroz og‘ir.” – “Ro‘zg‘or tomondanmi yoki munosabatlaringizdami?” Here clarification protects against the risk created by vague reference. Indirectness functions as an opening only because the hearer can request specification. Retrospective ratification occurs after the exchange: “I hope I didn’t put you on the spot earlier.” – “It was difficult, but I’m glad we talked.” Uzbek: “Oldingi gapim bilan sizni noqulay ahvolga solmadimmi?” – “Og‘ir bo‘ldi, lekin gaplashganimiz yaxshi bo‘ldi.” The later sequence evaluates not only the wording but the legitimacy of the encounter. It may confirm that directness was ultimately acceptable, or establish a boundary for future interaction.

Repair trajectory	Trigger	Remedial action	Boundary effect
Anticipatory calibration	Possible intrusion	Permission request or audience restriction	Prevents unauthorised entry
Immediate reformulation	Recipient discomfort	Apology and redesigned question	Restores epistemic openness
Negotiated clarification	Ambiguous hint	Alternative interpretation request	Makes indirectness accountable
Retrospective ratification	Uncertain relational effect	Later evaluation of the exchange	Sets a future boundary

Table 1. Sequential trajectories for repairing a breached verbal boundary

The typology demonstrates that a euphemistic replacement is only one possible remedial resource. Speakers may instead alter presupposition, participation framework,

timing, epistemic authority, or the recipient's response options. The distinctive object of analysis is therefore the transition between turns, not an isolated lexical pair.

5. English and Uzbek repair resources

English boundary repair frequently uses explicit metapragmatic vocabulary: private, personal, comfortable, ready, appropriate, and talk about. "That's too personal" classifies the prior move; "I'm not ready to discuss it" locates the limit in the speaker's present state; "Let's talk when we're alone" changes the participation framework. These formulations make refusal linguistically visible and can protect the addressee from having to produce a euphemistic answer. Their weakness is that an explicit privacy claim may itself sound distancing in a relationship built on expected disclosure. Uzbek repair often combines the same refusal with kinship address, apology, temporality, or collective grammar: "Oyi, bu haqda keyinroq gaplashsak" ("Mother, perhaps we could discuss this later"); "Aka, hozir bu gapni ochmay tursak" ("Brother, let us not raise this matter now"). Address terms preserve relational recognition, keyinroq and hozir postpone rather than permanently ban the topic, while the first-person plural presents closure as coordinated action. These forms can reduce open conflict, but collective grammar may obscure which participant actually wishes to stop. The contrast concerns preferred legitimising resources, not two closed national models. English speakers also use kinship roles and collective concern, while Uzbek speakers can state personal boundaries directly. Age, urban experience, bilingualism, educational background, and family history may alter the distribution. The comparison should therefore avoid claims that English is intrinsically individualistic or Uzbek intrinsically collectivist. What can be shown at the discourse level is how a particular turn assigns the right to continue, postpone, or terminate the topic.

Indirectness fails as repair under three conditions. First, it may leave the sensitive referent unrecoverable. If "He has that problem again" can refer to illness, alcohol use, or unemployment, the recipient cannot respond responsibly. Second, it may deny

contestability. “We all think you need rest” appears collective and caring, but it can silence the affected person by presenting an undisclosed decision as consensus. Third, it may preserve the surface of harmony while transferring emotional labour to the hearer, who must infer both the bad news and the reason for concealment. A useful distinction is therefore drawn between bridge indirectness and barrier indirectness. Bridge indirectness reduces the initial impact but remains open to clarification: “There is something difficult we need to discuss; would now be a good time?” Barrier indirectness blocks access while avoiding responsibility: “Some things are better left unsaid.” The first manages timing without cancelling the topic; the second converts silence into an unquestionable norm. In Uzbek, “Bir masala bor, tayyor bo‘lsangiz gaplashamiz” (“There is a matter; we shall talk when you are ready”) creates a bridge because readiness is negotiable. “Buni bilmaganingiz ma’qul” (“It is better that you do not know this”) creates a barrier by deciding on the addressee’s behalf. In English, “I can explain when you want” and “You don’t need to know” produce the same contrast. The crucial variable is not directness alone but whether the recipient retains interactional agency.

6. Discussion

The repair perspective revises the assumption that successful euphemisation can be identified from softened vocabulary. A conventionally acceptable form may still produce trouble, and a direct term may become appropriate after permission has been secured. The relevant evidence lies in uptake: whether the recipient accepts the formulation, seeks clarification, resists the presupposition, or withdraws. This approach connects face-work with accountability and makes family hierarchy empirically visible in turn-by-turn interaction.

The proposed model also clarifies the relation between verbal prohibition and silence. Silence is not automatically a tabu marker; it becomes meaningful through sequential placement and subsequent treatment. A pause followed by reformulation can signal processing difficulty, whereas repeated non-response after an intrusive question

can establish refusal. Analysts must therefore distinguish silence that invites a gentler formulation from silence that closes participation. This distinction is especially important in family settings, where deference may coexist with resentment or resistance. For contrastive research, the findings recommend functional rather than lexical equivalence. English "I'm not comfortable discussing that" and Uzbek "Bu gapni hozir qo'ya turaylik" ("Let us leave this matter for now") differ formally, yet both can suspend a topic. Their comparison becomes analytically adequate only when the distribution of agency is specified: the English form attributes the limit to the speaker's state, whereas the Uzbek form proposes a shared temporary action. Neither is inherently more polite; their effect depends on whether the interlocutor can acknowledge or challenge the boundary. The study is deliberately limited to an analytical model and does not claim quantitative representativeness. Its next empirical stage should examine anonymised naturally occurring or elicited family exchanges, coding the source of repair, the reformulated element, the participant relation, the response to repair, and the eventual return or non-return to the topic. Such data would allow comparison across generations and communicative channels without confusing cultural tendencies with universal rules.

7. Conclusion

The discursive boundary between verbal prohibition and indirect expression becomes visible when family participants repair a sensitive move. Four trajectories structure this process: anticipatory calibration, immediate reformulation, negotiated clarification, and retrospective ratification. They show that family euphemisation is not confined to replacing one word with another; it includes renegotiating timing, audience, presupposition, epistemic entitlement, and the recipient's right to respond. English and Uzbek family interaction use partially different resources to legitimate repair. English sequences often name privacy, readiness, and consent; Uzbek sequences frequently mobilise kinship address, deference, temporal postponement, and collective forms. These tendencies intersect and change across families. The most reliable evaluative criterion is

whether indirectness leaves a route to clarification. When it does, it functions as a bridge between sensitivity and understanding; when it removes the hearer's agency, it becomes a barrier that merely conceals unresolved conflict.

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