

Never discuss religion, sex, politics or money: Do people still follow the advice?

According to the old saying, it is best to avoid discussing religion, politics, sex and money publicly as it may be impolite to do so, causing discomfort and embarrassment to other people. In this handout, we are going to look at how these topics are treated in people's conversations in current British English and whether this differs from how much and in what way people talked about them twenty years ago. We will use these topics to think about how language reflects people's values and norms shared in the society and what makes some topics to be considered polite or impolite. To discuss these topics, we will use findings and data from the British National Corpus and from the British National Corpus 2014.



Key terms

impoliteness

politeness

language change

values & norms

Task 1

In January 1998, Chicago Tribune featured an article by Judith Martin entitled 'A Few Topics to Avoid in Social Conversation' which included the section below, naming sex, religion, politics and money among the key topics to be avoided by polite people in conversations.

"Here is a list of topics that polite people do not bring into social conversation: Sex, religion, politics, money, illness, the food before them at the moment, which foods they customarily eat or reject and why, anything else having to do with bodily functions, occupations, including their own and inquiries into anyone else's..." [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1998-01-01-9801010196-story.html]

Before we start looking at what the corpus evidence can tell us, discuss the following questions:

- Have you come across the recommendation to avoid talking about religion, sex, politics and money in social conversations?
- Why would these four topics be considered especially sensitive?
- What is similar and what may be different about them?
- Are there any other topics that you think are considered too sensitive to talk about?

Task 2

Let us look at how frequently these words appear in people's conversations in current use and whether this has changed over the last twenty years. Type the words into BNClab one by one and go to the Change button. Make a note on whether the frequency with which these words are mentioned increased or decreased overtime.

	<i>Freq.1</i>	<i>Freq.2</i>	<i>Change?</i>
Money	_____	_____	_____
Religion	_____	_____	_____
Politics	_____	_____	_____
Sex	_____	_____	_____

- What was the pattern that you have found for each word?
- If there has been a change, what factors may have played a role it?

Task 3

In Task 2, we looked at whether the use of the words *religion*, *politics*, *sex* and *money* changed over time in British English. In that task, we looked at language use from all speakers in the corpus together. However, social variables such as gender, age and social class often influence how people talk about sensitive topics. In this task, therefore, we are going to look at who talks about these topics most and least often. Type the words into BNClab one by one and use the Gender, Age and Social Class buttons to check whether some of the groups of people talk about these topics more often than others and note the information down.

	GENDER	AGE	SOCIAL CLASS
money	<i>e.g. Men somewhat more than women</i>		
politics			
religion			
sex			

Discuss the patterns for each word. Can you speculate about the reasons for why some social groups may talk about the topics more often or less often than others?

Task 4

So far, we have looked at the use of four specific words that represent potentially sensitive topics. However, when people talk about these topics, they don't necessarily have to mention these words explicitly; instead, they can use other words related to these topics. Therefore, to explore the topics in greater depth, we are going to look at various words related to the topic of 'politics' and explore whether their use has changed over the last twenty years, helping us understand whether today people talk about politics more or less often than in the past.

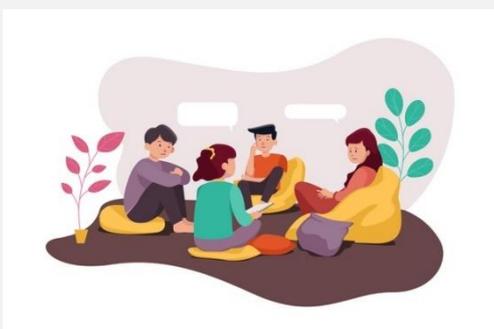
Type the following words into BNClab: political – politicians – government – taxes – parliament – your own word

You can type these words into BNClab one by one and check how their use has changed from 1990s to 2010s. You can also type them in together to find out their combined frequency using the following format:

politics OR politician OR politicians OR political OR government OR

Where your findings similar to those in Task 2, when you searched just for one key word representing the topic? You can explore the remaining three topics doing a similar search for the words related to them.

Research bite



Many researchers have acknowledged that when it comes to interpreting whether something is impolite or not, it is people's expectations that play a crucial role in whether they will take offence, rather than the communication being explicitly rude or offensive. These expectations are shaped by our prior experience as well as our values and norms. As Prof Jonathan Culpeper, a leading scholar in the field of politeness from Lancaster University, emphasises "values and norms lie at the heart of impoliteness" (2011, p.12). These values and norms can vary across different individuals, communities as well as cultures. Thinking of the advice not to discuss politics, religion, money and sex in social conversation, do you think these topics may be similar across different cultures or do you think there are likely to be cultural differences in what topics are considered impolite in social interaction?