

# Sexual, Impure, Vulgar: An Analysis of the Intimate Body-Part Terms in Egyptian Arabic

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## Abstract

The words used to name the intimate body parts are taboo in Egyptian Arabic due to their association with two “forbidden” domains: sexuality and excretion. It results in what we can describe as a double stigmatisation. The terms for the private parts embody some of the negative characteristics of the things they denote. Vulgarisation of these terms is a cultural and social consequence of this fact. This is why the discourse of anatomical parts associated with sexuality involves a strong emotional reaction and a specific nonverbal code. The intimate part terms may be perceived as vulgar and replaced by euphemisms. The main focus of this work is on the analysis of the relation sexual = impure = vulgar as a conceptual base for vulgarisms. The paper explores the following question: Where does the difference between male and female body parts in the ability to abuse and wield influence come from?

## 1 Intimate Body-Part Terms

The problem of vulgarization of the terms for intimate body parts in the Egyptian Arabic (ECA) is a phenomenon often observed in other languages and is an example of certain broader tendencies springing from human psychology. Terms used to name the intimate body parts are taboo as they are associated with two forbidden domains: sexuality and excretion. It results in what we can describe as a double stigmatization, mentally involving shame and timidity and a more tangible sense of impurity. Words used to name the private parts embody some of the negative characteristics of the things they denote. This is why the discourse of anatomical parts associated with sexuality involves a strong emotional reaction and a specific nonverbal code (e.g. hushed voice). Vulgarization of a term is a cultural and social consequence of the negative perception of what the term denotes.

The terms that I would like to discuss in this paper are:

- (1) *kuss*
- (2) *zibb*
- (3) *zubr*

(1) refers to the female reproductive organ, while (2) and (3) refer to the male ones. These three are described as “coarse” in Said Badawi and Martin Hind’s dictionary of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic. Translated, (1) is highly obscene; the English equivalent of “cunt”. In comparison (2) and (3) are both translated as “penis” or “cock”. While “penis” is a neutral word that can have a medical usage, “cock” is a colloquial and rather common expression with minimal vulgar characteristics. Neither (2) nor (3) are used abusively as a means of verbal aggression. Unlike using (1) there is no possibility of offending anybody by calling them (2) or (3). The neutral status of the two lexemes is confirmed by native speakers of Egyptian Arabic. It is important to highlight that in English there is a more offensive expression “dick”, meaning a male reproductive organ, but it was not used to translate either (2) or (3) in the aforementioned dictionary. The word “dick” has no lexical equivalent in Egyptian Arabic. In ECA<sup>1</sup> only female intimate body-part names can be used to verbally abuse other people.

(1) is the basic and most common aggressive expression and can be used in many different altercations, eliciting each time a strong emotional reaction. Moreover, the lexeme appears to undergo a gradual desemantization and in the past it was a derivational basis for a plethora of insulting expressions such as:

- (4) *kassis* ‘to kiss arse’ (coarse)
- (5) *kassīs* ‘arse–kisser’ (coarse)
- (6) *mikassāti* ‘arse kisser’ (coarse)
- (7) *mitkassis* (coarse)–passive participle of *kassis*

The expression in (1) appears most of the times with a nominal attribute *ummak*, i.e. as *kuss ummak* ‘your mother’s cunt’<sup>2</sup> and clearly insults the recipient’s mother; unlike a similar expression in Polish *kurwa mac* (lit. ‘whore mother’) where the semantics of the expression seem to be pushed into the background, mostly because *mac* as an obsolete word is no longer used except in this particular context.

The collocation of (1) and *ummak* is so obvious that the two words are often written as one, *kusummak*. However, without *ummak*, (1) can also be quite offensive, (it is enough to use only (1) for example: *ya kuss* (you cunt)). There is also the tendency to combine different abusive expressions in order to elicit a stronger effect.

<sup>1</sup> ECA = Egyptian Colloquial Arabic.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the examples are translated literally.