The potential of words to become swearing: An ethno semantic study

Fitri Amilia[a,1,], Astri Widyaruli Anggraeni[a,2], Anita Fatimatul Laeli[a,3,] Edwar Kemal[,4]

*[a] Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember, Indonesia;
[b] Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia;

[1] fitriamilia@unmuhjember.ac.id; [2] astriwidyaruli@unmuhjember.ac.id; [3] anitafatimatul@unmuhjember.ac.id
*Correspondent Author: fitriamilia@unmuhjember.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the potential of words as swear words through an ethnosemantic study. This research differs from other swearing studies examining the form and meaning of swear words. This study presents the potential of words to become swear words. This research uses a phenomenological approach. Swear words are expressive words of emotion that are easily found both in oral or written form, directly or on social media. Swear words are documented directly and indirectly. Swear words are analyzed using conceptual meaning analysis. Through an ethnosemantic study, two potentials exist for words to become swear words. First, conceptual meaning is added due to the speakers' ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and culture. Second, there is a loss of conceptual meaning in the form of functional components in the lexical meaning of a word. Implications of this research include a better understanding of how language adapts to social and cultural dynamics, aiding linguistic and anthropological studies. Socially and educationally, the results of this research can support the creation of programs that teach more ethical language use among the younger generation. This research is also useful for public policy, helping policy makers in drafting regulations regarding speech on social media that are more sensitive to cultural context. In addition, this research can support the psychological context in therapy and counseling by providing insight into the use of language in interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

In everyday communication, there are various kinds of swear words that are often used. Swearing is usually used to express anger, annoyance, and disappointment. However, in certain communities, swear words do not function to swear but to greet for familiarity (Ibda, 2019). Even in East Java, especially Surabaya, the swear word "cuk" has become a typical icon of the city (there is a brand Cak Cuk) (Annafi & Wijayanti, 2024). Previous research has examined the sociolinguistic function of swearing. Swearing can be offensive and a tool to express negative emotions (Fägersten & Stapleton, 2017; Ras-sin & Muris, 2005). On the other hand, swearing can also be done in a positive context to promote group bonding, to display identity, to express humor, solidarity, trust, and intimacy, or simply to function rhetorically and add emphasis to a message (see Bednarek, 2019; Fägersten, 2012; Fägersten & Stapleton, 2017; Daly et al., 2004; Dynel, 2012; Stapleton, 2010). Furthermore, swearing may be used to show dominance and exert social power (Ainsworth, 2016).

Although the use of swearing is often considered impolite and can cause conflict, this phenomenon is interesting to study from a linguistic, psychological, social, and cultural perspective. The study of swearing provides insight into how language is a tool for emotional expression and how social context influences the use of offensive language. According to Fägersten (2012), at a basic level, swearing can refer to words or phrases that are potentially considered offensive, inappropriate, or unacceptable in a particular social context; However, the diversity of labels used for swearing words (e.g. taboo words, curse words, profanities, or vulgar words, and many more) shows the subjectivity of the idea of swearing.

Swearing, as a linguistic and socio-communicative practice, has been investigated cross-linguistically and in relation to several variables such as age (e.g. McEnery & Xiao, 2004; Schweinberger, 2018), gender (e.g. Gauthier & Guille, 2017; Murray, 2012), and bilingualism or multilingualism (e.g. Dewaele, 2017). Swearing is considered a socially contagious and spreadable act. Nodoushan (2016) further notes that there are three classic characteristics of swear words, including non-literal meaning, taboo, and emotional expression.

Swearing can be described as a lexicon of offensive language (Jay, 2009). Singleton (2009) proposed three sets of features required for swear words: they relate to a taboo domain, have the potential to produce catharsis, and have both literal and non-literal meanings. The list of words that are 'considered' to be swear words can also vary across cultures and at different times, covering issues such as disease, animals, death, and relationships, to name just a few

examples that may be unintelligible. There is also some conceptual and functional overlap between swearing and other categories of taboo language use such as insults (derogatory terms used to discredit another person or group) and discriminatory language use (e.g. directly referring to race or other personal characteristics) (Allan, 2018; O'Driscoll, 2020). Another classification of the literal meaning of swear words is from Jay (2009) who distinguishes swear word references into nine categories, namely sexual references, dirty or blasphemous words, scattered and disgusting objects, animal names, ethnic-racial-gender insults, psychological-physical-social deviations, ancestral allusions, substandard vulgar terms, and offensive slang. Sexual references relate to sexual acts (e.g. making love), sexual anatomy (e.g. cock, penis, vagina), and sexual deviations (e.g. bastard, motherfucker). Indecent and blasphemous swear words refer to religious terms (e.g. Jesus Christ or damn), while eschatological and disgusting objects refer to feces (e.g. shit), excretory organs (e.g. bastard), excretory processes (e.g. Amilia et al. (The Potential of Words to Become Swearing) defecation), and body products (e.g. pee). Swear words can also be animal names (e.g. bitch, monkey) and ethnic-racial-gender insults (e.g. nigger, faggot). Psychological-physical-social deviations are also often used as swear words (eg. idiot, smallpox, whore). Ancestral satire is swear words that involve or relate to family relationships and ancestors (eg. bastard). Substandard vulgar terms are vulgar words whose construction is below satisfactory language standards (eg. in a rag, fart face). Finally, offensive slang refers to offensive substandard words that are created to facilitate communication (eg. bang, sucks).

The novelty of this research is studying the potential of words to become swear words through ethnosemantic studies. Ethnosemantics is an interdisciplinary study that combines ethnography and linguistics (ethnolinguistics) and semantics. Ethnolinguistics is a linguistic study that pays attention to cultural aspects in its use. Language is a system of symbols whose use is agreed upon and bound by the same thoughts. The same thoughts that are manifested into actions are cultural or ethnographic concepts. Specifically, this study focuses on the study of the meaning of language studied in semantics, the acronym in this study is called ethnosemantics.

Ethnosemantics is a branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of words in the context of culture and community agreements. Each word has a meaningful power, which differs between communities in using it. In other words, ethnosemantics studies how to use and understand the categories and/or taxonomies of language use among communities accurately.

327

The use of the language reflects the socio-cultural system of its speakers (Al- Husseini et al., 2016). Ethnosemantic research has an important role in understanding language culture, because ethnosemantic research aims to find details of the way of life, traditions, and customs of a community by classifying the lexemes used in their culture (Richter & Koch, 2004). Ethnosemantic analysis relies on the linguistic premise of semantic structures and operations that produce and help users understand meaningful components as well as ethnographic investigations and data interpretation by describing and understanding aspects of the culture of certain groups and communities in certain contexts. Both of these disciplines can produce authentic context-based meaning units that can only be understood properly in a strict socio-cultural and socio-political environment. The findings of this study are the potential of words to become swears or insults. Every word has the potential with the meaning or concept that arises from the agreement of society. Conversely, every word becomes a compliment due to the addition of conceptual meaning agreed upon by its speakers. The potential of a word to become a swear depends on how the word is used in a cultural and social context, as well as on its connotative meaning. A word that may seem neutral in one situation can have the potential to become a swear if it is associated with negative connotations, cultural context, or personal identity.

The objective of this research is to discover the potential of words to become swear words or insults. Every word has potential based on the meaning or concept that arises from societal agreement. Conversely, each word can become a compliment due to the addition of conceptual meaning agreed upon by its speakers. The potential of a word to become a swear word depends on how it is used in a cultural and social context, as well as on its connotative meaning. Therefore, through this research, the potential of words to become swear words will be identified. The findings of this study will serve as a basis for word selection in communication to foster a respectful character.

Method

This study examines the phenomenon of swear word usage. Swear words can express emotions such as anger, disappointment, and others. These swear words are natural data that can be easily found in both direct speech and text. To obtain swear words, the researcher searched for videos using keywords related to news containing pro and con opinions on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The comments from netizens that contained swear words in those videos became the data for this study.

The data collection technique to obtain swear words is conducted through documentation. Documentation involves steps such as reading comment texts on social media, marking and recording them, and classifying them according to data classifications. The data sources for this research are coded with the following codes: C for comments, U for speech or utterance, Y for YouTube, I for Instagram, and T for TikTok. Thus, valid data on swear words used by netizens on social media will be obtained.

In this research process, the analysis uses an ethno semantic study. Through ethno semantic studies, findings regarding the potential of words to become swear words will be obtained. The data analysis technique through ethno semantics employs conceptual meaning analysis based on the ideas, concepts, and culture of the speaker's community. The steps in this analysis are as follows: 1) Each word's lexical meaning is identified. 2) To obtain additional meanings that strengthen the factors making a word a swear word, a component meaning analysis technique is used from a cultural perspective. Thus, the potential of each word to become a swear word becomes concrete and measurable, in line with the understanding of the speakers of the language.

To test the validity of the data, confirmation of the conceptual meaning and its influence on the obtained swear words is conducted. Confirmation is done through in-depth interviews with students and lecturers. They are from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Muhammadiyah University of Jember serving as informants who validate the component meaning analysis of swear words. The purpose of this validation is to gain insights and cultural knowledge from the community in representing the conceptual meaning of the swear words used.

Results and Discussion

Result: The form and meaning of swear words

This section explains the results of the analysis. These should be presented clearly and concisely. Author(s) should explore the novelty or the contribution of their findings by comparing them to the existing literature and theories to Islamic education.

a. Animal swear words

Swearing using the word animal shows high emotions of anger, disappointment, dissatisfaction. This animal swearing is called the highest swearing to express emotions. Here are examples of animal swearing.

Amilia, Fitira et.al (The potential of words...)

(1) The context of data 1 is netizen comments on a court ruling that is considered detrimental and unfair to the victim

Hakim ***asu*** (CY)

The word asu is Javanese for dog. The word dog is a word that means an animal that has the characteristics of +barking, +can guard the house, +hunting. This dog animal is associated with two opposing characteristics, namely +unclean and +loyal. Animals with the association +loyal other than dogs are doves. The word animal in swearing (1) is expressed by someone as an expression of the judge's anger at the acquittal of a defendant in a murder case.

The word asu is a Javanese vocabulary. In Indonesian and Madurese, the word animal asu is equivalent to anjing (BI) and patek (BM). The two words anjing and patek are also swear words. This animal swearing in the context of Indonesian and Madurese speech also shows strong emotions of anger and/or disappointment. Apart from the word dog, other animal words that are swear words are: pig, monkey (kethek), kampret, chicken, tadpole, goat (wedhus), crocodile (bajhul), and so on. The use of animal words in swear words generally aims to insult, degrade, or express negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, or dissatisfaction.

b. Kinship swear words

Kinship swearing is seen in the following data.

(2) The context of data 2 is netizen comments and utterance on TikTok regarding unpleasant speech that contains swear words

Bapakmu! (CT, UT)

Swearing (2) uses the kinship name of Bapak (father) + kinship-mu (your). There are many variations of this swearing: bapake and pakmu. The variations are influenced by the use of the speaker's regional language. The use of kinship swearing shows the speaker's annoyance and spontaneity in swearing. The kinship word that becomes a swear word functions to show annoyance, not spontaneity.

Kinship swearing refers to the use of terms or words that are negative or insulting in the context of family or kinship relationships. This involves words or phrases that are critical and insulting in an impolite manner.

The words bapak (bapa?) and pakmu (pa?mu) have general characteristics: + a term for a man who is someone's father, + a form of greeting or respect for an older man or one who has a certain position, + indicates a certain social status or role, + a greeting that shows respect or politeness, but the use of this term in a negative context can be a form of insult or mockery with

a mocking tone to refer to someone. This kinship word will feel like a swear when the suffix -mu is added with an angry expression to make a negative response.

Other kinship words that become swears are kinship words that are close and the generation above the speaker, such as mother, uncle/aunt, grandmother/grandfather with variations of kinship greetings that apply in society.

c. Swear words for body parts

Body parts and sexual activities are often used as swear words because of their personal nature. Here are examples of swear words that use the word body parts.

> (3) The context of data 3 is netizen comments and utterance on TikTok regarding unpleasant speech that contains swear words
> Cangkemmu!/ lambemu! 'your mouth' (CT, UT)

The word (3) refers to the mouth. The word mouth is a word for body parts that has the concept of +meaning a cavity in the face +where the teeth and tongue are, and +to put food in. In Javanese, the word cangkem is a variation of a rude word while lambe is a variation of a moderate word.

The use of the word body parts as swear words is because swear words do not have the concept that the word should have. For example, swearing with the word matamu for someone who cannot use the function of their eyes wisely. People who cannot see properly have the potential to be sweard with the word matamu. People who do not watch their mouths have the potential to be sweard with lambemu, cangkemmu!.

Based on the explanation, all body part words have the potential to become swear words. The body parts in question are body parts that have a function and are used to interact with other people. If the body part does not interact with other people, then it is not a swear word, such as heart, intestines, and others.

The form of swear words about body parts that fall into the very rude category is the use of taboo words. Taboo words are words for genitals, both male and female. This taboo word is an expression of annoyance and anger. Its use is influenced by the loss of concept in the word. The word genitals has the lexical concept of + genitals, + something that is embarrassing, + something that causes shame. There is an additional cultural concept of + personal and private areas, + must be kept sacred, and + not shown publicly. This swear is aimed at people who do not have the lexical concept and cultural concept of the word genitals.

331

d. Food swear words

Here are swear words in the form of food words

(4) The context of data 4 consists of netizen utterance on youtube regarding unpleasant speech

Asem! (UY)

The swear word (4) asem refers to a polysemous word. The word asem means +fruit, +food, and +sour taste of tamarind fruit. This swear word is not always a swear word that shows anger or annoyance. This swear word tends to be used spontaneously. Other fruit words that are swear words are *jambu*, *telo*, and so on. Based on interviews, this word is used because it is considered expressive and maintains polite language. On the other hand, people who hear the word do not feel like they are being sweard at.

Discussion: the potential for words to become swear words

Every word has the potential to become swearing. There are two propositions put forward as findings in this study. These findings differ from the findings of other ethno semantic studies. Nugrahani & Parela (2022) found variations in words by developing component analysis with the same meaning field in ethno semantic studies. This study found the potential for words to become swear words. First, swear words have additional conceptual meanings according to cultural background, beliefs, religion, and community agreements. Second, swear words are used because the conceptual meaning of the word is not possessed by the person being sweard (sworn at).

Previous research, through ethno semantic studies, found additional vocabulary and meanings (Sucipto, 2018). Semantic meaning component analysis is a way of conducting analysis. Through ethno semantic studies, it can be emphasized that language is a set of meaningful symbols, whose symbols and meanings are bound to portraits of ideas and agreements in the scope of community culture. Here are two propositions as findings of this study.

In addition, the choice of lexical for swearing is also influenced by the gender of the speaker. Anggraeni (2019) found that men tend to choose words that contain very harsh meanings as swear words than women. An example is the choice of the word animal (asu) as a swear word, where the word is the most harsh swear word. While women tend to choose the word food (asem) as a swear word, which has a more refined meaning in swearing.

a.   Swear words are associated with conceptual meaning as a characteristic of the swear word

Swear words in the form of the use of animal words are generally used to show emotional expressions, anger, disappointment in others. Semantically, animal words are used as swear words because they have a conceptual meaning as a form of swearing in swear words. People are sweard with the words dog/asu/patek because they have the concepts of +unclean, +forbidden, +bark. These concepts arise influenced by the cultural response factors of their users.

Analyzed from a cultural perspective, the majority of Indonesian, Javanese, and Madurese people are Muslim. In the Muslim view, dogs are animals that are symbols of uncleanliness and haram. This symbol becomes a semantic concept attached to the word dog. Thus, the word dog becomes a swear word because it has the concepts of +unclean and +forbidden which are born due to the cultural factors of its speakers. In addition to the word dog, the word pig has the same additional concept with an ethno semantic approach.

In addition to these two words, other animal words that become swear words have conceptual meanings that are intended to be directed at other people/swear words. Monkey swearing is aimed at people who have one of the concepts: +hairy, +scratching, +greedy, +biting, +stupid, +chaotic behavior, +cheater, and so on. These concepts exist due to the ethno semantic approach of the speaker. The use of monkey as a swear word is an expression of anger and annoyance. Its use shows that the swear word has certain characteristics that do not conform to expected social norms or standards.

b.   Swear words show a loss of conceptual meaning of function in lexemes.

Words have the potential to become swear words because the lexical concept of the word is not found in the person being sweard. Swear words for people who cannot see are mata+klitik. Swear words for people who cannot keep their mouths shut are the words mulut+klitik and their variations in regional languages.

Every word has the potential to become swear words with the addition of conceptual meaning according to the speaker's cultural approach. In addition, words can become swear words if the conceptual meaning in the form of function is not possessed by the person being sweard. These two propositions apply to all swear words with their types and variations. language.

Conclusion

Every word has the potential to become a swear word. This potential is caused by the addition of conceptual meaning and its reduction. The addition and reduction of conceptual meaning are influenced by factors of thought, ideas, and concepts within the scope of the speaker's culture. The addition of conceptual meaning due to culture will cause differences and the potential for swear words. In certain societies, certain words are categorized as harsh swear words because of their ethno semantic conceptual meaning, which is different from other societies. This is caused by differences in ideas, concepts, and cultures that bind the speakers.

The limitation of this research is the restricted database of swear words from various social media, particularly in netizens' direct speech. The swear words presented in this study are those that are easily found in everyday conversations among Javanese and Madurese speakers in Jember. Thus, the presentation and analysis of the data are easily understood within that cultural context. It is also possible that the potential for swear words in other cultures in Indonesia may have similarities. The use of animal names and sensitive body parts is also employed as swear words. Given these limitations, further research is recommended to explore swear words from different perspectives, such as the norms and culture of swear word users, the factors behind the use of taboo words, and the diverse forms of swear word sentences. By doing so, universal knowledge about words in language, as well as word selection for effective and normative communication, can be obtained.

Declarations

Author contribution	:	Fitri Amilia was responsible for the entire research project. She also led the writing of the manuscript and the collaboration with all authors. Astri Widyaruli Anggraeni, Anita Fatimatul Laeli, and Edwar Kemal participated in the data collection, transcription, and analysis. All Authors also revised the manuscript and approved the final manuscript.
Funding statement	:	This research is funded by Universitas Muhammadiyah Jember.
Conflict of interest	:	All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

| **Ethics Approval** | : | Information on Ethics Approval and informed consent statements are required for all articles published in BAHASTRA since 2024. |
| **Additional information** | | No additional information is available for this paper. |

References

Ainsworth, J. (2016). *Culture, cursing, and coercion.* In Discursive Constructions of Consent in the Legal Process, edited by Susan Ehrlich, Diana Eades, and Janet Ainsworth. Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199945351.003.0002

Allan, K., (2018). *Taboo words and language: An overview*. In: Allan, K. (Ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language. Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198808190.013.1

Al-Husseini, H. A. M., Pandian, A., & Al-Shaibani, G. K. S. (2016). An ethno semantic study of affinal kinship terms in Arabic and Arab culture. *IRA International Journal of Education and Multidisciplinary Studies, 3*(2). doi: 10.21013/jems.v3.n2.p9

Anggraeni, A. W. (2019). Identitas gender dalam penggunaan kata-kata tabu bahasa Jawa di Jawa Timur. *Deskripsi Bahasa, 2*(1), 68–75. doi: 10.22146/db.v2i1.345

Annafi, M. H. & Wijayanti, Q. N. (2024) . Komunikasi verbal dalam melestarikan lokalitas daerah (studi kasus pada kaos cakcuk Surabaya). *Jurnal Medika Akademik, 2*(1), 125-134. doi: 10.62281/v2i1.43

Bednarek, M. (2019). *The multifunctionality of swear taboo words in television series.* In Emotion in Discourse, edited by J. Lachlan Mackenzie, and Laura Alba-Juez. John Benjamins. doi: 10.1075/pbns.302.02bed

Daly, N., Holmes, J. Newton, J. & Stubbe, M. (2004). Expletives as solidarity signals in FTAs on the factory floor. *Journal of Pragmatics, 36*(5), 945–964. doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2003.12.004

Dewaele, J. M. (2017). Self-reported frequency of swearing in english: do situational, psychological and sociobiographical variables have similar effects on first and foreign language users? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 38*(4), 330–345. doi: 10.1080/01434632.2016.1201092

Dynel, M. (2012). Swearing methodologically: The (im) politeness of expletives in anonymous commentaries on youtube. *Journal of English Studies, 10*, 25–50. doi: 10.18172/jes.179

Fägersten, K. B. (2012). *Who's swearing now? The social aspects of conversational swearing*.

Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Fägersten, K. B., & Stapleton. (2017). English swear words as humor in Swedish comic strips. *Journal of Pragmatik, 121*, 175–187. doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2017.10.014

Gauthier, M., & Guille, A. (2017). *Gender and age differences in swearing*. In Advances in Swearing Research: New languages and new contexts, edited by Kristy Beers Fägersten, and Karyn Stapleton. John Benjamin Publishing. doi: 10.1075/pbns.282.07gau

Ibda, H. (2019). Penggunaan umpatan thelo, jidor, sikem, sikak sebagai wujud marah dan ekspresi budaya warga Temanggung. *Ranah: Jurnal Kajian Bahasa, 8*(2), 172 -188. doi:

10.26499/rnh.v8i2.1293

Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 4*(2), 153-161. doi: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01115.x

McEnery, A., & Xiao, Z. (2004). Swearing in modern british English: The case of fuck in the BNC. *Language and Literature, 13*(3), 235–268. doi: 10.1177/0963947004044873

Murray, T. E. (2012). *Swearing as a function of gender in the language of midwestern American College Students*. In A Cultural Approach to Interpersonal Communication: Essential Readings, edited by Leila Monaghan, Jane E. Goodman, and Jennifer Meta Robinson. Blackwell Publishing.

Nugrahani, A., & Parela, K.A. (2022). Leksikalisasi pembungkus tradisional dari daun pisang: kajian etnosemantik. *Alinea: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya, 2*(2), 148-159. doi: 10.58218/alinea.v2i2.215

Nodoushan, M. A. S. (2016). On the functions of swearing in Persian. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict, 4*(2), 234–254. doi: 10.1075/jlac.4.2.04sal

O'Driscoll, J., (2020). *Offensive language: Taboo, offense, and social control*. Bloomsbury Academic. doi: 10.5040/9781350169708

Rassin, E., & Muris, P. (2005). Why do women swear? An exploration of reasons for and perceived efficacy of swearing in dutch female students. *Personality and Individual Differences, 38*(7), 1669–1674. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2004.09.022

Richter, A., & Koch, C. (2004). Integration, differentiation, and ambiguity in safety cultures. *Safety Science, 42*(8), 703–722. doi: 10.1016/j.ssci.2003.12.003

Singleton, D., (2009). *Unspeakable words: The taboo fringe of the lexicon*. In: Dynel, M. (Ed.), Advances in Discourse Approaches. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Stapleton, K. (2010). *Swearing*. In interpersonal pragmatics, edited by Miriam A. Locher, and Sage L. Graham. De Gruyter Mouton. doi: 10.1515/9783110214338.2.289

Sucipto, N. H. (2017). Makna afektif dalam mantra tradisi brokohan padi Desa Suru Sooko-Ponorogo: Kajian etnosemantik. *Jurnal Bapala, 4*(1), 1-12. https://garuda.kemdikbud.go.id/documents/detail/1578937

Schweinberger, M. (2018). Swearing in Irish English- a corpus-based quantitative analysis of the sociolinguistics of swearing. *Lingua, 209*, 1–20. doi: 10.1016/j.lingua.2018.03.008