

Male and Female Attitudes towards Swear Words: A Case Study at Binus International School

Maria Fe S. Nicolau¹, Katharina Endriati Sukamto²

¹ Binus International School Serpong, Jl. Lengkong Karya – Jelupang No. 58, Lengkong Karya/Serpong Tangerang 15322, INDONESIA

² Atma Jaya Catholic University, Jl. Jenderal Sudirman 51, Jakarta 12930, INDONESIA
 e-mails: ¹ nicolau@binus.edu; ² katharina.sukamto@atmajaya.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Swear words are generally used to articulate anger, pain, excitement, frustration, or surprise. It is often imitated by children who may not really understand the meaning of the swear words. This survey-based study aims to identify the swear utterances of male and female teenagers, find out their commonly-used swear words, and investigate whether bilingual male or female students of Grade 12, Binus International School, Simprug, Jakarta, use more swear words. A combination of multiple choice and open-ended questionnaire was constructed and the analysis revealed that swearing is inevitable and becomes a part of the male and female language repertoire. Both groups of students are said to employ the use of Indonesian and English swear words in carrying-out conversations in order to release stress and express intense emotions. However, male students tend to use more swear words that are associated with sexuality.

Keywords: Swear words; attitude; teenagers; gender differences

INTRODUCTION

Swearing is a natural human practice in different corners of the globe. Ljung (2011, p. 4) defines swearing as the use of utterances containing taboo words. People swear for a number of different reasons. Many people believe that uttering swear words is often times socially unacceptable, but recent studies indicate that it helps relieve stress, anger, and tension (Jay 2009, Ljung 2011, Wang 2013, Stephens 2013). As stated by Stephens (2013), a senior psychology lecturer at Keele University: “[...] swearing probably works by making people feel more aggressive, in turn setting off the fight or flight response” (p. 651).

Pinker (2008) states that swearing is universal (p. 327), and that the words and concepts used in swearing may be considered taboo (p. 328) in some cultures. He further argues that in the history of world languages, we may observe that “many words stay taboo for centuries” (p. 329) but dirty words may have turned “clean” (p. 328). For example, in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion* in 1914, the character Eliza Doolittle utters an expression “not bloody likely” which was considered very rude and offensive at that time. However, in *My Fair Lady* musical play in 1956, the swearword *bloody* has lost its offensive nature and now it has been widely heard on TV and in regular conversations (p. 328).

Pinker (2008) further describes that there are five categories of swearing: dysphemistic swearing, abusive swearing, idiomatic swearing, emphatic swearing, and cathartic swearing. Dysphemistic swearing has a dysphemistic effect that makes the listener think about negative matter (e.g. That’s *bull shit!*). The second category, abusive swearing, is used to abuse or insult others (e.g. *Fuck you asshole!*). The third one is idiomatic swearing, which is used to arouse interest or to show off (e.g. *Fuck, man!*). The fourth category, emphatic swearing, is used to emphasize something (e.g. It was so *fucking* big!). The last one, cathartic swearing, is often used when something bad happens and the speaker is undergoing a negative emotion (e.g. *Damn* this coffee!). In any case, swearing is likely to occur in almost any cultures, and it is basically associated with letting off one’s emotion.

A cross-cultural linguistic study about swearing was conducted by Ljung (2011). The study, which reports the results of the application of a questionnaire to native speakers of different languages, indicates that despite the fact that swearing is often times regarded as an offensive and disrespectful behavior, it is a sociolinguistic phenomenon that is understudied and is worth for investigation (p. 3). According to Ljung (2011, p. 79), swearing in many languages contains euphemistic taboo expletives that are used to express

pain, surprise or annoyance. Some examples in his data are as follows (p. 79):

- American
 English : *Son of a gun!* for *Son of a bitch!*
 English : *Copulating inferno!* for *Bloody hell!*
 French : *Mortbleu!* ‘death of blue’ for *Mort Dieu!* ‘God’s death’
 German : *Verflucht (nochmal)!* ‘forsworn’ for *Verdammt (nochmal)!* ‘Damn!’
 Italian : *Cavolo!* ‘cabbage’ for *Cazzo!* ‘dick’
 Portuguese: *fogo!* ‘fire’ for *fodo!* ‘fuck’
 Russian : *Yaponski bog!* ‘Japanese god’ for *Yob tvojú mat!* usually translated as ‘fuck our mother’
 Spanish : *Caramba!* for *Carajo!* ‘dick’
 Swedish : *Gästrikland!* (name of a province) for *Jävlar!* ‘devils’

Swearing does not always refer to the behavior of uneducated or low-social class people. All cultures, men and women, with no social boundaries are likely to practice this. Yet, it can be perceived that men and women differ in many ways. According to the “difference theory” (among others Uchida, 1992; Tannen, 2001), men and women are biologically different and so it is not surprising that they have different ways of speaking, although both groups live in the same environment. They establish different relationship with the society as if each belonged to a different environment and culture and the result of which is consequently reflected in their language. Lakoff (1973) and Spender (1980), on the other hand, see gender differences in speaking due to the inequality of power between men and women. Power, according to them, is often identified as a male patriarchal order. In relation to swearing, Ljung (2007, p. 93) claimed that “women seem to strive towards using the standard variety.” This implies that women tend to use milder and fewer swear words than men. Likewise, Edlund (2007, p. 64) states that “male conversation tends to revolve around topics of public concern and is focused on establishing status.” Sollid (2009) also reveals in her Swedish data that “Swedish men use swear words under all circumstances than women and they utter more offensive words when they swear.”

In the Indonesian-environmental context, the issue about gender differences in the use of swears words has not been widely explored. A study by Suyanto (2010), focuses on the swear words used by five male Javanese university students living in a boarding house in Semarang. The study, which was based on 16 informal conversations, reveals that Javanese swear words are commonly used among peers to indicate solidarity and friendship.

To this effect, this mini research stems from our desire to identify the swear utterances of 15 male and 15 female bilingual Grade 12 students from Binus International School Simprug Jakarta and to find out the kinds of swear words commonly used by the two gender groups. Most specifically, it aims to investigate which group applies more swear words and also to find out the attitude of the students towards the use of swear words.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the study are thirty students of Grade 12 (15 male and 15 female) aged between 17 and 19 years old from Binus International School, Simprug, Jakarta. All of them are Indonesians and speak Indonesian as their first language. As they attend an international school, they have to speak English at school. English, thus, is their second language.

Research procedures and analysis

A combination of multiple choice and open-ended questionnaire consisting of four items was constructed to allow the participants to give their own responses. The survey was conducted on October 21, 2013. Informal interviews were also utilized to clarify responses and obtain more in-depth data.

The first open-ended question in the survey (see Appendix) is used to find out the kinds of swear words that are often used by the male and female participants. It is also used to see which group employs more swear words. The multiple choice questions (no. 2, 3 and 4) are used to find the students’ attitude and the reasons behind their swearing utterances. For the first open-ended question, the respondents are asked to write five swear words that they commonly use. For the multiple choice questions, they are allowed to give multiple responses. The analysis, therefore, is based on the number of responses given by the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion of the study about the swear words used by the male and female students, the factors that lead them to swear, the age group in which they often swear and the media that has influenced them to use the swear words. Figure 1 below describes the choice of swear words by the male and female students.

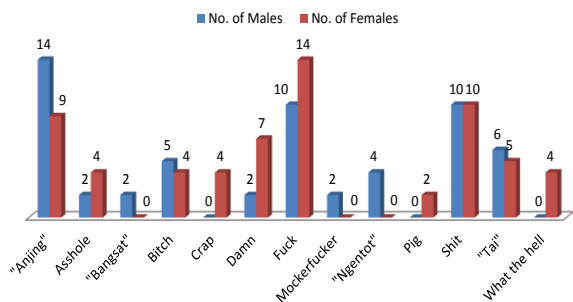


Figure 1. Swear words used by male and female students

It can be seen from the above table that the male students used four Indonesian and six English swear words, while the female respondents used only two Indonesian swear words and eight English swear words. The swear words *anjing*, *fuck*, and *shit* came out to be the top three for both male and female respondents. Fourteen male students and nine female students used *anjing*, ten male and fourteen female used *fuck* and ten male and female students stated that they used *shit*. Although there is a difference between the male and female participants' use of *anjing*, both groups stated that they could express their feelings better in their lingua franca. They mentioned that there was a very intense emotional connection when they conveyed the expression. Moreover, according to the participants, the swear word *anjing* was tantamount to comparing a person to an animal. The animals in this case, (e.g. *anjing* and *pig*) are associated with impurity and uncleanness.

Since all the respondents in this study are bilingual speakers, it is not surprising if they swear in their L1 and L2. Harris (2004, p. 241) argues that swearing in L1 is considered to be more emotional if the speaker is more proficient in his/her L1. However, when someone acquires two languages in early childhood, it is likely that they "elicit similar physiological reactions" (Harris et al., 2006, p. 266). In this case, the male respondents seem to have more swearing references in their L1 than the female counterpart.

Amusingly, the result of the study also shows that more female students (14) used the swear word *fuck* than male (10). During the informal interview, one female participant disclosed: "It is just a plain expression. It does not mean anything." While a male participant stated: "I heard this swear word used by almost all my friends. I am influenced yet I do not relate it to any bad connotation." This confirms Harris's (2004) claim that L2 is the language of emotional distance, and thus swearing in L1 is perceived to be more forceful than swearing in the later-learned languages (p. 223). Interestingly, however, both gender groups have more L2 swear words in their linguistic repertoire.

The responses of both genders are also the same with regard to the use of *shit*. However, one of the female participants said, "I use this swear word because it denotes that the person I am cursing is a piece of garbage." Pragmatically, using this swear word can be considered as conveying the speaker's communicative intention towards the interlocutor (cf. Wang 2013).

In relation to the different categories of swear words used by the participants, the data show that the male respondents use more words that are related to sexuality (*fuck*, *ngentot*, and *mockenfucker*) than the female counterpart (*fuck*). Interestingly, the number of swear words for the category of animals is the same for both male (*anjing*, *bitch*, *bangsat*) and female (*anjing*, *bitch*, *pig*). However, the use of expletives can be attributed more to the female respondents (*shit*, *tai*, *damn*, *asshole*, *what the hell*, and *crap*) than the male respondents (*shit*, *tai*, *dam*, *asshole*). As stated by Jay (2009), men are less likely to use euphemisms publicly or privately. They use obscenities to signal group membership and to discourage outsiders from joining the group. This was proven by two male participants in this study who stated that "they swear to signal the female counterparts to back off from the boys' talk."

In relation to the reasons of swearing, the teenaged students reveal different reactions, as indicated in Figure 2.

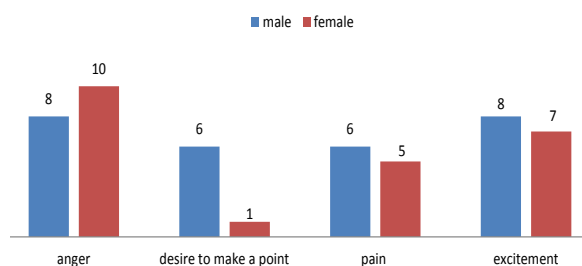


Figure 2. What often times leads you to swear?

In answering the question "What often times leads you to swear?", eight male and ten female respondents say that they swear due to anger, six male and one female swear due to their desire to make a point, six male and five female say that it is due to pain, and finally eight male and seven female mention that it is due to excitement. From the four indicators, it is revealed that *anger* shows the highest rate for the female participants. One of the female participants stated that "I swear when I am very angry. It releases my intense feelings. After that I feel a lot better." Interestingly, another female participant revealed: "After my utterances of swear words, I say sorry. I feel that I say bad words."

Seemingly, the data presented in Figure 2 shows that the male participants use swear words in any of those facets. It can be viewed that six of the male participants have more desire to use swear words than female counterpart (male: 6; female: 1). While eight male and seven female participants express their use of swear words when they are excited, this seems to be the case to most people across cultures. According to Montopoli (2010), Joe Biden, the current Vice President of the United States, swore due to his excitement over the passing of the health care legislation on March 24, 2010 when he congratulated President Barack Obama with an outburst, "This is a big f***ing deal." This can be viewed that more people are gradually accepting the fact that swearing is inevitable and it becomes a part of their linguistic repertoire in carrying out conversation and in releasing stress and even expressing intense emotions.

The question "In what age group do you often swear?" is to know in which age group the male and female students utter swear words.

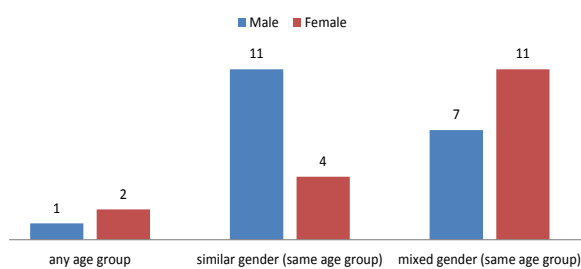


Figure 3. In what age group do you often swear?

Figure 3 shows that the female participants swear more in two different groups, namely any age group and mixed gender with same age group. The male participants, on the other hand, show a predominant swearing in similar gender with the same age group only. Two of the female students swear in any age group than the male counterpart (1), while in mixed gender with same age group, female participants (11) swear more than the male (7) participants. In similar gender with the same age group, female participants (4) swear less than the male ones (11). In relation to the mixed gender situation, a male participant commented: "I am not comfortable to swear in the presence of a female." Interestingly, it is revealed in this study that female participants do not show a sign of slowing down with regard to their use of swear words in a mixed gender with same age group. As stated by Jay (2009, p. 156), there is a tendency that "men and women swear more frequently in the presence of a group consisting only of their own gender than in mixed-gender contexts."

Considering that the younger generation nowadays are increasingly exposed to the media, the question

"What media has influenced your use of swear words?" is to find out the types of media that have influenced the students in using the swear words.

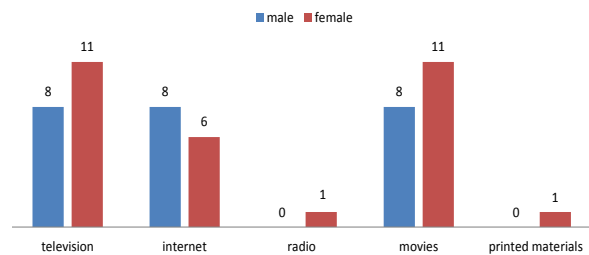


Figure 4. Media influence on the use of swear words

The findings indicate that television and movies are the media that have the highest influence over the use of swear words. Eight of the male participants and eleven of the female participants stated that they learnt the use of swear words from the two types of media which are television and movies. Internet influence ranks the second with eight male and six female participants. Finally, both radio and printed materials did not show a significant difference between male (0) and female (1) participants. It is noteworthy to mention that printed materials in this study include newspapers, tabloids and novels. According to a female participant, "I seldom read since I have a lot of homework to do in my different subjects. I guess those are my priorities." Another female participant added: "Once you watch a movie or television, translation is also provided. This exposes me more to swear words." Further, a male participant mentioned: "I am not fond of reading. Prefer to watch news in the television and watch movies."

Based on the responses of both gender groups, the female group seems to be more predominantly influenced by media. They stated that television and movies have greater clout since they utilized their visual and auditory senses every day. This confirms Jay & Janschewitz's (2013) finding that a greater portion of people who are influenced by media to swear are women. This is due to a greater proportion of women in public.

CONCLUSION

The results obtained in this study indicate that Lakoff's (2004) idea concerning 'females are the experts at euphemisms' still holds true. Despite the fact that the female participants in this study employ more swear words than the male counterpart, female participants still apply more expletives than their male counterpart when they converse.

It is also interesting to underscore that both male and female participants prefer to use the swear words in

their L1 (e.g. *anjing, tai, bangsat*) to exhibit a greater impact in their emotional resonance. On the other hand, the male participants use more swear words that are associated with sexuality than the female counterpart.

Likewise, the use of swear words is inevitable when the speakers want to express anger, pain, excitement and desire. Female students in this aspect swear more when they are angry while the male participants swear in all facets. In addition, females employ more swearing in any age group and in mixed gender (same age group) in comparison with their male counterparts. And apparently, the impact of media like movies and television are contributory factors for the exposure of the participants to use swear words.

In conclusion, swearing is inevitable and it becomes a part of the male and female linguistic repertoire. The notion that male swears more than female is not proven in this study. Both gender groups are said to employ the use of swear words – both in their L1 as well as in L2 – in carrying out conversation in order to release stress and express intense emotions. However, further research on the use of swear words in naturally occurring data should be conducted to see whether the swearing expressions do occur in real-life situation.

REFERENCES

- Edlund, A. (2007). *Language and gender*. Falun: Norstedts Akademiska Förlag.
- Harris, C. L. (2004). Bilingual speakers in the lab: Psychophysiological measures of emotional reactivity. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(2-3), 223-247. doi:10.1080/01434630408666530.
- Harris, C. L., Gleason, J.B., & Ayçiçeği, A. (2005). When is a First Language More Emotional? Psychophysiological Evidence from Bilingual Speakers. Retrieved from <http://www.bu.edu/psych/charris/papers/HarrisEmotionBiling.pdf>.
- Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(2), 153-161.
- Jay, T., & Janschewitz, K. (2013). The science of swearing. *Psychological Science*. Retrieved from www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2012/may-june-12/the-science-of-swearing.htm.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and women's place. *Language in Society*, 2(1), 45-80.
- Lakoff, R. (2004). *Language and woman's place: Text and commentaries*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ljung, M. (2007). *Swearwords*. Danmark: Nörhaven Paperback AS.
- Ljung, M. (2011). *Swearing: A cross-cultural linguistic study*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Montopoli, B. (2010). *Biden swears at bill signing: Just biden being biden? - Political hotsheet - CBS news*. Retrieved from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20001003-503544.html.
- Pinker, S. (2008). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sollid, H. (2009). *Attitudes to swear words: gender differences among native and non-native speakers of English*. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:158456/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.
- Spender, D. (1980). *Man made language*. Ontario: Pandora Press.
- Stephens, R. (2013). Swearing – the language of life and death. *The Psychologist*, 26(9), 650- 653.
- Suyanto, A. (2010). Javanese swear words in a boarding house: The case of five Soegijapranata Catholic university students. Unpublished thesis. Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang.
- Tannen, D. (2001). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Uchida, A. (1992). When difference is dominance: A critique of anti-power-based cultural approach to sex differences. *Language in Society*, 21(4), 547-568.
- Wang, N. (2013). An analysis of the pragmatic functions of “swearing” in interpersonal talk. *Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and Intercultural Communications*, 71-79.

Appendix: The questionnaire

This is a survey questionnaire to discover the students' perception towards swearing. Please answer as honestly as possible. All the participants will remain anonymous and the data given will only be applied to this study.

1. What are the top 5 swear words that you are using?

- | | |
|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 4. _____ |
| 2. _____ | 5. _____ |
| 3. _____ | |

2. What often times leads you to swear? (You may tick more than one choice.)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Anger | <input type="checkbox"/> Excitement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Desire to make a point | <input type="checkbox"/> Insult someone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pain | |

3. In what age group do you often swear? (You may tick more than one choice.)

- any age group
 similar gender (same age group)
 mixed gender (same age group)

4. What media has influenced your use of swear words? (You may tick more than one choice.)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Television (series, soap opera) | <input type="checkbox"/> Movies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Internet | <input type="checkbox"/> Printed Materials (e.g. novels, newspapers, tabloids) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Radio | |