

SWEARWORDS USED BY BENGKULUNESE: A CASE STUDY OF TABOO EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract: Swearwords are natural part of our language. They are used as the most healing way to throw away some extra frustration or anger in a difficult situation. Anderson lists three different motives for swearing: psychological motives, social motives and linguistic motives. The primary aim in this research is to find out swearwords that are commonly used by Bengkuluese people and the most frequent motives behind them. There are 20 Bengkuluese people as the participants of this research who filled in questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a table which consisted of two columns. The first is the swearwords column and the second one is the circumstances of the occurred swearwords which must be filled in by the participants completely. Based on the swearwords gained from the participants, there are 43 swearwords that are generally used by them in their daily speaking activity. Some of them are still in Indonesian language version and some other swearwords are from Bengkuluese language version. For example the word “sialan” and “kurang ajar” are Indonesian languages that are still understood by those who are not Bengkuluese, while the word “sea”, “bigal”, or “cuk mak” are based from Bengkuluese language.

Introduction

Swearwords are fascinating. Society condemns them, few admit to using them, and still, everybody swears, at least occasionally. Swearwords are a natural part of our language, and they are undoubtedly one of the most efficient ways to do away with extra frustration or anger in difficult situations. It has even been suggested that swearwords may be a factor in reducing stress (Crystal: 1995). Practically a languages in the world exhibit swearwords (Ljung: 1984). Some languages more than others, but on the whole, swearwords can be said to be a universal phenomenon. However, the use of swearwords in different languages and different cultures is not homogeneous – on the contrary, practices can be very varying. Different cultures may take their swearwords from different sources, and there are differences in swearing behavior between cultures. Each different culture has its own preferred way of doing things, its own conventions and norms, whether it will be regarding which side of the road to drive on or the use of

swearwords; and as much as translators must be at home in the language and culture they are translating from, they simply cannot ignore the preferred ways, conventions and norms of their own culture.

In this mini research, we will discuss swearwords, dirty words and dirty concepts, and several of the examples might come across as quite striking. At this point, we will soon discuss in more detail: the “dirtiness” associated with swearwords and foul language in general inhabits in our minds – not in the language or in the words themselves. Thus, theoretically speaking, the study of swearwords and dirty language is as motivated as any other linguistic studies. As Jay (1992) puts it, “this common and extensive phenomenon deserves the attention of psychologists, linguists and others interested in language and communication”. My primary aim in this mini research is to find out swearwords that are commonly used by Bengkuluese people and the most frequent motives behind them. The discussion on “dirty language” in this study focuses on

swearwords. As swearwords always refer to a taboo subject, the concept of taboo will be discussed in more detail. Euphemisms, which can practically be seen as swearwords from a pragmatic viewpoint, will also be touched upon. This study does not, however, discuss other aspects of “bad language” such as profanity, blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity, insults, racial slurs, etc., as they would simply take up too much space.

“Dirty” Language

Certainly, there is bad use of language in a variety of forms and situations, but as such, language is a neutral system of semiotic signs that enables us humans to communicate. Language and the use of language reveal norms and values in the culture in which the language is spoken (Daun: 1998). From a purely linguistic standpoint, the word ‘spade’ is as good and usable a word as, for instance, ‘shit’ – nothing in the words themselves characterize them as “good” or “bad”. The dirtiness of the word ‘shit’, and so called ‘foul language’ in general, exists only in people’s associations, values and attitudes towards non-linguistic issues (Andersson: 1985). When we see or hear the word ‘house’, we automatically think of a building made for people to live in. This, we have agreed on in the English language. Equally, when we see or hear the word ‘shit’, we think of human or animal excrement. However, even before we think of waste material from human or animal bodies, we react – it is a ‘dirty’ word. Something has altered or skewed the mental concept associated with this word, and accordingly, the primary function of the word ‘shit’ is no longer to refer to actual human or animal excrement – the word, referring to a concept our culture sees as taboo, has gained a widened

denotative meaning and become a dirty word, a swearword.

Taboo

The word ‘taboo’ has its etymological roots in the Polynesian societies, especially the Tongan islands (*Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. *taboo, tabu*), and it generally refers to something that is socially, culturally or religiously proscribed. We know that the word ‘*taboo*’ dates back to the 18 century, when Captain James Cook allegedly introduced the word into English. Besides that, *Collins English Dictionary* gives the following definition of ‘*taboo*’: something that is forbidden or disapproved of, placed under a social prohibition or ban resulting from social or other conventions, it is also, a ritual restriction or prohibition of something is considered holy or unclean. According to Andersson (1985), taboos are surrounded by feelings of guilt, repulsion, uncleanness or belief in supernatural forces. In his book *Totem and Taboo*, the Austrian physician and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1983), writes that taboo prohibitions have no rational grounds and that they are of unknown origin, signifying things that are unapproachable, uncommon or not generally accessible in our lives, Freud defines the concept of taboo in the following way: “The word ‘taboo’ denotes everything, whether a person or a place or a thing or a transitory condition, which is the vehicle or source of this mysterious attribute. It also denotes the prohibitions arising from the same attribute. And, finally, it has a connotation which includes alike ‘sacred’ and ‘above the ordinary’, as well as ‘dangerous’, ‘unclean’ and ‘uncanny’.

Taboos are not universal, but are created by each culture and each

language, although they often overlap. As there are many intercultural taboos, so are there culture-specific taboos. Take, for example, meat intended for human consumption. For the average *Finn*, meat is meat. For the average *Jew*, meat is either *Kosher* or taboo.

There are both behavioral taboos, for instance the prohibition against incestuous relations, and linguistic taboos, for instance the use of swearwords. Our behavioral taboos will reflect on our language, and with time, the actual words that are used to talk about the subject that is considered taboo will themselves become taboo. These taboo words tend to become swearwords, and in turn the terms we invent to circumvent taboo swearwords become euphemisms.

Sources of Taboo

Although taboos are not universal and all cultures are likely to have a number of culture-specific taboos, there are certain subjects and concepts that are taboo in almost all cultures. According to Andersson in Karjalainen (2002), western cultures generally take their taboo words, and thus swearwords, from one or more of the following categories:

- (a) Sexual organs, sexual relations
 - (b) Religion, church
 - (c) Excrement
 - (d) Death
 - (e) The physically or mentally disabled
 - (f) Prostitution
 - (g) Narcotics, crime
- (Karjalainen: 2002)

The first three categories seem pretty straightforward. Death certainly is a taboo subject if we think of all the different euphemistic ways of talking about death. The physically and mentally disabled, then surely, it would be nice if this was not a taboo subject, but for some reason, it is. We look away when we see a handicapped person, and when having a discussion with a mentally disabled

person, we try to remain open-minded and natural to the degree that we actually achieve the exact opposite. It should also be noted that words used when talking about the physically or mentally disadvantaged soon become loaded and offensive – take the words like ‘retard’ or ‘cretin’, which were originally neutral words – and are replaced by euphemisms. The two last categories, prostitution and narcotics and crime, are not perhaps the first things we think of when trying to find sources of taboo words.

From Taboo to Swearwords

Of all taboo usage of language, I would argue that swearwords are by far the most interesting. Everybody knows what a swearword is, and equally everybody knows how, when and when not to swear. As Ljung (1983) points out, it seems easy to point at several instances that might be called swearing, but it is difficult to define exactly the concept of swearing. When defining a swearword it is important to keep in mind that not all foul language is swearing. Most people would agree that the use of swearwords is an instance of foul or poor use of language. However, the reverse is not true – foul language does not always automatically mean that swearing is involved. For instance, the sentence “They were fucking like rabbits” may be regarded as poor or foul use of language, since there are, according to our linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions, less loaded and more accepted words that could be used instead, e.g. ‘making love’. The word ‘fuck’ in this example is not, however, an instance of swearing, since it is used in a technical sense, or in other words, used to signify the actual act of having intercourse. And this, argues Ljung (1984), is the first important point in defining a

swearword – it should be used in a non-technical sense. This explains why the word ‘bitch’ is appropriate at a dog show, but not when used to disparage a woman. In line with this requirement of non-technicality, the word ‘Jesus’ in the sentence “The life and teachings of Jesus forms the basis of Christianity” is not a swearword, but becomes one when used in an exclamation like “*Jesus fucking Christ!*” (Karjalainen: 2002).

Apart from being used in a non-technical sense, a word must also be taboo to classify as a swearword, or at least refer to a taboo subject or word (Ljung: 1984). A word or an expression should also be used in an emotive way to classify as a swearword, according to Ljung, who makes a difference between ‘emotive’ and ‘emotional’. The key to the difference between emotive and emotional is the degree of control a speaker has over a situation: if a person accidentally drops a hammer on his or her foot, he or she probably feels a certain amount of pain, but not enough to lose control – this may result in an emotive expression to vent frustration and anger, e.g. “Damn!” . However, if the same person drops a largish anvil on his or her foot, this very likely leads to a highly emotional, inarticulate groan or cry of pain (Ljung: 1984).

In a work by Andersson & Richard Hirsch (in Karjalainen: 2002), three conditions are given for a word or an expression to classify as a swearword: it refers to taboo and/or stigma (sign of social unacceptability) in a culture; it is not presumed to be interpreted literally; it can be used to manifest strong emotions and attitudes. However, it would seem that they in fact do agree, and that they are simply talking about the same things with different terminology. Whether they talk about taboo, stigma, non-technicality or the principle of non-

literal meaning, they have all outlined the same basic conditions.

From Swearwords to Euphemisms

Because swearwords are seen as instances of too direct, harsh, unpleasant or offensive language, we come up with less offensive synonyms, i.e. euphemisms. In their work *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language used as a shield and weapon*, Allan & Burridge (1991) state that euphemisms are used as alternatives to unwanted expressions in order to avoid possible loss of face, either one’s own or that of the hearer.

Sooner or later, all swearwords generate euphemisms and the stronger the taboo, the larger the number of avoidance forms (Hughes: 1991). We can avoid the use of taboo terms by resorting to more childish or technical variants, which still refer to the same thing.

Euphemisms allow us to start a word as if we are going to say a prohibited word, but instead of going all the way; we can turn off into more “innocent” channels. Some people consider euphemisms to be instances of swearing, some find them slightly more acceptable than the crude words they replace. Yet pragmatically, euphemisms function in a way identical to swearwords. Another alternative for avoiding the original swearwords is the use of dysphemisms (Allan & Burridge:1991), or the deliberate substitution of a neutral expression with a potentially more offensive one. While dysphemisms may sound coarse, they may actually work towards the same goal as euphemisms – avoiding the use of loaded, tabooed terms.

Why Do We Swear?

Swearing is generally considered to be bad use of language, an unnecessary linguistic feature that corrupts our language, sounds unpleasant

and uneducated, and could well be disposed of. At the same time, however, most people seem to have difficulties living up to their high linguistic ideals regarding swearwords, and consequently, swearing lives on (Andersson 1985: 110, Montagu 1967: 2, Andersson & Trudgill 1990: 8). Andersson lists three different motives for swearing: psychological motives, social motives and linguistic motives.

Psychological motives

Every day in our lives, we get angry or frustrated when unpleasant, unexpected events occur or things in general do not go according to plans. In these situations, the normal reaction is to release or express these strong feelings in one way or another – we may stamp our feet, gnash our teeth, hit a nearby object or simply let out a more or less forceful “argh”. However, following upon frustration or anger, arising from an unexpected event or shock, most people resort to swearing for an immediate vent of emotion (Montagu: 63, 72, Andersson: 110, Andersson & Trudgill: 53, Ljung 1984a: 11ff). These swearwords are not deliberate, but come more as a reflex. As Andersson points out, it does not matter if one gets one’s finger stuck in the door to the pub or to the church – the swearword will come all the same.

Social and Linguistic Motives

As any sociolinguist would agree, there are a number of social and linguistic motives for swearing, which might be quite deliberate and complex. For instance, we may swear to assert our identity in a group, to shock, to amuse, to insult, to indicate friendship, to mark social distance or social solidarity etc. When swearwords are used for these purposes, there is not necessarily any frustration or anger present. Social

swearing, according to David Crystal (1995), is the most common swearing pattern.

Social motives for swearing differ from psychological motives in that they involve more than one person, as social swearing depends on an audience to have any real function. Swearing in solitude has hardly any social significance, but when in company, swearing can be used for a number of reasons, as suggested above. In these cases, swearing is highly deliberate – we are using swearwords as rhetoric tools to achieve a certain reaction in the hearer. Swearwords are indeed most effective and shocking when they are uttered in situations and places where they are least expected (for instance, in church, in a public speech, etc.) (Andersson: 1985), and the same is true for the person who utters the swearword.

Definition of terms: Bengkulu

Before proceeding to discuss the methodology employed, it may be necessary to define the terms *Bengkulu* as used in this study firstly. Bengkulu is one of provinces in Indonesia. It is on the southwest coast of the island of Sumatra, and borders the provinces of West Sumatra, Jambi, South Sumatra and Lampung. The capital and largest city of the province is Bengkulu city. It was formerly the site of a British garrison, which they called *Bencoolen*. The province has a population of 2,405,060 (2006 census). There are also numbers of ethnics who have settled in Bengkulu province such as Bengkuluese, Rejangese, Palembangese, Minangese, Batakese, Javanese, Chinese, etc. The province also includes Enggano Island. Bengkulu lies near the Sunda Fault and is prone to earthquakes and tsunamis. In June 2000 a quake caused damage and the death of at least 100 people. A recent report predicts that Bengkulu is "at risk of

inundation over the next few decades from undersea earthquakes predicted along the coast of Sumatra". (Leirier: 2007).

Method

The type of this mini research is descriptive quantitative, additionally the researcher extracted several swearwords gained from Bengkuluese people. There are 20 Bengkuluese people as the participants of this mini research who filled in questionnaire. The questionnaire, then, contains a table which consists of two columns. The first is the swearwords column and the second one is the circumstances of the occurred swearwords which must be filled in by the participants completely. The questionnaire was employed in order to find out swearwords that are commonly used by Bengkuluese

The List of Swearwords: the taboo words sources

A. Sexual Organ

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	<i>Pantek</i>	5	25
2	<i>Pilat</i>	1	5
3	<i>Sea'</i>	1	5
4	<i>Gendek</i>	1	5
5	<i>Pantek mak kau</i>	1	5
6	<i>Hoi pepet</i>	1	5

Table 1

From the table above, it shows that the word "Pantek" is the most frequent swearword about sexual organs. There are 25 % of the participants who commonly used the word when they feel angry or become frustrated. The rest of the result shows that only 5 % of the participants who rarely used the word "Pilat", "Gendek", "Pantek mak kau", "Sea", and "hoi pepet".

people and the most frequent motives behind them.

Findings and Discussions

Based on the swearwords gained from the participants, there are 43 swearwords that are generally used by them in their daily speaking activity. Some of them are still in Indonesian language version and some other swearwords are from Bengkuluese language version. For example the word "sialan" and "kurang ajar" are Indonesian languages that are still understood by those who are not Bengkuluese, while the word "sea'", "bigal", or "cuk mak" are based from Bengkuluese language. The followings are the classification of the swearwords, gained from the participants, which have been classified into the sources of taboo words including the percentages and the frequency

B. Sexual Relations

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Cuk mak	1	5
2	Cuk mak kau	1	5
3	Cuk klawai	1	5
4	Kacuk nung kaban	1	5
5	Kacuk keladi	1	5

Table 2

From the table above, it can be seen that each word above results that 5% of the participants infrequently used the words in their daily speaking activity. It is perhaps that the words have vulgarly and roughly meanings among Bengkuluese people since it deals with human sexual relations.

C. Excretion

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Taik	4	20
2	Taik kucing	1	5

Table 3

The word “taik” is also the most frequent swearword that is commonly used by Bengkulu people. It shows that 15% of the participants who like to employ the word. On the other hand, the word “taik kucing” is less frequent swearword used by them.

D. Animal

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Monyet	2	10
2	Anjing	1	5
3	Babi	1	5
4	Tikus	1	5
5	kuyuk	1	5

Table 4

Based on the data above, it can be analyzed that the word “monyet” is commonly used by the participants. There are 10% of the participants who like to utter this swearword of animal. On the other hand, the rest of them show only 5% of the participants who rarely used the word “anjing”, “babi”, “tikus”, “kuyuk” in daily speaking activity.

E. Mentally Disabled

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Bigal	2	10
2	Cemen	1	5
3	Gilo	5	25
4	Dodol	1	5
5	Oon	1	5

Table 5

From the table above, it shows that the word “Gilo” is the most frequent swearword of mentally disabled. There are 25 % of the participants who commonly used the word when they feel mad or become very disappointed. The next swearword that is frequently used by the participants is “bigal”, the result shows that there are 10% of them who used the word when they feel angry or peevisish.

F. Physically Disabled

No.	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Boneng	1	5

Table 6

The word “Boneng” includes as swearword of human physically disabled. However, it shows that only 5% of the participants who used the word in daily speaking activity.

G. Prostitution

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Lonte	1	5
2	Gudua	1	5

Table 7

From the table above, it can be seen that each word has similar portion of swearwords that are commonly used by the participants. There are only 5% of them who infrequently used the swearwords in daily speaking activity.

H. Cursing

No	Swearwords	Frequency	%
1	Kurang ajar	7	35
2	Setan	4	20
3	Brengsek	3	15
4	Mampus	2	10
5	Keparat	2	10
6	Bangsats	1	5
7	Sialan	4	20
8	Kualat kau	1	5
9	Bajingan	1	5
10	Dak selamat	1	5
11	Palak bak kau	3	15
12	Iblis	1	5
13	Mbahmu	1	5
14	Kampret	1	5
15	Matilah kau	2	10

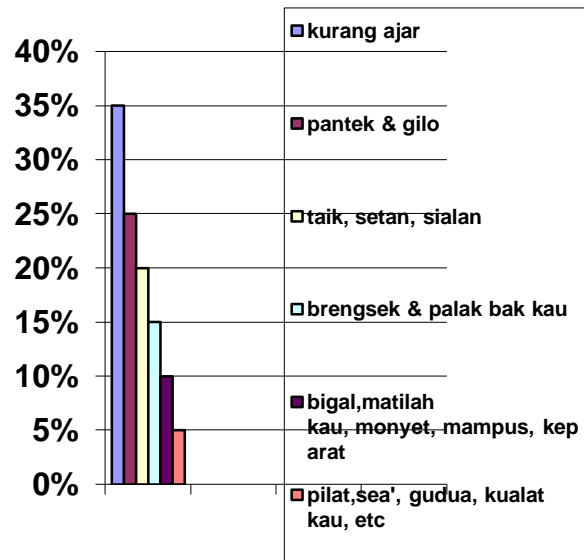
Table 8

Based on the data above, it shows that the word “kurang ajar” is the most frequent swearword that is commonly used by the participants which is about 30% of them who like to use it, the next swearwords which are frequently used by the participants are the word “sialan” and the

word “setan” (20%). Furthermore, the word “brengsek” and “palak bak kau” results 15% of the participants who usually used them. There are, additionally, 10% of the participants who also like to use the swearwords “mampus”, “keparat”, and “matilah kau” in their daily speaking activity. Last but not least, there are several swearwords that are also used by the participants. They are “bangsats”,

“kualat kau”, “bajingan”, “dak selamat”, “iblis”, “mbahmu”, and “kampret”. Each of the swearword results 5% of them who infrequently used them in daily life.

Chart 1. The Chart of the Most Frequent Swearwords



Based on the chart and the information from the previous tables above, it can be concluded that the word “kurang ajar” becomes the most frequent swearword that are commonly used by participants who are Bengkuluese people. There are 35% of the participants who often used this swearword of cursing. The next frequent swearwords that are generally used by the participants are the words “pantek” and “gilo” (25%). The swearwords “setan” and “sialan” are in the third place of the most frequent swearwords that are commonly used by the participants; the chart shows that there are 20% participants who like to use these words. There are 15% of the participants who frequently used the words “taik”, “brengsek”, “palak bak kau”. Furthermore, the swearwords “bigal”, “matilah kau”, “monyet”, “mampus”, and keparat are commonly used only by 10% of the participants. Finally, there are only 5% of the participants who used

swearwords “pilat”, “sea”, “gendek”, taik kucing”, “kualat kau”, “cuk mak”, “cuk klawai”, “mbahmu”, “kampret”, “bajingan”, “gudua”, “kuyuk”, etc in their daily speaking activity.

Swearwords Motives

There are at least two motives behind the use of swearwords, psychological motives; social and linguistic motives. When people get frustrated, disappointed, mad, or upset; it is allowed for them to say swearwords. As Crystal (1995) stated that swearwords can be employed to reduce someone’s stress. Here, those who use swearwords when they get mad or frustrated are dealing with psychological motives. Whereas social and linguistic motives are generally occurred to indicate several reasons, such as: to indicate friendship, to amuse, to show off, to show the group identity, etc. Based on the data gained from the participants, it can be drawn the motives behind the use of their swearwords in the following table.

Table 9. The Swearwords Motives

No	Motives	Swearwords	Frequency
1	Psychological Motives	Setan, Monyet, Kurang ajar, Taik, Pantek, Brengsek, Keparat, Mampus, Bigal, Bangsat, Sialan, Boneng, Ngok-ngok, Kualat kau, Gilo, Taik kucing, Bajingan, Dodol, Oon, Anjing, Pilat, Cuk mak, Cuk klawai, Gendek, Lonte, Sea’, Babi, Dak selamat, Cuk mak kau,	41

		Gudua, Palak bak kau, kacuk keladi, kacuk kelamai, Pantek mak kau, iblis, Kuyuk, Hoi pepet, Mbahmu, Kampret, Kacuk nung kaban, Matilah kau.	
2	Social & Linguistics Motives	Bigal, Cemen, Sialan, Tikus, Gilo	5

Based on the table above, it can be analyzed that there are 41 from 43 swearwords which have been used by the participants with psychological motives behind them. However, there are only 5 swearwords which are commonly used by the participants with which have social and linguistics within the use of swearwords. Moreover, the numbers in the brackets are written to show number of participants who frequently used the swearwords. In conclusion, psychological motives become the most frequently motives existed in people daily speaking activity since these motives are always followed by anger, frustration, disappointment, etc; when people use swearwords.

Conclusion

This mini research is an attempt to find out the swearwords that are commonly used by Bengkulu people and also the motives behind the swearwords themselves. It has been analyzed that the word “kurang ajar” is the most frequent swearword that are generally used by Bengkulu people when they feel angry, frustrated, disappointed, or infuriated; and there are several less frequent swearwords used by them such as “kualat kau”, “pilat”, “sea”, “gudua”, “cuk mak kau”, bajingan”, “hoi

pepet”, etc. Moreover, the psychological motives occurred frequently behind saying the swearword. It is, additionally, expected that the study of swearwords can contribute to the features of sociolinguistics study any further. Theoretically speaking, it is hoped that it can be as motivated as any other linguistic studies which have common and extensive phenomenon that deserves the attention of psychologists, linguists and others interested in language and communication. Thus, it is also expected that this study can be able to bring a smile or a grin to the face of the reader at least occasionally. After all, swearwords are quite fun to play with.

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