

SWEARING AMONG MALAYSIAN YOUTH

BY

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ABSTRACT

Previous findings have discovered an increase in swearing phenomenon among Malaysian youth. This is unexpected considering the emphasis on politeness and conflict avoidance in the Malaysian culture. This research aims to identify the common swear words and phrases among Malaysian youth in Malay and English languages. This research also focuses on revealing the functions of swearing and the factors influencing the usage of swear words among Malaysian youth. All in all, 1100 tweets, retweets and comments on the 14th Malaysian General Election (GE14) were collected and ten interview sessions were conducted with 28 university students from different races in Malaysia. From the tweets, retweets and comments, 49 Malay and 22 English individual swear words as well as phrases were identified by the researcher. The most common swear words among Malaysian youth identified from both tweets and interviews are ‘bodoh’ for the Malay language and ‘fuck’ for the English language. From the analyses, among the functions of expressing emotions, insulting others, making jokes and expressing solidarity, the highest occurrence is in insulting others. However, the data from the interviews demonstrate that making jokes and strengthening relationships are the most popular functions among the Malaysian youth. Co-participants, setting of interaction, topic of conversation and mood of the speakers are factors affecting the usage of swear words with co-participants as the most important one. These findings justified why swearing phenomenon is currently in the rise among Malaysian youth. However, they still adhere to their culture of politeness and maintaining harmony. Most of the time, they use swear words and phrases with close friends with the intention of making jokes and strengthening their bonds.

مُلخَصُ البَحْثِ

تُبيِّن الدراسات السابقة زيادة في ظاهرة الشتائم بين الشباب الماليزي، وهذا غير متوقع بالنظر إلى تحذُر صفات الأدب، وتجنُّب الصراع في الثقافة الماليزية، ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تعرُّف الكلمات والعبارات البذيئة الشائعة بين الشباب الماليزي باللغتين الملايوية والإنجليزية، والكشف عن وظائف الشتائم والعوامل المؤثرة في استخدامها بينهم؛ لذا جُمِعت 1100 من التغريدات والتغريدات المحولة والتعليقات على الانتخابات العامة الماليزية الرابعة عشرة، وأُجريت عشر مقابلات مع 28 طالبًا جامعيًا من أعراق مختلفة في ماليزيا؛ وحددت الباحثة 49 كلمة ملايوية و22 كلمة إنجليزية بذيئة يشيع استخدامها بين الشباب الماليزي، وأكثرها شيوعًا كلمتا "bodoh" في الملايوية و"fuck" في الإنجليزية، وأظهر تحليل بيانات التغريدات أن هذه الكلمات تُوظَّف للتعبير عن المشاعر، وإهانة الآخرين، وإلقاء النكات، والتعبير عن التضامن، وأن إهانة الآخرين هي الوظيفة الأكثر شيوعًا بين هذه الوظائف، وفي المقابل؛ أظهرت نتائج المقابلات أن إلقاء النكات وتعزيز العلاقات هما الوظيفتان الأكثر شيوعًا عند استخدام التعابير البذيئة بين الشباب الماليزي، وتبيَّن أن أهم العوامل التي تؤثر في استخدام هذه التعابير طبيعة المخاطب، وظروف الحديث، وموضوع المحادثة، ومزاج المخاطب؛ وقد سوَّغت هذه النتائج ظاهرة الشتائم بين الشباب الماليزي، ولكنهم - على الرغم من ذلك - ما زالوا متمسكين بثقافة الأدب والحفاظ على الانسجام مع الآخرين غالبًا، وأنهم يستخدمون كلمات وعبارات بذيئة مع الأصدقاء المقربين بقصد إلقاء النكات وتقوية الروابط.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Language Studies

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter examines and discusses the background of the study followed by the statement of the problem as identified by the researcher. It also includes research objectives, research questions as well as the scope set by the researcher in investigating the issue. It is then followed by the significance of this study. The chapter ends with the summary of organization for this whole thesis.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Communication is a vital element in our lives and it serves various purposes. Some of the purposes are to request something, to show agreement or to gain information. Different purposes will require different ways of communicating. People learn to communicate from parents, teachers as well as others in their surroundings. It is also important to note that there are many elements that should be considered when communicating with others. Some of them are gender, race and status of the interlocutors. To illustrate, the communication style between two friends will be different if compared with the style between a teacher and a student. People are required to talk formally and politely to teachers as a sign of respect. Meanwhile, talking casually and using some slangs when interacting with friends are common, especially among close friends. Likewise, the communication style may also differ according to the level of intimacy (Azman, Azmi, Maros & Abu Bakar, 2017; Fägersten, 2000; Ghafar, 2018; Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Taking the conversations between two strangers and two

close friends as examples, the strangers will converse in a more formal way compared to the two friends. Thus, it has been noted that the communication style between speakers may vary due to many factors.

As explained earlier, it is clear that different social backgrounds require speakers to communicate and behave differently in the interaction. If they fail to do so, it may result in misunderstanding or the listeners may consider the speaker rude or impolite. Apart from inappropriate behaviour and different communication styles, one can also be considered rude when using offensive language like swear words or vulgar phrases. Swearing in communication may cause misunderstanding and conflict between the involved parties. Hence, it is important for the speakers to take great consideration in the choice of words used to ensure that they are suitable and can be accepted by others in the interaction.

With regard to swearing, it has existed since ancient times but swear words are rarely uttered and recorded in writing (Montagu, 2001). Swear words had been used in Ancient Greek, Roman empire and in the Latin language, and were first recorded by Ancient Egyptians (Ljung, 2011). In some cases, the use of swear words in public is a serious offence and could lead to the death penalty (Ljung, 2011). During the 19th century, the use of swear words was opposed by the British society. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, swearing has become common and highly prevalent, especially among the youth (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). It has become a norm in contemporary language use regardless of serious resistance against swearing across different cultures (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

Another aspect of swearing that is worth noting is the existence of different types of swear words. Back in the old days, swear words in the English language were mostly related to sacred places and religious matters like ‘damn’ and ‘hell’ (Patrick, 1901). In

this present day, swear words can be classified under larger categories namely religions, diseases, parts of the body, sexual acts as well as bodily functions (Pinker, 2007; Rassin & Muris, 2005; Stapleton, 2010).

Despite the common use of swear words and phrases by people around the world, swearing is still highly condemned by most societies (Montagu, 2001). It is socially censured due to the use of obscene words and in formal settings, swearing is more likely to incur disapproval (Stapleton, 2010). It is important to note that swearing acceptance is different among people with different languages and cultures. For instance, Asians are conservative and their cultures discourage people from swearing while Europeans are more open-minded and liberal, thus they tend to accommodate the use of meaningless swear words in communication (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

Nevertheless, recent studies reveal that swearing is a common phenomenon among the youth in Malaysia (Azman et al., 2017). Readers Digest has ranked Kuala Lumpur 34th out of 36th major cities in the world in the list of least courteous cities (Lim & Tariq, 2012). Besides, Malaysia has also been ranked number 33 out of 35 countries in the world according to rudeness level (The Malaysian Times, 2012). Rudeness can be amplified by both behaviour as in mannerism as well as use of language. This clearly indicates that Malaysians' styles of communication have undergone some changes since the time of our forefathers. For instance, swearing has now become common among the youth. Hence, it is crucial to investigate the swearing phenomena in Malaysia and find some insights on this sociolinguistic issue.

Generally, swear words should be avoided by speakers as they are associated with impoliteness (Baudin & Paramasivam, 2014; Hughes, 2015). Commonly, swear words would be used to express negative emotions such as anger, madness, frustration, hatred as well as annoyance (Stapleton, 2010). Nevertheless, recent studies carried out

by linguists on profanity have revealed that it is not necessarily linked to negativity (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015; Wang, Chen, Thirunarayan, & Sheth, 2014).

Several studies have documented that there are some circumstances in which swearing are used to express positive emotions such as joy and love (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Furthermore, according to the research conducted by Pluszczyk (2015), swear words are also used to portray harmony, solidarity as well as to create humour. Even though these cases have been proven by scholars, the studies were mainly conducted in Western societies (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). There is little published research on swearing in Eastern societies, specifically the Malaysian society (Azman et al., 2017; Baudin & Paramasivam, 2014). It is still unproven whether similar situation and findings can be observed in the Malaysian context. Thus, it is necessary to explore the most common swear words used by Malaysian youth in the social media, the functions of swearing and the factors affecting the use of swear words in their interactions.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The swearing phenomenon has received considerable attention in the West due to its complexity and effect on communication. Many studies have been conducted in Western societies on this phenomenon across different mediums using different samples. For instance, some studied on swear words in social media platforms such as Twitter (Darma, Wennyta & Fitri, 2017; Wang et al., 2014), in movie scripts (Mahayana, 2017; Pluszczyk, 2015), and corpus (Twenge, VanLandingham & Campbell, 2017). Meanwhile, some investigated the usage of swear words among factory workers (Daly, Holmes, Netwon & Stubbe, 2004), female traders (Irer, Nthiga & Muriithi, 2017), college and university students (Dehraj, Dehraj Mansoor & Arshi,

2017; Fägersten, 2007; Jay, King & Duncan, 2006; Pilotti, Almand, Mahamane, & Martinez; 2012; Rahman, 2017) as well as among native speakers and foreign language users (Dewaele, 2016).

Some studies have even found that swearing is used to express positive emotions such as to make jokes and strengthen bond between friends (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Despite the numerous findings and extensive researches done in Western societies, it still remains a question whether similar cases happen in Malaysia.

Previous study by Azman et al. (2017) as well as Baudin and Paramasivam (2014) have reported that swearing is now a common phenomenon among youth in Malaysia despite indirectness and politeness in the Malaysian culture (Barkema, Chen, George, Luo, & Tsui, 2015; Kim, Lee, & Mattila, 2014; Liu, Meng, & Fellows, 2015). Those who swear are considered unintelligent, immature and emotionally unstable (Pinker, 2007; Vingerhoets, Bylsma, & De Vlam, 2013). This will affect their social life since most people are not comfortable with swearing, especially the older generations. It is inappropriate and can also lead to miscommunication as well as conflict (Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann, 2003). When swear words are used in arguments, it can lead to violence due to its sensitive nature.

Although studies have recognized the prevalence of swearing phenomenon in Malaysia, there remains a paucity on research about it. Thus, it is important to investigate the usage of profanity among members of the Malaysian community, specifically Malaysian youth.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The targeted population for this current study is the youth since they are expected to use more swear words compared to the general adult population (Jay, 2009). According to the 1997 National Youth Development Policy of Malaysia, youth is defined as young people between 15 to 40 years old. It is assumed that they are likely to be the agents of social change for language in Malaysia. Besides that, previous research on swearing (Azman et al., 2017) show evidence that swearing is frequent within this speech community. Youth is also the population which is most affected by the changing nature of language due to globalization (Doku & Asante, 2011). This particular segment of population has been exposed to the Western culture via social media which are accessible worldwide due to the Internet. Thus, this group of speech community provides the relevant data for this present study.

The data for the current study were collected from the tweets and comments on social media specifically Twitter. Twitter is a personal broadcast network that allows the users to express their feelings through texts, images and videos without necessarily getting a response. According to the data presented by Statista (2018), the number of active Twitter users increases every year with only 1.5 million in 2014 to 2.2 million in 2018. Besides that, Statcounter (2018) indicates that Malaysian users have become more active on Twitter from only 4.86% usage in January 2018 to 9.93% usage in August 2018. Hence, the social networking site, Twitter, provides ample data for this current research.

According to Malaysian statistics on general elections, Malaysians aged 21-39 made up the majority of registered voters in the 14th Malaysian General Election (GE14) with 41% (Chow, 2018). Other age ranges were made up of 39% (40-59 years old) and 20% (60-80 years old and above) of the registered voters. 9th May was a historical

moment for all Malaysians when the ruling party of 60 years was overthrown (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2018). This has brought many reactions from Malaysians especially the vast majority of voters who consisted of youth who expressed their feelings in social media such as Twitter (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2018).

The announcement made by the government on holding the voting on Wednesday as well as the corruption problem faced by members of the then ruling party had sparked various emotions in the citizens (Tan, 2018; Welsh, 2018). Social media, especially Twitter, were flooded with hashtags dedicated to GE14 and the hashtags trended during that time (Kaur, 2018; Mohan, 2018). Hence, this current research focuses on this issue to collect the data in answering the research questions.

Besides the data collected from Twitter, the researcher also conducted interviews to acquire in-depth data on the perceptions of swearing among youth in Malaysia. The respondents were undergraduate students of Universiti Teknikal Melaka (UTeM) who consisted of Malay, Chinese and Indian students. Since the respondents were youth of different races, the data would be more reliable in providing better insights on the common English and Malay swear words among youth in Malaysia as well as the functions of swearing and the factors influencing its usage.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The key research objectives of this study are listed below:

1. To identify the Malay and English swear words and phrases commonly used by Malaysian youth.
2. To examine the functions of swearing among Malaysian youth.
3. To investigate the factors that influence the usage of swear words among Malaysian youth.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research seeks to address the following questions:

1. What are the swear words and phrases commonly used by Malaysian youth?
2. What are the functions of swearing among Malaysian youth?
3. What are the factors that influence the usage of swear words among Malaysian youth?

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research is significant as the findings shed new light on the current perception of Malaysian youth towards the usage of profanity. Although profanity exists in every culture, this topic is still understudied due to its sensitive nature. The study on linguistic taboos adds a new dimension to the understanding of how humans react to the world around them by creating prohibitions to avoid certain behaviour. It gives ample information on the social customs, religious beliefs as well as the political system of a community. It also allows the researcher to understand the ways one community reacts to certain issues.

According to Lakoff (2001), the detailed analysis of the language used in a particular society is essential to provide an insight into the complexity of what is considered acceptable in different communities. To date, there have been limited studies on swearing specifically in Malaysia, hence this study sets out to find the linguistic behaviour of Malaysian youth in swearing. Furthermore, it is one of the duties of linguists to identify and document the changes in language used in a community. Therefore, this study can contribute to this area of research and act as guidance or reference to study the use of swear words in different languages or mediums.

Subsequently, this study also provides new insights into the functions of swearing among the Malaysian youth nowadays. Since Western scholars have discovered that swearing also serves as a tool to create humour, demonstrate solidarity as well as to portray positive emotions (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Pluszczyk, 2015; Wang et al., 2014), this present study will fill in the gap by proving whether the same circumstances are also observed in an Eastern society, namely the Malaysian community. By understanding the functions of swearing, this study makes a major contribution to the study of language use among youth nowadays.

This study is useful for the youth as well as adults in grasping the reasons behind the utterance of swear words. The risk of conflict and miscommunication can be hindered when knowing that there are positive functions of using swear words such as strengthening the bond and making jokes. Teachers, as well as parents, can be more understanding and accepting of the change in language used by today's youth.

1.8 ORGANISATION OF THESIS

The first chapter covers the background of the study and discusses the problem addressed in this study. It also includes the scope of the study, research objectives, research questions and elaborates more on the significance of this study. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature that summarises the findings related to the area of study. This literature review aims towards exposing the current state of the topic under study and identifying the key gaps in the field of study. This chapter also provides the two frameworks that guide the study. In the third chapter, the methods used in collecting and analysing the data are presented and discussed. The summary of the methods is presented in Table 1.1 (refer to table below). Chapter Four highlights the results of the study and provides further discussions on the findings. The final chapter includes the

conclusion of the findings, the implications as well as the limitations of this current study. It also provides recommendations for future researchers.

Table 1.1 Research Questions, Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods

Research Questions	Data Collection Method	Data Analysis Method
1. What are the swear words and phrases commonly used by Malaysian youth?	Twitter (1,100 tweets, comments, retweets on the 14 th Malaysian General Election) Focus group interviews with 28 undergraduate students from UTeM	Content analysis on the tweets, comments and retweets as well as the interview transcriptions based on the types of swear words (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Ghafar, 2018; Pinker, 2007; Rahman, 2017; Rassin & Muris, 2005; Stapleton, 2010)
2. What are the functions of swearing among Malaysian youth?	Twitter (1,100 tweets, comments, retweets on the 14 th Malaysian General Election) Focus group interviews with 28 undergraduate students from UTeM	Content analysis on the tweets, comments and retweets as well as the interviews transcriptions based on the conceptual framework developed by Pluszczyk (2015)
3. What are the factors that influence the usage of swear words among Malaysian youth?	Focus group interviews with 28 undergraduate students from UTeM	Content analysis on the transcription of the interviews based on the conceptual framework developed by Fägersten (2000)

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter provides an understanding on the relationship between taboo, language as well as culture. The relationship between swearing and culture is also discussed in this chapter. It also offers an insight on the previous researches done on functions and factors influencing swearing. Next, it explains further the language preferences in swearing and the existing studies on youth as well as swearing in the Asian context. This chapter later provides the conceptual frameworks used to guide this current research.

2.2 TABOO, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Social constraints on people's behaviour come from the society's beliefs of certain aspects of life. This concept is widely known as taboo (Allan & Burridge, 2006). It is viewed as undesirable and dirty (Burridge, 2010). The constraints exist as the society believes that if performed, it can cause discomfort to or harm people. Violation of the taboo may also lead to exclusion from a society or group, punishment by the authority, getting sick or even dying (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Mbaya (2002) shares in his paper that people in the Oromo culture (Ethiopia, Africa) believe that women who violate the taboo will give birth to babies with a scaly skin disease, cause misfortune or death to her husband or endanger the community's hunting, fishing or agricultural livelihoods.

According to Allan and Burridge (2006), there are five categories of taboo which are:

1. Bodies and bodily discharge like sweat, faeces, menstrual blood and snot.

2. Organs, sexual acts and act of urinating as well as defecating.
3. Illnesses, death and acts of killing such as hunting and fishing.
4. Acts of naming, addressing, touching and viewing individuals, holy creatures, objects or places.
5. Food and acts of gathering, preparing and consuming food.

Things that are considered to be inappropriate or taboo in a community, may not be similar in other communities. This is because taboo derived from cultural beliefs of every particular society. It is acquired through interactions with other members of the same social group and are later strengthened through existing institutions in the community such as family, workplace, school or religious institution (Kramsch & Widdowson, 1998). For instance, in table manners, Chileans perceived using fingers to eat instead of using utensils as bad behavior (Boscamp, 2013). Thus, this shows that taboo is influenced by the cultural beliefs of every society.

Beliefs and values are also portrayed in the language use of community members. These include what is appropriate and inappropriate to say to others and the certain ways people should communicate with each other. Different societies may have different understanding and perceptions towards taboo words and phrases due to their different worldviews and the complex relationship between language and culture. Hence, it is not surprising when different groups of people have different linguistic taboos or swear words and phrases. However, that does not mean that there will not be similarities at all. Similarities and differences in terms of taboo words and phrases have been observed in previous researches (Mbaya, 2002; Yusoff, 2007).

Mbaya (2002) studies the languages of traditional Africa and found that words for sex, parts of the body and death are considered as taboo words. Apart from that, certain bird and animal names as well as words for marriage and kinship relations are

also categorized as taboo words. For example, since the word 'sex' is taboo, it has been substituted with other words like 'meru' (eyes) in Ciluba language (Congo) and 'kanam' (face) in Wolof language (Senegal). It is also taboo in the African culture to call the elders by their names. In Mandingo (Senegal), they are usually addressed as 'Kollo' (elder brother) and 'Diadia' (elder sister). Even husbands and wives are prohibited from calling each other by names out of respect. In Luba (Congo), husbands will be addressed as chiefs or dads while wives will be called 'Muina kuanyi' (the owner of my house) or 'Mwa bana' (the mother of children).

These instances of kinship terms can also be found in Malay culture (Yusoff, 2007). The younger or elder sister of one's father or mother (who is normally referred to as 'aunt' in English) will be called 'Mak Long', 'Mak Ngah', 'Mak Lang', 'Mak Cik' or 'Mak Su' depending on the birth order. The examples above show that both African and Malay languages have similarities in terms of taboo when addressing the elders. Nevertheless, both also have distinction in terms of the specifications of the terms as Malay language addresses the elders more specifically according to their birth order.

Malay society also has taboo words related to mental intelligence and animal. For instance, the word 'dungu' that refers to stupid, as well as the words 'babi' and 'anjing' that refers to pig and dog (Ahmad et al., 2016; Haidir, & Mulyadi, 2019). Other than that, there are also words related to parts of body such as the words 'pukimak' that means 'mother's vagina' and 'tetek' which means breast. All of these words are considered taboo in Malay society and those who used these words in communication will be considered rude.

In Yemeni society (Qanbar, 2011), apart from the words related to sex and private body organs, words referring to present political figures or system are also considered as taboo. This is due to the current political scene in Yemen that started with