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The potential of words to become swearing: an ethnosemantic study

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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.

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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, 2019:175). 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 and Wijayanti, 2023:130). Previous research has examined the sociolinguistic function of swearing. Swearing can be offensive and a tool to express negative emotions (Fägersten and Stapleton 2017; Ras-sin and 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

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rhetorically and add emphasis to a message (see Bednarek 2019; Fägersten 2012; Fägersten and Stapleton 2017; Daly et al. 2004; Dynel 2012; Stapleton 2010). Furthermore, swearing may be used as a way 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 swear 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 and Xiao 2004; Schweinberger, 2018), gender (e.g. Gauthier and 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.

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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. 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

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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.

Method

This study examines the phenomenon of swear word usage. Swear words can show expressions of emotion, anger, disappointment, and others. To obtain swear words, documentation was carried out on the use of swear words on social media in the form of oral and written trigger texts and comments. Swear data is classified according to its type. To present the research findings, an ethnosemantic approach was used. Through ethnosemantic studies, findings will be obtained in the form of the potential of words to become swear words. The ethnosemantic analysis method uses conceptual meaning analysis according to the ideas, concepts, and culture of the speaker's community. Swear texts are obtained through documentation. However, to confirm the truth of the conceptual meaning and its influence, in-depth interviews were conducted with different users directly. Researchers also use the views and cultural knowledge of the surrounding community in representing the conceptual meaning of the swear words used.

Results and Discussion

Result: The form and meaning of swear words

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.

(1) Hakim *asu*.

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

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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) *Bapakmu!*

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) *Cangkemmu! / lambemu!* 'your mouth'

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.

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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 swears with the word *matamu*. People who do not watch their mouths have the potential to be swears 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*.

d. Food swear words

Here are swear words in the form of food words

(4) *Asem*!

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 swears 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 ethnosemantic studies. Nugrahani and Parela (2022) found variations in words by developing component analysis with the same meaning field in ethnosemantic 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

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agreements. Second, swear words are used because the conceptual meaning of the word is not possessed by the person being swears (sworn at).

Previous research, through ethnosemantic studies, found additional vocabulary and meanings (Sucipto, 2018). Semantic meaning component analysis is a way of conducting analysis. Through ethnosemantic 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 swears 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 uncleanness 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 ethnosemantic 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 ethnosemantic approach of the speaker. The use of monkey as a swear word is an expression

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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 swears. 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 swears. 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 ethnosemantic conceptual meaning, which is different from other societies. This is caused by differences in ideas, concepts, and cultures that bind the speakers.

Declarations

Fitri Amilia was responsible for the entire research project. She also led the writing of the manuscript and the collaboration with the second and the third author. Astri Widayaruli Anggraeni and Anita Fatimatul Laeli participated in the data collection, transcription and analysis. She also revised the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

Author contribution

: Fitri Amilia was responsible for the entire research project. She also led the writing of the manuscript and the collaboration with the second and the third author. Astri Widayaruli Anggraeni and Anita Fatimatul Laeli participated in the data collection, transcription and analysis. She also revised the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript.

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