

Female English Swearing on *Whatsapp* Communications: A Sociolinguistics perspective

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Abstract

Traditionally, swearing was considered a taboo subject. However, in today's era swearing has become a common thing. It is practiced not only by men but women also practice it. To avoid social impoliteness, it is practiced in various ways, purposes, and languages based on the context. This research analyzed the types and functions of English swearing used by females on *WhatsApp* seen from a sociolinguistics perspective. Ljung (2011) and Vingerhoets & Bylsma (2013)'s theories were applied in this research. Observations were conducted through *WhatsApp* stories in gaining eight written utterances data and virtual interviews were conducted by eight participants in gaining the functions of swearing data. The results show four types of swear words covered the use of swearing, namely: religious theme, scatological theme, sexual activities theme, and mother/family theme. Each of these themes has different functions depending on the context of utterances. Other results indicate that females function English swearing in intra-individual and inter-individual. Intra-individual functions lead to show anger, frustration, and annoyance. Inter-individual functions lead to insulting others and showing solidarity. These functions were triggered by positive emotions (excitement and chill out with friends) and negative emotions (anger, frustration, and annoyance). Mostly Females swear triggered by negative emotions.

Key words: *Swearing; English Swearing; Taboo word; English learner students*

Abstrak

Secara tradisional, sumpah serapah dianggap sebagai hal yang tabu. Namun, di era sekarang ini sumpah serapah sudah menjadi hal yang lumrah. Itu tidak hanya dipraktikkan oleh laki-laki, tetapi juga dipraktikkan oleh wanita. Untuk menghindari ketidaksopanan sosial, itu dipraktikkan dalam berbagai cara, tujuan, dan bahasa berdasarkan konteksnya. Penelitian ini menganalisis jenis dan fungsi umpatan berbahasa Inggris yang digunakan oleh wanita di *WhatsApp* dilihat dari perspektif Sociolinguistik. Teori Ljung (2011) dan Vingerhoets & Bylsma (2013) diterapkan dalam penelitian ini. Observasi dilakukan melalui *WhatsApp* Stories dalam mendapatkan delapan data tuturan tertulis dan wawancara virtual dilakukan oleh delapan partisipan untuk mendapatkan data fungsi makian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat jenis makian yang menutupi penggunaan umpatan, yaitu: tema religi, tema skatologis, tema aktivitas seksual, dan tema ibu/keluarga. Masing-masing tema tersebut memiliki fungsi yang berbeda tergantung pada konteks tuturan. Hasil lain menunjukkan bahwa perempuan memfungsikan umpatan bahasa Inggris secara intra-individu dan antar-individu. Fungsi intra-individu mengarah pada ekspresi kemarahan, frustrasi, dan kejengkelan. Fungsi antar individu mengarah pada menghina orang lain dan menunjukkan solidaritas. Fungsi-fungsi ini dipicu oleh emosi positif (kegembiraan dan bersantai dengan teman) dan emosi negatif (marah, frustrasi, dan jengkel). Kebanyakan Wanita bersumpah dipicu oleh emosi negatif.

Kata kunci : *Sumpah Serapah; Sumpah Serapah Bahasa Inggris; Kata tabu; Pelajar-pelajar Bahasa Inggris*

A. Introduction

Swearing is a natural habit of people in saying something that is considered taboo in social life. It consists of rude language which is inappropriate to say. Although it is considered a taboo subject, it does not require the possibility that swearing still often occurs in the community without being limited by age, gender, and personal background. At this time, the use of swearing language is not only used by male figures but it is also used by female figures. Supported by the increase in digital communication, this makes swearing no longer a taboo subject but a common subject.

Many speakers use swearing language in digital communications such as *WhatsApp* in delivering their particular message, especially among female speakers. Since females are considered more advanced in language development than males (Maulina 2019), it does not require that females also swear by using their second language. Moreover, they express it in different types of swear words. In expressing swear words, they have different purposes based on the context of the utterances.

According to Ljung (2011), swearing is part of an expression that contains taboo words. Taboo words themselves are inappropriate to say because they lead to negative utterances. Although taboo words are different from swearing, swearing is also part of taboo utterances because it has a non-literal meaning (Ljung 2011). Jay (2009) categorized English taboos, involved sexual references, profane or blasphemous, scatological referents and disgusting objects, animal names, ethnic-racial-gender slurs, insulting references, ancestral allusion, substandard vulgar terms, and offensive slang. Moreover, most speakers in uttering swear words use high intonation, stress, and tone of voice (Ljung 2011). Hence, swearing is considered socially impolite around society.

Although swearing is considered socially impolite, some people still practice swearing. Certain situations underlie a person in swearing. Setiawan & Fatimatuzzahroh (2018) showed five different situations covering someone uttering swear words, namely: *get angry, get mad, chill out with friends, joking, habit, and annoyance*. Getting angry and getting mad are the most common situations triggering someone to swear. These situations are intended to show their negative emotion that will release their anger (Wright & Mokbel 2016). Whilst, chilling out with friends followed by joking come to the positive side of swearing that builds solidarity in a group. The fifth situation is habituation, this situation is more lead to the habit of mentioning swear words to emphasize the utterance. By emphasizing the utterance, it shows their self-identity and their coolness. The last situation is an annoyance situation, this situation comes from the effect of abusive swearing. Hence, this situation leads to the self-defending of the swearer in mocking their enemies.

In doing swearing, some people do swearing differently. (Ljung 2011) proposed types of swear words in two ways, they are based on the themes and the functions. Themes are commonly related to how the swear words are formed in each area of swear words. Functions are commonly related to the purposes of speakers in mentioning swear words. Firstly, there are five types of swear words based on the themes, namely: religious or supernatural theme, scatological theme, sex organ theme, sexual activities theme, and mother (family) theme. Secondly, there are two types of swear words based on the functions, namely: stand-alone and slot fillers. Stand-alone functions are included as expletive interjections, oaths, curses, affirmation and contradiction, unfriendly suggestions, ritual insults, and name-calling. Whereas, slot fillers use to make the longer utterances, including adverbial or adjectival intensifiers, adjectives of dislike, emphasis, modal adverbials, anaphoric use of epithets, and noun supports.

Some people function swear words based on their purposes both personal and inter-personal. Vingerhoets & Bylsma (2013) proposed two functions of swearing: intra-individual functions and inter-individual functions. Intra-individual functions deal with expressing intense emotions (anger, annoyance, frustration). Since swearing can be the effect of catharsis, it has a positive impact on releasing anger and pain. It is supported by Stephens & Umland (2011) in their experiment. The participants were asked to hold ice water while saying swear words and natural words. It demonstrated that the participants who said swear word could endure their pain compared to participants who said a natural word. This function is different from the inter-individual function. The inter-individual function of swearing deals with the interpersonal context of the message. Swearing in an inter-individual of negative context will be perceived as a harmful effect on others. However, in a positive context, swearing will be used to show credibility, humor, group binding, and identity maker. Some example of swearing practice in a short conversation in inter-individual function between two urban working-class Australian Aboriginal girls as follows (Allan 2006):

A: *If I had a pussy like yours I'd take it to the cats' home and have it put down . . .*

B: *If I had brains like yours I'd ask for a refund . . .*

A: *Well, if I had tits like yours I'd sell them off for basket balls . . .*

The habit of swearing is not necessarily only carried out by certain genders or certain social statuses. Everyone, including men and women, low-social class and high-social class do swearing equally. Although, the use of swearing language between men and women is different. Ljung (2011) claimed that women tend to use milder and fewer swear words than men. This is due to social views which think that women are considered very improper to do swearing. In using milder swearing, L2 swear words are commonly preferred by women rather than L1 swear words. Harris (2004) showed that L1 swear word is considered more forceful rather than L2, L3, or the learned language. This is one reason why women tend to avoid using L1 language. Women do not necessarily do swearing, but certain reasons make them do it. Nicolau & Sukamto (2011) in their research stated that women tend to do swearing caused of angry situations compared to men who tend to do the swearing in all situations. Allan (2006) revealed that Australian Aboriginal girls do swearing by considering the context. Not all swearing is aimed to show negative emotion but swearing is also used to build solidarity in a group.

Previous studies have been examined related to this topic. The first previous study was conducted by Nicolau & Sukamto (2011). This study was concerned about male and female attitudes towards swear words. This study observed the types, frequency, media influences, and interlocutors of mentioning swear words. Since the participants were bilingual students of an International school, the participants do the swearing in both Indonesian swear words and English swear words. The result showed that the male students mentioned four Indonesian swear words and six English swear words. It was different from female students, they mentioned two Indonesian swear words and eight English swear words. This showed that female participants employed more swear words rather than male participants. The female participants mentioned swear words were in angry situations but male participants mentioned swear words in all situations. Concerning the functions of swear words, the swear words were used to express anger, pain, excitement, and desire.

The second study also has the same topic as this present study. The study was concerned about a male attitude toward swearing words based on the pragmatic meaning and social functions. Since the participants were Indonesian, the swear words were produced in Javanese, Indonesian, and English swear words. The result showed that the male tends to produce Javanese sexual swear words (*jancuk*) and Indonesian animal names (*anjing*). The

males functioned the swear words into two functions, namely: intra-individual and inter-individual. The males more functioned swearing as inter-individual (keeping relation with friends, emphasizing something, expressing habitual, and showing self-identity. Meanwhile, the intra-individual functioned as the realization of cathartic swearing (*releasing anger and pain*). These functions were triggered by certain situations, namely: *Getting angry, getting mad, and chilling out with friends*. They were the most common situations in expressing swear words.

Those previous studies are different from this present study. This present study tries to explore swearing in English used by females from a sociolinguistics perspective. Since some females do the swearing in English, it is done differently from one to another. Therefore, this study aims to find out what types of English swearing are often used by females and how they function English swearing in digital communication.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative research method in collecting data and analyzing data. Mack et al. (2005:1) stated that “qualitative research is effective in gaining specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of a particular population.” A qualitative method investigates the kinds of method - the qualities - inside the data and decide the reason why particular speakers used precise context, especially human beings (Wray et al., 1998, as cited in Cholidah 2017). Hence, a qualitative method was appropriate to analyze “Female English Swearing on WhatsApp Communication from a Sociolinguistics perspective.

The subjects of this study were eight senior English Department female students of Universitas Negeri Surabaya. These students used English swearing more often than other students. The source of data was eight written utterances taken from *WhatsApp* stories containing English swearing.

In collecting the data, this study used non-participatory observation by collecting the *WhatsApp* stories containing English swearing using a cell phone. This study also used structured interviews by using interview guidelines. In doing interviews, the researcher determined the informants who have used swear words. Then, the researcher was conducting virtual interviews through personal chattings with the participants who have used English swearing on *WhatsApp* stories by asking some questions related to the research questions.

In analyzing the data, this study used Miles et al. (2014) theory in which the data was condensed by choosing data samples according to the theme of each type and reducing other unrelated types. Next, the data was displayed in the form of written utterances containing English swearing on *WhatsApp* stories. The last, all of the data were concluded and examined for validity by linking the theoretical basis of Ljung (2011) and Vingerhoets & Bylsma (2013).

C. Finding and Discussion

Finding

In this chapter, it has two major parts: finding and discussion. In finding, it shows the data which is found in *Whatsapp* stories. The finding covers the types and functions of English swearing based on the themes.

1. English Swearing related to religious/supernatural theme

The religious or supernatural theme is related to the religious terms of human belief. Based on the Christian beliefs, Ljung (2011) proposed that the term swearing is divided into

two parts, they are celestial (*God, Jesus/Christ, Holy Ghost, and The Saint*) and diabolic (*Devil, The hell*). Mostly, female students tend to mention celestial and diabolic swearing. The finding showed two English swearings related to diabolic and celestial swearing, namely: *Hell* and *God*. The data were found in two ways:

- (01) ***What the hell***, doing internship while doing other duties
 (02) ***OMG!*** These men are so cutie

The two data above show that English swearing is related to religious terms mentioned in different ways. Those two data contain expletive interjections in a different context. Thus, the functions are different between datum (01) and datum (02).

Datum (01) shows diabolic swearing *what the hell*. Based on the Oxford online dictionary, *hell* is a belief for some religious people as a place of eternal fire under the earth as a form of punishment for evil-doer after death. The phrase comes firstly at the beginning of the utterance which means expletive interjection. This phrase has certain stress compared to other utterances. It was also supported by a comma to separate the swearing from other utterances. Ljung (2011) showed that expletive interjection of swearing in the form of single words, phrases, or clauses is mentioned to express strong feelings, annoyance, frustration, and anger.

The datum (01) shows the English swearing *what the hell* reflects the speaker's disappointment with her double duties in doing the internship. This finding was also supported by the data conducted from the interview. The student mentioned English swearing in the context of (01) was to show her frustration. The *hell* is considered to have much power when it is said to others (Ljung 2011). Hence, by saying this expletive interjection, it will release her anger, pain, and stress (Cho & Tian 2020).

Datum (02) consists of celestial swearing *God* in the utterance *OMG*. *OMG* stands for *Oh My God*. This phrase was mentioned at the beginning of the utterances by using an exclamation mark. This means that this phrase is an expletive interjection. Since it consists of the word *God* in the utterance, it becomes a swearing. *God* in the Oxford online dictionary means a spirit worshiped in various religions that have power over nature and human fortunes. In datum (02), the swearing *OMG* as an expletive interjection was used to show excitement with the men who were considered to have cute faces. This finding was proven by the interview data, the student did not consider *OMG* as a swearing because the word *God* was typically mild swearing (Ljung, 2011). Therefore, both diabolic and celestial have differently functioned based on the contexts themselves.

2. English Swearing related to scatological theme

Sarnika, (2018) stated that Scatological swear words come from the excrement terms that are considered to be dirty, disgusting, and rude. Ljung (2011) showed that English scatological swearing involved *ass, asshole, arsehole, piss, shit, crap, and fart*. The data found two swear words related to scatological terms mentioned by the female students, namely: *Shit* and *Ass*. These two words functioned differently based on the context. The data will be analyzed in (03) and (04):

- (03) ***Having time for Webtoon, but not for your shit***
 (04) ***If Andrew Garfield in "No Way Home", I'll drag my ass out my house and slap every single human being that walked by!!!***

Data (03) consists of swear words *shit*. *Shit* can be defined variously. *Shit* commonly is defined as human body excretion. Based on the Oxford online dictionary, *shit* can be defined as feces, a worthless person, or something worthless. In (03) the word *shit* comes after the possessive adjective "your" which means ritual insult in insulting someone who speaks without

any evidence. Hence, this function leads to an inter-individual function that includes both the speaker and the interlocutor. This finding was supported by the data from the interview. The student was more defined as nonsense that can be used to insult her opponents. This function is different from the context of datum (04).

Datum (04) shows the scatological term *ass* as the affirmation swear word. *Ass* can be defined as a human's body part or a foolish person. In the context of utterances in (04), the word *ass* is mentioned as the human's body part that reflects how annoyed the speaker is with the actor, Andrew Garfield if he is an actor in the story "No Way Home". She will come out of her house and will slap the people who walked around. This can be seen that the word *ass* here was used as the affirmation utterance in showing the annoyance. This finding was supported by the data from the interview that the student mentioned swear words when she was in an annoying situation. Thus, swearing is used to show annoyance (Ljung 2011) is still true.

3. English Swearing related to sexual activities theme

Mentioning sexual activities terms are part of swearing behavior. This term of swearing is more vulgar and sacred when it is mentioned publicly (Malo & Adindarena 2021). Sexual activities swearing can lead to negative or positive terms. In negative terms, it is used to express anger and insult others. However, in positive terms, it is used to show intimacy with other people or groups (Malo & Adindarena 2021). The data found there was one swear word related to a sexual activity used by the female student, namely *fuck*. However, this swear word was used differently becomes *fuck you* and *fucking*. Those two words were functioned differently based on the context. The data will be analyzed in (05) and (06):

(05) *For parents who let their children play ball on the road until make me got an accident, **fuck you!***

(06) *Late post when we were "under the **fucking** pressure"*

Datum (05) shows that there is a swear word related to sexual activity mentioned by the student, called *fuck*. *Fuck* is defined as "to copulate" or "to deceive" (Hobbs, 2013) cited from Fairman. He also stated that this word is the most powerful taboo word for several centuries. Thus, *fuck* word is improper when it is said in many situations of communication (Rahayu & Setiawan 2019). Ljung (2011) claimed that *fuck or fuck you* are currently used to show emphatic, insulting others, and adverb of degree. In the datum (05) the swearing *fuck you* indicates an emotive utterance. The whole utterance shows how angry the speaker was with the child's parents who let their child play ball on the road until make the speaker got an accident at that time. She mentioned the word *fuck you* at the end of her speech as an expletive interjection to show her negative emotion. This is also reinforced by an exclamation mark after the words *fuck you*. The data taken from interview show that the student in mentioning *fuck you* was in a bad temper situation. She stated that this phrase was appropriate to insult someone instead of reducing her anger caused by someone. However, this function of the word *fuck* will be different from the context in (06).

Datum (06) shows the word *fuck* differently. The datum shows the *fuck* was modified into *fucking* by adding the suffix -ing. This word comes before the noun "pressure" which means used as an adjectival intensifier. Data conducted from the interview showed that the student mentioning *fuck* in the form of *fucking* means the emphasis of the word. Thus, in the context of this term, the swear word *fuck* is used as the emphasis of the utterance in showing the credibility of her utterance. By mentioning this swear word, it could convince the interlocutors of her utterances.

4. English Swearing related to mother or family theme

Ljung (2011) stated that addressing a mother, sister, or other female relatives is considered taboo for certain people because these terms are commonly used as ritual insults and abusive terms in name-calling. Mother (family) theme of swearing leads to the Noun or Noun Phrase that is functioned as Anaphoric Use of Epithets for man or girl (Putri et al. 2019). Mother theme involved *motherfuck*, *son of bitch*, *bastard*, etc. The data found two swear words related to mother or family themes, involved: *motherfucker* and *son of bitch*. Although swearing is related to mother or family terms, it is commonly used as anaphoric use of epithets, the students in functioning these words differently based on the context of utterances. Those words will lead to insulting someone and showing solidarity. The data will be analyzed in (07) and (08):

- (07) *You can be a bad **motherfucker**, but that don't make you a man!*
(08) *Hey, this **son of a bitch** turns to 22 years old, happy birthday bro!*

Data (07) and (08) consist of swear words related to mother terms. Those swear words were used as anaphoric use of epithets referred to someone. However, those two words are mentioned differently based on the context. Datum (07) leads to a negative outcome. While datum (08) leads to a positive outcome.

Datum (07) contains the mother term of swearing, namely *motherfucker*. *Motherfucker* is a combination of two words, namely *mother* and *fucker* (Putri et al., 2019) cited from Spears (2000). In terms of meaning, *fucker* is defined as a man who copulates frequently or copulates well. Then, this word is combined with the word *mother* which is defined as a man who copulates frequently with his mother. Hence, this word is considered a heinous utterance (Hughes, 2006). In the context of (07), the word *motherfucker* was combined with the adjective "bad" and followed by the determiner "a" which means an anaphoric use of epithet for the man. It is also supported by the suffix -er which refers to a person. Data conducted from the interview showed that *motherfucker* was functioned by the speaker to insult their opponents. Thus, the swear word *motherfucker* in that context leads to the negative side of swearing. This swear word will be different from a swear word in the context of datum (08).

Datum (08) the swear word shows in the phrase *son of a bitch*. Based on the Cambridge online dictionary, it is defined as an unpleasant man. In (08), this swear word is mentioned in the form of a noun phrase that was referred to a person. In this context, *son of a bitch* reflects the anaphoric use of epithets for someone who turns 22 years old at that time. However, in this utterance, there does not appear to be any hatred, but rather the intimacy between the speaker and that man. Data conducted from the interview support this finding that the student referred to the phrase *son of a bitch* only to her close friends instead of showing solidarity. This case was related to chill out with friends situation that can increase solidarity. This can be seen that expressing *son of a bitch* in this context does not lead to abusive swearing.

Discussion

From the whole data conducted by observation and interview, the results show that the case of using swear words in digital communication like *WhatsApp* is still happening particularly the female students. Since they are English learner students, they tend to use English swearing. Using English swearing is perceived as more polite and not all people understand it instead of avoiding bad labeling around society. The main data conducted by

observations in the *WhatsApp* story show the female students do the swearing in different swear words and different ways. There are only four types of swearing based on the themes used by them, namely religious/supernatural theme, scatological theme, sexual activities theme, and mother/family theme. From these types of swearing, it was found that there was no similarity in the function of swear words even though they were of the same type. The female students were more produced English swearing variously. This finding supports the claim of Nicolau & Sukanto (2011) in their research that females tend to use various kinds of swear words. However, different words have different functions. the students tend to do the swearing in both intra-individual and inter-individual. In religious themes, the swear words were used only in the form of expletive interjections. However, the functions of these expletives were different based on the contexts of utterances. In scatological swearing, women also mentioned swearing words that are considered disgusting objects. Commonly, they mentioned the words to insult the opponents and to show annoyance. Sexual activities themes also showed different functions of swearing. The female students were likely more used to the word *fuck*. However, the form of this word has functioned differently. The student in expressing sexual activities swearing lead to insulting others and emphasizes the utterance. The last is mother or family themes that were commonly used as anaphoric use of epithets in referring to someone. However, the use of anaphoric use of epithets has different outcomes both positive and negative outcomes based on how the students function the swear words. From the whole finding, the female students in expressed swear words were mostly triggered by both negative emotions (*anger, frustration, and annoyance*) and positive emotions (*excitement and chill out with friends*).

D. Conclusion

Female English learner students tend to use English swearing on the *WhatsApp* platform in expressing swear words. Using English swearing aims to avoid impoliteness and bad labeling from societies in practicing swearing because not all people understand the meanings. The result shows that there are four types of swear words based on the themes used by females: religious/supernatural themes, scatological themes, sexual activities themes, and mother/family themes. In each of these themes, not all swear words have the same function.

Since females' swearing is triggered by both positive (excitement and chilling out with friends) and negative emotions (anger, frustration, annoyance), they function as English swearing as both intra-individual and inter-individual based on the context of utterances. In the case of reasons of doing swearing, the result indicates that they mostly do swearing triggered by negative emotions. In intra-individual functions, they tend to function English swearing to show anger, frustration, and annoyance emotions. Compared to inter-individual functions, they tend to function English swearing to insult others and to show solidarity.

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