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Swear Words Used by Japanese: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of swear words in the Japanese language, focusing on their forms, references, and communicative functions. The aim is to identify the types of swear words used by native speakers, analyze their morphological structures, and understand the meanings and roles they play in social interaction. A descriptive qualitative approach was used, employing interviews and document analysis as primary data collection methods. Instruments included the researcher as the key instrument, supported by document analysis sheets and interview guides. Data were collected from three native Japanese speakers, supplemented with related texts and online sources. The study identified 41 Japanese swear words categorized into 14 monomorphemic words, 17 polymorphemic words, 13 phrases, and 6 clauses. The references of these words varied, including sex (4), excrement (4), animals (4), mental illness (2), and death (3). Functionally, the swear words were used to express emotions (15), show aggression (12), deliver insults (20), emphasize a point (1), and establish group identity or solidarity (3). The findings reveal the complexity of swearing in Japanese, showing that such expressions play an important role in emotional release, group belonging, and social confrontation. This study enhances the understanding of Japanese sociolinguistics and pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential element of human communication, serving not only as a tool for conveying information but also for expressing emotions and building relationships. One of the more expressive and emotionally charged uses of language is found in swearing. Swear words, although often considered impolite or vulgar, are used by individuals to release tension, signal frustration, or emphasize certain feelings in intense emotional situations (Vingerhoets et al., 2013). These expressions

serve various communicative purposes, from emotional release to social signaling. Swear words vary across languages and cultures in form, meaning, and usage. They often relate to culturally sensitive or taboo topics, such as religion, sexuality, bodily functions, and death (Jay, 2009).

Recent studies show that swearing is increasingly recognized as a functional component of modern communication. While traditionally stigmatized, swear words are now acknowledged for their multiple roles such as humor, emphasis, or emotional release (Khusna et al., 2021.; Stapleton, 2020). Abu-Rayyash et al. (2023) observed that swearing evolves with communication contexts, including digital spaces, where anonymity and informality may promote freer use of offensive language. In the Japanese context, the use of swear words presents a unique linguistic and cultural phenomenon. Japan is widely known for its communication norms that emphasize politeness, group harmony, and indirectness. However, this perception overlooks the existence of offensive or emotionally charged expressions that function as swear words, particularly in informal or online settings (Shen et al., 2024). Examples such as shine (die) and uzai (annoying) demonstrate how tone and context determine whether a word is interpreted as aggressive or simply emphatic. Moreover, Japanese speakers are more likely to engage in swearing in anonymous digital environments, such as manga dialogue or social media, reflecting a dynamic and situational use of language (Sari & Haristiani, 2024). Despite this, most existing studies focus on media or online contexts, often without clearly categorizing the forms, references, and communicative functions of Japanese swear words. This gap in the literature highlights the scientific novelty of this study. While swearing has been widely studied in Western and Southeast Asian contexts, fewer works have explored the phenomenon in Japan, especially in relation to its linguistic forms, semantic references, and pragmatic functions in communication. This research aims to contribute new insights into the sociolinguistic nature of swearing in Japanese by addressing how such expressions reflect emotional and cultural attitudes in communication.

Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What swear words are used by Japanese speakers? (2) What are the linguistic forms of these swear words? (3) What are the semantic references of Japanese swear words? and (4) What are the communicative functions of swear words in Japanese discourse?.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore the forms, references, and functions of Japanese swear words. Data collection included document analysis and interviews, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how Japanese individuals use swear words in real communicative contexts. The research was conducted in Singaraja, Buleleng Regency, North Bali, a location chosen due to its popularity as a tourist destination, which increases the likelihood of encountering native

Japanese speakers visiting for vacations or business purposes. The study involved three native Japanese informants selected through convenience sampling. These informants met the following criteria: native speakers of Japanese, aged 17–65, fluent in English, visiting or residing in Bali, available and willing to be interviewed, and possessing a sound understanding of Japanese culture and traditions. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with these informants, while secondary data were collected from credible sources such as academic articles, online content, and relevant documents related to Japanese language and culture. Instruments used in the study included the researcher as the main data collection instrument, a document analysis sheet for systematically organizing findings from secondary sources, and an interview guide to ensure focus and consistency during data collection. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) model: Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and organizing relevant data related to Japanese swear words. Data display utilized tables to systematically present patterns in the form, references, and functions of the swear words. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification were conducted concurrently to ensure the accuracy and reliability of findings, triangulated through document analysis and native speaker interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results in this research focus on the swear words used, the forms of swear words, and the references of swear words used by Japanese and also present the functions of swear words used by Japanese.

Results

1. Hindi Swear Words Used by Japanese

Table 1. Hindi Swear Words Used by Japanese

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning
1.	*kuso*	shit, damn
2.	*fuzakeru na*	stop messing with me or don't joke
3.	*shinjimae*	drop dead
4.	*chikushou*	damn it
5.	*baka*	stupid/fool
6.	*busu*	extremely ugly woman
7.	*uzai*	pain in the ass or extremely annoying
8.	*warugaki*	spoiled brat
9.	*doke*	get out of my way!
10.	*yariman*	slut
11.	*shine*	go die
12.	*kusojijii*	old fart, old hag (unpleasant old man)
13.	*gaki*	shorty, brat
14.	*debu*	your pig, filthy, fat
15.	*buta*	pig (used for fat people)
16.	*saru*	monkey (mischievous person)

17.	*hentai*	pervert, sex maniac
18.	*urusee*	shut up
19.	*kuzu*	trash
20.	*usero*	fuck off
21.	*korosu zo*	i'll kill you
22.	*temee*	you
23.	*nani shitendayo*	what the hell/fuck are you doing?
24.	*atama okashii no ka?*	are you insane?
25.	*abazure*	bitch
26.	*bakayarou da na*	you are such a stupid bastard
27.	*kono kuzu me*	you piece of trash
28.	*tsukaenai yatsu*	a worthless person!
29.	*manko*	vagina, cunt
30.	*kiero*	get lost
31.	*damare*	shut up
32.	*kusoyarou*	shit bastard
33.	*mukatsuku*	makes me sick, pisses me of
34.	*yatteran nee*	i can't take this shit anymore!
35.	*damare konoyarou*	shut up, you bastard
36.	*yarou*	bastard, jerk, punk
37.	*kichigai*	crazy, lunatic, insane person
38.	*kusokurae*	eat shit, go to hell
39.	*aho*	idiot
40.	*kimoi*	gross or disgusting
41.	*yowamushi*	coward

2. The Form of Hindi Swear Words Used by Japanese
A. Swear Words in The Form of Words
a. Monomorphemic Words

Japanese swear words in monomorphemic form include terms that directly express frustration, contempt, or insult meaning without morphological modification.

Table 2. Swear Words Used by Japanese in Morphological structure of Monomorphemic

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning
	kuso	shit, damn
	baka	stupid/fool
	busu	extremely ugly woman
	uzai	pain in the ass or extremely annoying
	gaki	shorty, brat
	debu	your pig, filthy, fat
	buta	pig (used for fat people)
	saru	monkey (mischievous person)
	hentai	pervert, sex maniac
	kuzu	trash
	aho	idiot
	kimoi	gross, disgusting
	temee	you (rude/derogatory)

manko	vagina, cunt

Based on the table, a total of fourteen (14) swear words used by Japanese are classified as monomorphemic word, meaning they consist of a single, indivisible morpheme that cannot be broken down further while still retaining meaning.

b. Polymorpheimc Words

The table below presents the swear words in Japanese that belong to the polymorphemic word category

Table 3. Swear Words Used by Japanese in Morphological Structure of Polymorphemic

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Morphemes
1.	*shinjimae*	drop dead	*shin + jimae*
2.	*chikushou*	damn it	*chiku + shou*
3.	*damare*	shut up	*damaru + re*
4.	*warugaki*	spoiled brat	*waru + gaki*
5.	*urusee*	shut up	*urusai + ee*
6.	*yariman*	slut	*yari + man*
7.	*shine*	go die	*shinu + e*
8.	*kusojijii*	old fart, old hag (unpleasant old man)	*kuso + jijii*
9.	*yowamushi*	coward	*yowa + mushi*
10.	*abazure*	bitch	*aba + zure*
11. .	*kiero*	get lost	*kieru + ro*
12.	*kusoyarou*	shit bastard	*kuso + yarou*
13.	*mukatsuku*	Makes me sick, pisses me of	*mukatsu + ku*
14.	*kichigai*	crazy, lunatic, insane person	*ki + cigai*
15.	*kimoi*	gross or disgusting	*kimo + i*
16.	*kusokurae*	eat shit	*kuso + kurae*
17.	*doke*	get out of my way!	*dokeru*

Based on table 3. a total of seventeen (17) swear words used by Japanese are classified as polymorphemic words.

B. The Swear Words in The Form of Phrase

Table 4. The Swear Words Used by Japanese in The Form of Phrase

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Classification
1.	*fuzakeru na*	Stop messing with me or don't joke	Verb Phrase
2.	*shinjimae*	Drop dead	Verb Phrase
3.	*warugaki*	Spoiled brat	Verb Phrase
4.	*korosu zo*	I'll kill you	Verb Phrase
5.	*damare konoyarou*	Shut up, you bastard	Verb Phrase
6.	*nani shitendayo?*	What the hell/fuck are you doing?	Verb Phrase
7.	*Yatteran nee*	I can't take this shit anymore	Verb Phrase
8.	*kusojijii*	Old fart	Noun Phrase
9.	*bakayarou da na*	you are such a stupid bastard	Noun Phrase

10.	*kono kuzu me*	You piece of trash	Noun Phrase
11.	*kusoyarou*	Shit bastard	Noun Phrase
12.	*atama okashii no ka?*	Are you insane?	Adjective Phrase
13.	*tsukaenai yatsu*	A useless person	Adjective Phrase

Based on Table 4, a total of thirteen (13) swear words used by Japanese are classified as phrases, divided into seven (7) verb phrases, four (4) noun phrases four, and two (2) adjective phrases.

C. The Swear Words in The Form of Clause

In the form of words, this study found that swear words are classified as independent clause and dependent clause.

Table 5. The Swear Words Used by Japanese in The Form of Clause

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Classification
1.	*korosu zo*	I'll kill you	Independent Clause
2.	*nani shitendayo*	What the hell are you doing?	Independent Clause
3.	*atama okashii no ka?*	Are you crazy? / Are you insane?	Independent Clause
4.	*yatteran nee*	I can't take this shit anymore	Independent Clause
5.	*damare konoyarou*	Shut up, you bastard!	Independent Clause
6.	*bakayarou da na*	You are such a stupid bastard	Independent Clause

Based on Table 5., there are six (6) swear words in the form of independent clauses.

3. The References of Swear Words Used by Japanese

Swear words in the Japanese language can be classified based on their references. These references indicate the underlying meaning or association of the insult

Table 6. The Reference of Swear Words Used by Japanese

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Reference(s)
1.	*manko*	vagina, cunt	sex
2.	*yariman*	slut	sex
3.	*hentai*	pervert, sex maniac	sex
4.	*abazure*	bitch	sex
5.	*kuso*	shit, damn	excrement
6.	*kusoyarou*	shit bastard	excrement
7.	*kusojijii*	old fart, old hag (unpleasant old man)	excrement
8.	*kusokurae*	eat shit, go to hell	excrement
9.	*buta*	pig (used for fat people)	name of animal
10.	*saru*	monkey (mischievous person)	name of animal
11.	*chikushou*	damn it	name of animal

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12.	*yowamushi*	coward or weird person	name of animal
13.	*atama okashii no ka?*	are you insane?	mental illness
14.	*kichigai*	crazy, lunatic, insane person	mental illness
15.	*shinjimae*	drop dead	death
16.	*shine*	go die	death
17.	*korosu zo*	i'll kill you	death

Based on the table 6, there are seventeen (17) Japanese swear words that can be categorized according to their references: sexual activity (*manko, yariman, hentai, abazure*), excrement (*kuso, kusoyarou, kusojijii, kusokurae*), animal names (*buta, saru, chikushou, yowamushi*), mental illness (*atama okashii no ka?, kichigai*), and death (*shinjimae, shine, korosu zo*).

4. The Function of Swear Words Used by Japanese

This study found several functions in the use of swear words by Japanese people. These functions include expression of emotion, emphasis, group identity, aggression, and insult.

Table 7. The Function of Swear Words Used by Japanese

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Function(s)
1	*kuso*	shit, damn	Expression of Emotions, Insult
2	*fuzakeru na*	stop messing with me/don't joke	Expression of Emotions
3	*chikushou*	damn it	Expression of Emotions
4	*uzai*	pain in the ass, annoying	Expression of Emotions, Insult
5	*doke*	get out of my way	Expression of Emotions
6	*urusee*	shut up	Expression of Emotions
7	*mukatsuku*	pisses me off	Expression of Emotions
8	*yatteran nee*	I can't take this shit anymore!	Expression of Emotions
9	*atama okashii no ka?*	are you insane?	Expression of Emotions
10	*shinjimae*	drop dead	Expression of Emotions, Insult
11	*korosu zo*	I'll kill you	Expression of Emotions
12	*yarou*	bastard, jerk, punk	Expression of Emotions
13	*kimoi*	gross or disgusting	Expression of Emotions, Insult
14	*bakayarou da na*	you stupid bastard	Expression of Emotions
15	*kusokurae*	eat shit	Expression of Emotions
16	*temee*	you (rude)	Group Identity
17	*baka*	stupid/fool	Group Identity, Insult
18	*aho*	idiot	Group Identity
19	*shine*	go die	Show Aggression
20	*nani shitendayo?*	what the hell are you doing?	Show Aggression

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Function(s)
21	*damare konoyarou*	shut up you bastard	Show Aggression
22	*kiero*	get lost	Show Aggression
23	*usero*	fuck off	Show Aggression
24	*damare*	shut up	Show Aggression
25	*busu*	extremely ugly woman	Insult
26	*warugaki*	spoiled brat	Insult
27	*yariman*	slut	Insult
28	*kusojijii*	old fart	Insult
29	*gaki*	shorty, brat	Insult
30	*debu*	fat/filthy person	Insult
31	*buta*	pig	Insult
32	*hentai*	pervert, sex maniac	Insult
33	*kuzu*	trash	Insult
34	*kono kuzu me*	you piece of trash	Insult
35	*abazure*	bitch	Insult
36	*saru*	monkey	Insult
37	*manko*	vagina, cunt	Insult
38	*yowamushi*	coward	Insult
39	*kichigai*	crazy, lunatic	Insult
40	*kusoyarou*	shit bastard	Insult
41	*tsukaenai yatsu*	worthless person	Insult

Based on the function, there are forty-one (41) Japanese swear words that can be categorized into four primary communicative functions: expressing emotions, showing aggression, establishing group identity, and delivering insults. There are fifteen (15) swear words that function to express emotions, such as *kuso*, *fuzakeru na*, *chikushou*, *uzai*, *doke*, *urusee*, *mukatsuku*, *yatteran nee*, *atama okashii no ka?*, *shinjimae*, *korosu zo*, *yarou*, *kimoi*, *bakayarou da na*, and *kusokurae*. These expressions are typically used to release frustration, annoyance, or anger in various social contexts. Next, there are twelve (12) swear words that are primarily used to show aggression. These include *shine*, *shinjimae*, *korosu zo*, *atama okashii no ka?*, *nani shitendayo?*, *damare konoyarou*, *kiero*, *usero*, *damare*, *urusee*, *doke*, and *uzai*. These words are often directed at others in heated arguments or hostile interactions, serving as verbal weapons. Three (3) swear words serve the function of establishing group identity or solidarity, particularly through informal or derogatory terms used within certain peer groups. These are *temee*, *baka*, and *aho*. Lastly, there are twenty (20) swear words that function to deliver insults aimed at attacking someone's character, appearance, or status. Examples include *kuso*, *shinjimae*, *baka*, *busu*, *warugaki*, *yariman*, *kusojijii*, *gaki*, *debu*, *buta*, *hentai*, *kuzu*, *kono kuzu me*, *abazure*, *saru*, *manko*, *yowamushi*, *kichigai*, *kusoyarou*, and *tsukaenai yatsu*. These insults are often laced with cultural, social, or personal implications designed to demean or humiliate the target.

Discussion

This study identified forty-one Japanese swear words, which were analyzed based on their forms, functions, and references. In terms of reference, the study found five dominant categories namely sex, excrement, animals, mental illness, and death which partially align with the frameworks of Hughes (2006). While Hughes' categories were more closely aligned, especially in terms of sex, excrement, and animals, categories such as religion or personal background were absent in this study. Functionally, the swear words matched Wang's (2013) classification namely emotional expression, emphasis, group identity, and aggression, but this research added a significant category of direct insults, which was not present in Wang's framework. Compared to Cahyani and Setiawan (2019), this study partially aligned, especially in categories like anger and insult, but found fewer instances of regret or wonder. In comparison with previous research in other languages, such as Acehnese, Balinese, English, and Arabic, this study confirmed some universal themes (e.g., references to sex, animals, and excrement) but noted that Japanese swear words often focus more on direct personal attacks, commands, and insults related to intelligence, appearance, or behavior elements that do not always fit into existing reference categories. This indicates that while Japanese swearing shares cross-linguistic patterns, it also exhibits distinct features, particularly in its aggressive tone and socio-emotional functions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concluded that forty-one (41) commonly used Japanese swear words were analyzed based on their forms, functions, and references. The swear words were classified into monomorphemic, polymorphemic, phrases, and clauses, with phrases further divided into noun, verb, and adjective phrases. In terms of references, the study identified categories such as sex, excrement, animals, mental illness, and death, with additional words found outside these categories, such as insults targeting personal traits or behaviors. Functionally, Japanese swear words were used to express emotions, emphasize statements, express solidarity, show aggression, and insult others. The study aligns with previous research on swearing in other languages but highlights the unique characteristics of Japanese swear words, including the absence of strong religious references. Additionally, the research uncovered words that don't fit traditional reference categories, such as expressions of frustration or personal insults. The study underscores how swear words in Japanese reflect cultural values and norms, emphasizing their role in communication beyond just insults.

For future research, it is suggested that regional differences in the usage of swear words across Japan be explored, as swearing practices may vary based on dialect and local culture. A comparative study between Japanese swear words and those from other languages could also be conducted to examine common patterns or unique differences in the use of swearing, helping to understand cultural attitudes towards swearing and its emotional and social functions.

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