



The Comparison Between Balinese and South Korean Swear Words in Terms of References Used

Ni Putu Pradnya Suari^{1*}, I Gede Budasi¹, Rima Andriani Sari¹

¹Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, Bali, Indonesia

pradnya.suari@student.undiksha.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to compare the references in swear words in South Korean and Balinese. A comparative descriptive qualitative research design with document analysis was employed in this study. The data for this study were gathered from previous studies, which focused on Balinese swear words in informal Standard Korean (Pyojuneo) and Balinese language spoken in Buleleng regency. The findings show that both Balinese and South Korean swear words share several similar reference domains, including sexual activities, excretion, religion or supernatural beings, social conditions, concrete objects, abstract concepts or situations, body parts, animals, actions, and professions. Although Balinese swear words tend to refer more to animals, mythical beings, and personal characteristics based on local cultural beliefs, South Korean swear words tend to have more varied expressions referring to sexual behavior and personal attacks. The findings of this study indicate that although the two languages share common taboo domains of reference, the cultural interpretations and sensitivities of these references differ, as do the sociocultural norms of South Korean and Balinese societies. In conclusion, understanding the similarities and differences in references between Balinese and South Korean languages can help speakers avoid misinterpretation in communication.

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays an essential role in expressing emotions, social identity, and cultural values within a community. One of the most explicit and socially marked forms of language use in representing these values is swear words. Swear words function not only as expressions of strong emotions, such as anger, frustration, or

surprise, but also as indicators of social norms and boundaries of politeness within a speech community Allan & Burridge (2006) and Ljung (2011). For this reason, the study of swear words is highly relevant in the fields of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, particularly when examined across different cultural contexts.

From a linguistic perspective, swear words refer to concepts or entities that are socially considered taboo, sensitive, or inappropriate to be expressed neutrally in a particular society (Allan & Burridge, 2006 and Joos, 1967). The references embedded in swear words, such as those related to sexuality, body parts, excretion, animals, religion or supernatural beings, social conditions, and personal characteristics, reflect the cultural values and belief systems held by the speakers (Ljung, 2011; Wijana, 2004). Therefore, analyzing the references of swear words is important in revealing how culture influences linguistic choices in the expression of offensive or taboo language.

The use of swear words has become increasingly significant in the context of intercultural communication, especially in societies experiencing intensive cross-cultural contact. Differences in cultural backgrounds may lead to different interpretations of the offensiveness and appropriateness of particular swear words (Dewaele, 2017). In this regard, the study of swear words is closely connected to intercultural communication, because the meanings and references of swear words are strongly shaped by social norms and value systems operating within a community Gudykunst et al. (1997).

The selection of Bali and South Korea as the focus of this study is based on the growing interaction between the two communities, particularly in the fields of tourism, education, and employment. South Korea is one of the major contributors of international tourists to Bali, and this increasing mobility has intensified contact between Balinese and South Korean speakers in daily and professional communication contexts. In Balinese society, swear words are closely related to local cultural beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and social practices, this is supported by Aryasuari et al. (2024) who found that Balinese taboo expressions frequently refer to animals, supernatural beings, and socially sensitive attributes rooted in local cultural beliefs, and they are often influenced by community norms and shared cultural knowledge, particularly in the Buleleng dialect (Wisudayanti, 2020; Dewi et al., 2025). Many Balinese swear words also reflect references to animals, supernatural beings, and personal attributes that are deeply embedded in local traditions. This is further evidenced by Yogiantari et al. (2024) who reports that Balinese taboo words predominantly refer to animals, supernatural entities, and socially stigmatized behaviors shaped by local cultural norms.

In contrast, the South Korean linguistic context is strongly influenced by hierarchical social relations and politeness norms rooted in Confucian values. Swear words in Korean are generally restricted in formal settings and are highly sensitive to age, social status, and relational distance. However, in informal interactions,

particularly among peers and in popular media, Korean swear words are increasingly used to express emotions and interpersonal stances. The references of Korean swear words often involve sexual behavior, personal attacks, and derogatory evaluations, which reflect different cultural perceptions of taboo and social boundaries (H. S. Kim & Plester, 2021); Mahayoni et al., 2025).

Previous studies on swear words have examined various aspects of this linguistic phenomenon. For example, Dewi et al. (2025) reported that Dutch swear words commonly refer to sexuality, body parts, animals, and social identity, showing that swear word references are shaped by cultural context. Some studies focus on the morphological forms of swear words Carstairs-Mccarthy (2002), while others emphasize their pragmatic functions and degrees of offensiveness (Jay, 2000; Dewaele, 2017; Wang, 2013). In Balinese context, several studies have explored the use and social functions of swear words within local communities and educational settings (Wisudayanti, 2020; Dewipayani et al., 2017; Dewi et al., 2025). Similarly, studies on Korean swear words have discussed their pragmatic use and sensitivity to social hierarchy and politeness norms (S. Kim & Brown, 2022; Mahayoni et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on swear words in both Balinese and South Korean contexts, there is still a lack of comparative studies that specifically focus on the references used in swear words across these two cultures. Most previous research has concentrated on the forms and functions of swear words, while the cultural meanings embedded in their references remain underexplored. Therefore, this article focuses on comparing the references used in Balinese and South Korean swear words by employing a comparative approach. This study aims to identify the types of references found in both languages and to examine their similarities and differences. Based on the purpose of this study, the research questions are what types of references found in both languages and their similarities and differences? The findings are expected to contribute to sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies, particularly in understanding how cultural values and social norms shape the use of swear word expressions in intercultural contexts between Balinese and South Korean communities.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design using document analysis as the main methodological approach. This design was selected because the study aims to examine and interpret the references used in swear words in Balinese and South Korean, which require contextual, interpretive, and qualitative analysis rather than numerical measurement. A qualitative approach allows the researchers to explore how swear words refer to particular taboo domains and how those references reflect sociocultural values embedded in each speech community. Document analysis was considered appropriate because the data of this study were derived from existing

academic documents and not from direct observation or spoken interaction (Bowen, 2009).

The data sources of this study consisted of secondary data obtained from two undergraduate theses conducted at Ganesha University of Education. One thesis focuses on the use of swear words in Balinese language, particularly in the Buleleng regency, while the other examines swear words in South Korean, specifically in informal Standard Korean (Pyojuneo). These two documents were selected because they provide systematically collected and validated data related to swear words within their respective linguistic and cultural contexts. The use of secondary data enables this study to re-examine existing findings and to conduct a comparative analysis of swear word references across two different language communities.

Data collection was carried out through a systematic document analysis procedure. The researchers carefully read the two selected theses to identify all lexical items and expressions categorized as swear words. Each swear word was then extracted and recorded in a data sheet along with its contextual information and brief description provided in the original studies. Only data that were relevant to the focus of this research, namely the references used in swear words, were included. This procedure ensured that the data collected were directly aligned with the objectives of the study and represented authentic usage documented in previous research.

Data analysis was conducted by following Bowen's (2009) document analysis framework. The analysis began with organizing and familiarizing the data, followed by coding each swear word according to the type of reference it conveys. The classification of references was guided by the reference categories proposed in previous studies on swear words, particularly Malo & Adindarena (2021). After the classification process, the researchers compared the reference categories found in Balinese and South Korean swear words to identify patterns, similarities, and differences between the two languages. The findings were then interpreted by relating the identified reference types to the sociocultural contexts of Balinese and South Korean communities. Finally, the results were presented descriptively and comparatively in order to answer the research objectives of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the research findings on the references used in (Saniada et al., 2023) and South Korean swear words. The data were classified into reference categories based on the framework proposed by Malo and Adindarena (2021). The findings are presented in tables showing the distribution of swear words by reference type in both languages. Each table is accompanied by a brief explanation to highlight the main patterns and tendencies found in the use of references in Balinese and South Korean swear words.

1. Sexual Activity

Table 1. Swear Words Refer to Sexual Activity

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Sexual activity	<i>katuk</i>	fuck	<i>shipal</i>	fuck
			<i>jojdwaesseo</i>	you're fucked
			<i>ssiblanom</i>	fucking bastard
			<i>ssibsaekki</i>	motherfucker
			<i>jonna</i>	fucking

As shown in the table 1, Balinese swearword related to sexual activity is *katuk*, which means 'fuck'. This term functions as an expression of strong emotion or verbal aggression. Meanwhile, South Korean swearwords demonstrate a wider range of expressions within the same reference category, including *shipal* 'fuck', *jojdwaesseo* (you're fucked), *ssiblanom* 'fucking bastard', *ssibsaekki* 'motherfucker', and *jonna* (fucking). This indicates that South Korean has more lexical variations in expressing swearwords related to sexual activity compared to Balinese.

2. Excretion

Table 2. Swear Words Refer to Excretion

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Excretion	<i>tai</i>	shit	<i>jiral</i>	bullshit

As presented in Table 2, Balinese swearword related to excretion is *tai*, which means 'shit'. This term is typically used to express emotion or frustration. Meanwhile, the South Korean swearword *jiral*, meaning 'bullshit', is also classified under excretion and is commonly used to show annoyance or disbelief. The findings indicate that both Balinese and South Korean employ swearwords related to excretion, although the number of identified terms in this category is limited.

3. Religion or Supernatural Beings

Table 3. Swear Words Refer to Religion and Supernatural Beings

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Religion and Supernatural beings	<i>gamang</i>	ghost	<i>cegiral</i>	damn
	<i>memedi</i>	ghost	<i>yeombyeong</i>	damn it
	<i>panak</i>	son of the	<i>jenjang</i>	crap
	<i>gamang</i>	ghost		
	<i>panak medi</i>	son of the		

As shown in the table 3, Balinese swearwords related to religion and supernatural beings include *gamang* 'ghost', *memedi* 'ghost', *panak gamang* 'son of

the ghost', and *panak medi* 'son of the ghost'. These terms reflect beliefs in supernatural entities and are often used as insulting expressions. Meanwhile, South Korean swearwords in this category consist of *cegiral* 'damn', *yeombyeong* 'damn it', and *jenjang* 'crap', which are commonly used to convey anger, annoyance, or emotional emphasis. The data indicate that both languages utilize references to religion and supernatural beings as sources of swearwords, although Balinese shows a greater variety in this category.

4. Social Condition

Table 4. Swear Words Refer to Social Condition

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Social condition	<i>pirate</i>	fuck	<i>nyeon</i>	bitch
	<i>bangsat</i>	bastard	<i>nom</i>	bastard
	<i>nani</i>	you (coarse)	<i>chonnom</i>	hillbilly
	<i>sige</i>	you (coarse)		

As shown in the table 4, Balinese swearwords related to social conditions include *pirate*, *bangsat*, *nani*, and *sige*, which are used to insult or belittle a person in social interactions. In comparison, South Korean swearwords in this category include *nyeon* 'bitch', *nom* 'bastard', and *chonnom* 'hillbilly', which also serve to demean people based on social perceptions or personal backgrounds. The findings indicate that both languages use social conditions as a source of swearwords, although Balinese swearwords appear to be slightly more varied in this category.

5. Concrete Object

Table 5. Swear Words Refer to Cocreate Object

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Concrete object	<i>bangke</i>	Corpse	<i>ttong</i>	Shit
	<i>berung</i>	Scar		
	<i>bangke</i>	Die		
	<i>bangkaan nani</i>	You (coarse) are a corpse		

As presented in the table 5, Balinese swearwords related to concrete objects include *bangke* 'corpse', *berung* 'scar', *bangke die*, and *bangkaan nani* 'you coarse are a corpse'. These terms are used to insult or express hostility toward others, often drawing on tangible, physical objects to reinforce the insult. In comparison, the South Korean swearword in this category is *ttong* 'shit', which is commonly used to express annoyance, frustration, or stress. The findings suggest that both languages employ concrete objects as a source of swearwords, although Balinese swearwords in this category demonstrate greater variety.

6. Abstract Concept or Situations

Table 6. Swear Words Refer to Abstract Concept or Situations

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Abstract Concept or Situations	<i>nani</i>	you (coarse)	<i>gulrae</i>	really?
	<i>sige</i>	you (coarse)	<i>jenjang</i>	crap
	<i>bangke</i>	die	<i>jojdwaesseo</i>	you fucked

As shown in Table 6, swear words referring to abstract concepts or situations are found in both Balinese and South Korean. In Balinese, *nani* ‘you coarse’, *sige* ‘you coarse’, and *bangke* ‘die’ refer to abstract social evaluations and situational meanings rather than concrete entities. Meanwhile, South Korean swear words such as *gulrae* ‘really?’, *jenjang* ‘crap’, and *jojdwaesseo* ‘you’re fucked’ also rely on abstract or situational references to convey meaning. These findings indicate that both languages employ abstract concepts or situations as a reference in the formation of swear words.

7. Body Part

Table 7. Swear Words Refer to Body Part

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Body part	<i>naskleng</i>	head-dick	<i>jot</i>	dick
	<i>pletan</i>	male genital	<i>jotgateun</i>	like a dick
	<i>bungut</i>	mouth		
	<i>jit</i>	ass		
	<i>tenas</i>	head		
	<i>polone</i>	brain		
	<i>mue jit</i>	ass face		

As shown in the table 7, Balinese swearwords related to body parts include *naskleng* ‘head-dick’, *pletan* ‘male genital’, *bungut* ‘mouth’, *jit* ‘ass’, *tenas* ‘head’, *polone* ‘brain’, and *mue jit* ‘ass face’. These terms are used to belittle or insult a person by referencing specific body parts. Meanwhile, South Korean swearwords in this category include *jot* ‘dick’ and *jotgateun* ‘like a dick’, which are also used to insult or express verbal aggression. The findings indicate that both languages use body parts as a reference for swearwords, although Balinese swearwords show greater lexical diversity in this category.

8. Animal

Table 8. Swear Words Refer to Animals

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Animal	<i>cicing</i>	dog	<i>gaesaekki</i>	son of a bitch
	<i>kaung</i>	pig	<i>saekkia</i>	bastard

<i>kuluk</i>	dog	<i>horosaekki</i>	bastard
<i>bojog</i>	monkey		
<i>ubuan</i>	pet		

As shown in the table 8, Balinese swearwords related to animals include *cicing* ‘dog’, *kaung* ‘pig’, *kuluk* ‘dog’, *bojog* ‘monkey’, and *ubuan* ‘pet’. These terms are commonly employed to insult others by drawing on the perceived undesirable qualities of these animals. In comparison, South Korean swearwords in this category include ‘*gaesaekki* ‘son of a bitch’, *saekkia* ‘bastard’, and *horosaekki* ‘bastard’, which similarly use animal references to express verbal aggression or insult. The findings indicate that both languages use animals as a source of swearwords, though Balinese swearwords show slightly greater variety in this category.

9. Actions

Table 9. Swear Words Refer to Actions

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Activity	<i>mepete</i>	talk	<i>dwijeo</i>	die
	<i>ngamah</i>	eat	<i>dakcheo</i>	shut up
	<i>medem</i>	sleep	<i>kkeojyeo</i>	get lost
	<i>matah</i>	raw		
	<i>mejaguran</i>	fight		

As presented in Table 9, Balinese swearwords related to actions include *mepete* ‘talk’, *ngamah* ‘eat’, *medem* ‘sleep’, *matah* ‘raw’, and *mejaguran* ‘fight’. These terms are often used to criticize someone’s actions or habits in a socially aggressive way. In comparison, South Korean swearwords in this category include *dwijeo* ‘die’, *dakcheo* ‘shut up’, and *kkeojyeo* ‘get lost’, which also target specific actions to insult or verbally attack the listener. The findings indicate that both languages utilize activities as a reference for swearwords, although the types of actions referenced differ between Balinese and South Korean.

10. Professions

Table 10. Swear Words Refer to Professions

The References	Balinese		South Korean	
	The Term	The Meaning	The Term	The meaning
Professions	<i>sundel</i>	whore	-	-

As shown in Table 10, swear words referring to professions appear only in Balinese. The term *sundel* ‘whore’ is used as a swear word by referencing a profession associated with immoral or socially stigmatized behavior. In contrast, no South Korean swear words in the data are categorized as referring to professions. This finding indicates that professional references as a source of swear words are limited in the dataset and occur exclusively in Balinese.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that both Balinese and South Korean swear words employ a wide range of reference domains. Similar patterns have also been reported in other languages. Wiguna et al. (2025) showed that Filipino swear words rely on reference domains such as sexuality, body parts, animals, and social conditions, which are also found in Balinese and South Korean data. This similarity suggests that certain taboo references are universally salient, although their cultural realization differs across speech communities. That can be systematically classified using the reference framework proposed by Malo and Adindarena (2021), which was adopted as the main analytical framework in this study. Based on this framework, the references identified in both languages include sexual activity, excretion, body parts, animals, religion or supernatural beings, social conditions, professions, actions, and abstract concepts or situations. The presence of these shared reference categories indicates that swear words in Balinese and South Korean draw upon similar taboo domains, suggesting that certain sources of profanity, particularly those related to the human body, morality, and social identity, are cross-culturally salient. This finding supports the applicability of the reference classification proposed by Malo and Adindarena (2021) to different linguistic and cultural settings, and demonstrates that their categorization can capture the main types of references used in both Balinese and South Korean swear words.

Despite the similarity in the types of references identified, this study found clear differences in the distribution and cultural prominence of particular reference categories. This finding is consistent with previous Balinese studies, such as Wibawa et al. (2024). Using the reference classification of Malo and Adindarena (2021), Balinese swear words were more frequently associated with references to animals, supernatural or mythical beings, and personal characteristics. These reference types are closely related to Balinese cultural beliefs and local moral concepts, in which animals and supernatural entities are often symbolically associated with negative traits, inappropriate behavior, or social deviance. The frequent use of such references suggests that Balinese speakers tend to employ culturally familiar symbols to express disapproval, anger, or mockery. Therefore, although the reference categories are formally similar to those found in South Korean data, the cultural meanings attached to these references are strongly shaped by local traditions and belief systems.

In contrast, South Korean swear words were found to rely more heavily on references related to sexual behavior and direct personal attacks. When examined through the reference framework of Malo and Adindarena (2021), these references fall mainly into the categories of sexual activity, body-related references, and personal or social identity references. The dominance of these reference types indicates that Korean swear words tend to target the individual more directly by attacking personal dignity, morality, or social image. This pattern reflects the sociocultural norms of South Korean society, where maintaining face, social harmony, and hierarchical relationships is highly

valued. As a result, references that threaten personal integrity and social standing become particularly powerful and offensive, especially in informal interactions among peers.

Furthermore, the comparison of both languages based on Malo and Adindarena's (2021) framework highlights that the same reference category may function differently across cultures. For example, references to animals and supernatural beings, which are classified under similar reference types in both datasets, are more commonly used and culturally resonant in Balinese swear words, whereas such references are relatively less dominant in the South Korean data. Conversely, references to sexual activity and personal attacks, although present in both languages, appear to be more productive and socially salient in South Korean swear words. This finding indicates that the reference framework of Malo and Adindarena (2021) successfully provides a shared analytical structure for cross-cultural comparison, while at the same time allowing the identification of culturally specific tendencies in the use of swear word references.

Overall, the detailed comparison demonstrates that the reference categories proposed by Malo and Adindarena (2021) are not only suitable for analyzing Balinese swear words but are also applicable to South Korean swear words. However, the results clearly show that the sociocultural background of each speech community plays a crucial role in determining which reference types are more frequently used and considered more offensive. Although Balinese and South Korean swear words draw on the same general reference domains, the dominance of animal and supernatural references in Balinese and the prominence of sexual and personal attack references in South Korean reveal culturally distinct patterns of taboo and social sensitivity. This confirms that swear word references are culturally grounded expressions, and that the framework of Malo and Adindarena (2021) can effectively be used to uncover both universal and culture-specific aspects of profanity.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the limitation focuses on comparing the references used in Balinese and South Korean swear words by employing a comparative approach. This study shows that swear words in Balinese and South Korean languages are not merely expressions of rude or impolite speech, but function as meaningful sociolinguistic elements shaped by cultural norms and social contexts. The findings reveal that both languages share similarities in the references of swear words, particularly in including sexual activity, excretion, religion or supernatural beings, social conditions, concrete objects, abstract concepts or situations, body parts, animals, actions, and professions. However, clear differences are also found in how swear words are used and perceived in each culture. Balinese swear words tend to be more flexible and commonly used in informal situations, often serving as expressions of familiarity, humor, or emotional release among close interlocutors. Meanwhile, South Korean swear words are strongly influenced by hierarchical

structures and politeness norms rooted in Confucian values, making their usage more restricted and context-dependent. Therefore, the use of swear words reflects the cultural values, social relationships, and communication styles of each society.

The implication of this study is the importance of understanding these similarities and differences to avoid misunderstanding and to support effective intercultural communication, especially in the context of increasing interaction between Balinese and South Korean communities. Furthermore, there are suggestions of this study, such as to gain a better insight into the context of swear word uses, further studies should employ primary sources, such as observation or interviews. Moreover, other languages or ethnolinguistic communities could be added to further studies to make the results more generalizable, particularly regarding the use of swearing in the references. Moreover, to gain a better insight into the meaning of swear words in cross-cultural social interactions, further studies are encouraged to combine the analysis of references with pragmatic uses or politeness strategies.

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