



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

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to compare the use of swear words in Balinese and Singaporean languages based on the references employed. This study applied a qualitative approach with a document study method, where data were obtained from relevant previous studies. The data were analyzed by classifying swear words into ten reference categories based on the framework of Malo and Adindarena (2021), which includes social conditions, concrete objects, abstract concepts, religion or supernatural beings, sexual organs or activities, body excretions, body parts, animals, actions, and professions. The results show that both languages have similarities in the use of universal references, such as social conditions and abstract concepts, to express negative evaluations and emotions. However, Balinese swear words show a wider variety of references through the presence of religious or supernatural, animals, concrete objects, and professions, which are not found in the Singaporean language. This difference reflects the influence of cultural values and social context on the selection of references in cross-cultural swear words. Also, this study contributes to sociolinguistics and discourse analysis by demonstrating that swear words can be systematically categorized through reference types.

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INTRODUCTION

Language served as the primary means of expressing emotions, social identity, and cultural values within a community. One of the most explicit forms of language use in representing these values was swear words. Swear words not only served as an outburst of negative emotions, but also as markers of social norms and boundaries of politeness that applied in a speech community (Allan & Burrige, 2006; Ljung,

2011). Therefore, the study of swear words was relevant in sociolinguistics and pragmatics, especially when linked to different cultural contexts.

From a linguistic perspective, swear words were understood as forms of language that referred to concepts or entities considered taboo, sensitive, or inappropriate to say neutrally in certain societies (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Rothwell, 1971). References in swear words, such as the body, sexuality, animals, mental conditions, or social categories, reflected the cultural values that existed in the society of the speakers (Ljung, 2011; Wijana, 2004). Thus, an analysis of the references used was important to reveal how culture influenced linguistic choices in expressions of profanity.

The phenomenon of swear word usage became increasingly prominent in the context of cross-cultural communication and multilingual societies. Cultural differences often led to differences in perception regarding the offensiveness of a swear word (Dewaele, 2016). In this context, the study of swear words could not be separated from intercultural communication because the meaning and reference of swear words were greatly influenced by the social norms and value systems prevailing in a society (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

The selection of Bali and Singapore as objects of study was based on contrasting sociolinguistic characteristics. Bali represented a local ethnolinguistic community that maintained its regional language as part of its cultural identity and daily social practices. In this context, Balinese swear words were often related to social structures, interpersonal relationships, and customary norms (Dewi et al., 2020; Wisudayanti, 2020). In addition, the high intensity of international tourism in Bali expanded language and cultural contact, which influenced the dynamics of language use, including swear words (Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Bali, 2024).

In contrast, Singapore was a multilingual society characterized by intensive contact between languages and dialects. Swear words in Singapore were heavily influenced by the Hokkien dialect, which was used as the main source of swear words in informal interactions (Sugiantari et al., 2025; Yun, 2012). The use of swear words in this context showed a shift and expansion of references due to the influence of globalization and cross-ethnic interactions (Wen et al., 2021). These conditions made Singapore a relevant context to compare with Bali in cross-cultural studies.

A number of previous studies examined swear words from various perspectives. Some studies focused on morphological forms and processes (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002), while others focused on pragmatic functions and levels of offensiveness (Dewaele, 2016; Jay, 2009; Wang, 2013). In the Indonesian context, research on Balinese swear words generally discussed social functions and contexts of use (Dewipayani et al., 2021; Saniada et al., 2023; Wisudayanti, 2020). Mahayoni et al. (2025) and Wahyuni et al. (2025) showed that swear words in different cultures varied in their forms, functions, and references. Furthermore, Yani et al. (2017) compared American and Balinese swear words and identified similarities in form,

reference, and function, while emphasizing that swear words remained culturally localized. Additionally, Budasi (2012) identified simple words, phrases, and metaphorical expressions as the main structural forms in Balinese and Indonesian, highlighting the strong influence of cultural values.

Based on previous studies, there appeared to be a research gap, namely a lack of studies specifically comparing references used in swear words between Bali and Singapore. Most previous studies focused more on form or function without examining in depth how swear word references reflected the cultural value systems of their speakers. Therefore, this study focused on analyzing the references used in swear words through a comparative approach between Balinese and Singaporean contexts. This study aimed to discuss and compare the types of references used in Balinese and Singaporean swear words as well as to identify their similarities and differences. The results of this study were expected to contribute to sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between language, culture, and taboo expressions in a cross-cultural context.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review design. This approach was chosen because the study focused on analyzing the meaning and classification of references in swear words, which required contextual and interpretive understanding. The study relied on academic sources, making this method suitable for examining linguistic phenomena based on secondary data (Bowen, 2009).

The data sources for this study were secondary data obtained from previous studies in the form of relevant journal articles and theses. The Balinese swear words data were taken from studies discussing the use of swear words in various social contexts in Balinese society. Meanwhile, data on Singaporean swear words were obtained from research examining the use of swear words in the Hokkien dialect in Singapore. All data sources were selected based on their relevance to the use of swear words in the social context of each language community.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis. The researchers identified and selected swear words listed in written sources, then recorded relevant data for further analysis. This process was carried out systematically by carefully reading and examining documents so that the data collected were in line with the research objectives.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis. The analysis began by identifying and grouping swear words based on the references used or references referred to by the swear words. Reference classification was performed with reference to studies on swear words (Malo & Adindarena, 2021). Next, data from Bali and Singapore were compared to identify similarities and differences in the types of references used. The results of the analysis were presented descriptively and

comparatively to address the research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents research findings on references used in Balinese and Singaporean swear words. The data were classified into reference categories based on the framework developed by Malo and Adindarena (2021). Each table showed the distribution of swear words based on reference type, accompanied by a brief explanation to highlight the main patterns found.

1. Social Condition

Table 1. Swear Words Refer to Social Condition

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Social Condition	<i>belog</i>	stupid	<i>siao</i>	crazy
	<i>buduh</i>	crazy	<i>gao sia</i>	troublemaker
	<i>bengkung</i>	obstinate	<i>ah kua</i>	effeminate man
			<i>bu liao</i>	useless
			<i>kanasai</i>	unlucky
			<i>siao kia</i>	crazy kid
			<i>kao pei kao</i>	cry father, cry
			<i>bu</i>	mother
			<i>buay song</i>	pissed off
			<i>chao kwan</i>	bad character
			<i>kia su</i>	scared to lose to others
			<i>bo tua bo</i>	no elder, no younger
			<i>suay</i>	
			<i>kai see</i>	scared to die
		<i>ni zen swee</i>	you are so unlucky!	
		<i>xiao nian ni</i>	you are just a kid!	
		<i>kum gong</i>	damn	

Table 1 shows that both Balinese and Singaporean languages use swear words that refer to social conditions and individual characteristics. In both languages, these expressions are commonly used to evaluate a person negatively, particularly in relation to intelligence, behavior, or mental state. However, the Singaporean data show a noticeably higher number and variety of swear words referring to social conditions compared to Balinese, indicating that this type of reference plays a more dominant role in Singaporean swear words usage.

2. Concrete Objects

Table 2. Swear Words Refer to Concrete Objects

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Concrete Objects	<i>bangke</i> <i>bangkaan</i> <i>nani</i>	corpse you coarse are corpse	-	-

Table 2 shows that references to concrete objects are only found in the Balinese language. Swear words in this category are derived from physical objects that carry unpleasant or negative associations. In contrast, no concrete object references are identified in the Singaporean swear words analyzed, suggesting that this type of reference is not commonly used in Singaporean swear words.

3. Abstract Concept or Situations

Table 3. Swear Words Refer to Abstract Concept or Situations

The References of Swear Words	Balinese			Singaporean
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Abstract Concept or Situations	<i>nani</i>	you coarse	<i>jialat</i>	very bad
	<i>sige</i>	you coarse	<i>simi lan</i>	what the hell
	<i>bangke</i>	die	<i>simi lan</i>	what the hell (but stronger in emphasis)
			<i>jiao</i>	
			<i>mai lah</i>	don't do things in such a way
			<i>si bei</i>	worse
			<i>jialat</i> <i>wah lau</i> <i>eh</i>	oh my god

Table 3 shows that both languages use abstract concepts or situations. These expressions are typically used to react to unfavorable circumstances rather than to directly insult a specific individual. Although both languages use this category, Singaporean swear words show a greater tendency to rely on abstract situational references, while Balinese uses them in a more limited manner.

4. Religion or Supernatural Beings

Table 4. Swear Words Refer to Religion or Supernatural Beings

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Religion or Supernatural Beings	<i>pirate</i> <i>memedi</i> <i>panak medi</i> <i>nani</i>	ancestor ghost you coarse are son of ghost	-	-

Table 4 shows that references related to religion or supernatural beings are only found in Balinese. These expressions involve spiritual or supernatural entities that are familiar within Balinese cultural and religious contexts. No similar

references are found in the Singaporean swear words, making a clear distinction between the two languages in terms of the involvement of religious or supernatural elements.

5. Sexual Organs or Activities

Table 5. Swear Words Refer to Sexual Organs or Activities

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Sexual Organs or Activities	<i>naskeleng</i>	head-dick	<i>chee bye</i>	women's private parts
	<i>pletan</i>	male genital	<i>chao chee bye</i>	smelly lady's private part
	<i>katuk</i>	fuck	<i>lan pa chee</i>	male testicle
	<i>mekatukan</i>	fuck	<i>lan jiao</i>	penis
			<i>kan ni na</i>	fuck your mother
		<i>kan si lang</i>	fuck everyone	

Table 5 shows that both languages use references related to sexual organs or activities. This category represents one of the most strongly taboo sources of swearing in both languages. Balinese and Singaporean swear words include references to both sexual organs and activities.

6. Bodily Excretions

Table 6. Swear Words Refer to Bodily Excretions

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Bodily Excretions	<i>tai</i>	feces	<i>san jua sai</i>	feces
	<i>dakin teli</i>	vagina excrement		

Table 6 shows that both Balinese and Singaporean swear words use references related to bodily excretion, although their occurrence is relatively limited. These swear words are generally used to express disgust or to demean the target of the utterance. In both languages, bodily excretions function as a supplementary reference category rather than a dominant one.

7. Body Part

Table 7. Swear Words Refer to Body Parts

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Body parts	<i>jit</i>	ass	<i>bo geh</i>	no teeth
	<i>polone</i>	brain		
	<i>mue jit</i>	ass face		
	<i>bungut nanine</i>	you coarse mouth		

Table 7 shows the use of body part references in Balinese and Singaporean swear words. These expressions are often directed at individuals and function as

direct personal insults. However, Balinese swear words show a wider variety of body part references compared to the Singaporean, where such references are fewer and more restricted.

8. Animal

Table 8. Swear Words Refer to Animals

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Animals	<i>cicing</i>	dog	-	-
	<i>bojog</i>	monkey		
	<i>kuluk berung</i>	wounded dog		

Table 8 shows that references to animals are only found in Balinese swear words. In this category, humans are metaphorically compared to animals that are associated with negative traits or behaviors. No animal-based references are identified in the Singaporean swear words analyzed, highlighting a difference in metaphorical strategies between the two languages.

9. Actions

Table 9. Swear Words Refer to Actions

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Actions	<i>mepete den</i>	talk too much	<i>lu ai kan ni na</i>	you like to look at your mother's private parts
	<i>ngamah</i>	eat	<i>ni hai bu</i>	you messed up!
	<i>medem den</i>	always sleep	<i>ni hua hee tao</i>	don't act dumb!
	<i>bangke muh</i>	die you	<i>hao</i>	

Table 9 shows that both languages use references to actions in swear words. These expressions focus on criticizing actions or behaviors that are perceived as inappropriate or annoying.

10. Professions

Table 10. Swear Words Refer to Professions

The References of Swear Words	Balinese		Singaporean	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Professions	<i>sundel</i>	whore	-	-

Table 10 shows that references to professions only appear in the Balinese swear words. These swear words involve occupations that carry negative social connotations and are used to attack a person's dignity. Such references are not found in the Singaporean swear words included in this study, further emphasizing the broader range of reference categories used in Balinese.

Discussion

Based on the results of the study, swear words in Balinese and Singaporean were classified using Malo and Adindarena's (2021) theory, which divides swear words into ten categories, namely social conditions, concrete objects, abstract concepts or situations, religion or supernatural beings, sexual organs or activities, bodily excretions, body parts, animals, actions, and professions. The findings show that not all of these reference categories appear in both languages, revealing significant similarities and differences in the patterns of swear word reference usage. The results of the study show that both Balinese and Singaporean languages use six categories of reference, namely social condition, abstract concepts or situations, sexual organs or activities, bodily excretions, body parts, and actions. This similarity indicates that both languages utilize domains of reference that are universally considered taboo or sensitive in society.

In the social condition category, both languages use swear words to negatively judge individuals based on their character, behavior, or social condition. Words such as *belog*, *buduh*, and *bengkung* in Balinese and *siao*, *ni zeng swee*, and *bu liao* in Singaporean serve to belittle the interlocutor by associating them with incompetence, deviance, or social inferiority. These findings are in line with Malo and Adindarena (2021), who state that references to social conditions are used to construct stigma and social hierarchies through language.

Similarities can also be seen in the category of abstract concepts or situations, such as *bangke* in Balinese and *jialat* and *simi lan* in Singaporean. These references do not refer to specific physical objects, but rather to negative evaluations of situations, circumstances, or conditions experienced by the speaker. According to Ljung (2011), swear words with abstract references are often used as spontaneous expressions of reaction to situations that are considered annoying or harmful, without necessarily targeting specific individuals directly.

In addition, both languages also utilize references to sexual organs or activities, bodily excretions, and body parts. The use of references related to the body and biological functions supports Allan and Burrige's (2006) view that aspects of the body and sex are the main sources of taboo words because they conflict with norms of decency and social morality. Therefore, these references have strong emotional power and are effective in the context of cross-cultural swearing.

In the category of actions, both languages use swear words to condemn certain actions or behaviors, such as *mepete den* and *bangke muh* in Balinese and *ni hua hee tao hao* and *ni hai bu* in Singaporean. These references to actions show that swear words not only attack identity, but also evaluate behavior that is considered deviant or socially unacceptable.

Although they share a number of similarities, there are striking differences in the number and types of reference categories used in each language. Balinese shows a more diverse use of reference categories than Singaporean. In Balinese, there are categories such as concrete objects, religion or supernatural beings, animals, and professions,

which do not appear in Singaporean. References to concrete objects, such as *bangke* and *bangkaan nani*, refer directly to physical objects associated with death or something disgusting. The use of these concrete references shows the tendency of the Balinese language to use real objects as a means of reinforcing the meaning of insults, as explained by Wijana (2004) that insults in Indonesian regional languages are often both literal and metaphorical.

A notable difference can also be observed in the category of religion or supernatural beings. The Balinese language uses references such as *memedi*, *pirate*, and *panak medi nani*, which are deeply rooted in the belief system and cosmology of Balinese society. The absence of this category in the Singaporean languages shows that religious and supernatural elements are not the main source of swear words in Singaporean context. This is in line with Wardhaugh & Fuller's (2015) view that cultural background and belief systems greatly determine the types of references that are considered relevant or taboo in a language community. In addition, the Balinese language also uses references to animals and professions, such as *cicing*, *bojog*, and *sundel*. These references serve to demean human dignity by equating individuals with animals or socially stigmatized professions. According to Allan dan BurrIDGE (2006), this kind of dehumanization strategy is a characteristic of swear words that aim to attack personal identity directly.

In contrast, Singaporean swear words show a stronger tendency to use references to social conditions and abstract concepts or situations, such as *jialat*, *si bei jialat*, and *mai lah*. These references focus more on assessing situations or conditions than attacking the personal identity of the interlocutor. Wen et al. (2021) explain that in the context of Singapore's multilingual and multicultural society, swear words are often used as markers of emotional attitude, so they tend to be situational and not very personal.

Based on the overall findings, both Balinese and Singaporean languages utilize swear words from taboo domains as classified by Malo and Adindarena (2021). However, Balinese shows a wider variety of references that are more concrete, while Singaporean tends to use references that are more abstract and evaluative of the situation. This difference confirms that although the category of swear word references is universal, the selection and tendency to use them are greatly influenced by the cultural background, value systems, and social contexts of each society.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that swear words in Balinese and Singaporean can be systematically analyzed through the category of references used, revealing meaningful sociolinguistic similarities and differences. Both languages utilize universal references such as social conditions, abstract concepts or situations, sexual organs or activities, body excretions, body parts, and actions to express

negative evaluations and emotions. However, Balinese shows a broader range of references through the presence of religion or supernatural beings, animals, concrete objects, and profession references, reflecting the close connection between language, beliefs, and local social structures. In contrast, Singaporean language tends to use more situational and abstract references, in line with the multilingual and multicultural character of its society. These findings confirm that although swear words are cross-cultural, their selection and tendencies of the use are strongly influenced by the cultural values and social contexts of each community between Balinese and Singaporean. Moreover, the limitation focused on analyzing the references used in swear words and a comparative approach between the Balinese and Singaporean languages. Thus, as the implication of the study, this study contributes to sociolinguistics and discourse analysis by demonstrating that swear words can be systematically categorized through reference types.

Further research should expand the scope of data by using primary data through direct observation or interviews to capture the context of the use of swear word in greater depth. In addition, comparative studies can be developed by involving more languages or ethnolinguistic groups to strengthen the generalizations of the findings related to references used. From an analytical perspective, future research could combine reference studies with the aspects of pragmatic function or politeness strategies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of swear words in cross-cultural social interactions.

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