



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

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to compare the references used in swear words in Balinese and Australian. Swear words are linguistically and culturally significant because they reflect social norms, beliefs, and emotional expression within a speech community. This research employed a comparative descriptive qualitative design using primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with native Balinese speakers and native Australian English speakers, while secondary data were collected from relevant studies and academic documents. The data were analyzed through inductive categorization based on reference types in sociolinguistic studies of taboo language. The findings show that both languages share common reference domains, including religion/ supernatural being, sex, excrement, animals, personal background, mental illness, and sexual activity. However, Balinese swear words emphasize animal references, supernatural being, and social hierarchy, whereas Australian English swear words more frequently involve sexual references and personal insults used flexibly in informal contexts. These differences reflect distinct sociocultural values and potential sources of cross-cultural misunderstanding. For the implication of this study is the importance of understanding these similarities and differences for preventing cross-cultural misunderstanding and for promoting effective intercultural communication, particularly between speakers of Balinese and Australian English.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a system of communication but also a reflection of cultural values, social relationships, and the norms that prevail within a society. Every community develops linguistic conventions that regulate how individuals express emotions, attitudes, and identities. One of the most striking examples of the

relationship between language and culture is the use of swear words. Swear words are generally categorized as taboo expressions because they refer to topics considered socially sensitive, offensive, or impolite. Despite their negative reputation, however, such expressions continue to play important communicative roles in everyday interaction. Swearing can function to express strong emotions, intensify meaning, signal group membership, or even create humor depending on the context in which it is used (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Ljung, 2011; Hughes, 2006).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language always varies according to social factors such as age, gender, social status, and cultural background. These factors influence not only vocabulary choice but also the level of politeness and the appropriateness of certain expressions in particular situations. Swear words are highly sensitive to social norms because their acceptability depends heavily on the relationship between speakers and listeners as well as the situational context. Andersson and Trudgill (1990) state that swearing typically involves taboo topics but is rarely interpreted literally; instead, it functions as an emotional outlet or pragmatic device. Crystal (1991) adds that taboo language often emerges spontaneously in response to strong emotions such as anger, surprise, or frustration. Nordquist (2020) further emphasizes that swearing is not always intended to insult but can be used to emphasize statements or express social solidarity.

Scholars have classified swear words based on their referential domains. Hughes (1998) identifies common sources of taboo language, including religion, sexuality, bodily functions, animals, and social status. These categories reflect what a society considers sacred, impure, or sensitive. Over time, historical developments show that taboo areas may shift as cultural values change (Hughes, 2006). In addition to reference, the structure of swear words is also linguistically significant. Morphological studies indicate that swear expressions may take the form of single words, compound words, phrases, or even full clauses (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002; Delahunty & Garvey, 2004). Therefore, swearing represents not only a sociocultural phenomenon but also an integral part of language structure.

Balinese society provides a particularly interesting context for studying taboo language because it possesses a complex system of speech levels and social hierarchy. The Balinese language distinguishes between polite and informal registers based on factors such as caste, age, and social distance (Arka, 2018). In such a system, inappropriate language use may be perceived as disrespectful or offensive. Consequently, swear words in Balinese are strongly influenced by social relationships and communicative situations. Research by Budasi (2012) shows that Balinese swear words often contain references to animals, body parts, biological functions, or social identity with strong negative connotations. In addition, research conducted in the Bali Aga community of Sidetapa Village found that certain expressions may function as friendly teasing or as serious insults depending on the level of familiarity between

speakers (Wiyasa et al., 2017). This highlights the importance of pragmatic context in interpreting taboo language.

In contrast, English-speaking cultures, particularly in Australia, are often associated with relatively egalitarian social norms and informal communication styles. Australian English is widely known for its use of slang and casual expressions, including swear words in everyday conversation. In many cases, swearing does not necessarily indicate hostility but can serve as a marker of intimacy, solidarity, or humor. Research on Australian swearing shows that taboo expressions frequently occur in informal situations and are not always perceived as offensive among peers (Widiantara, 2025). Andersson and Trudgill (1990) also note that in many English-speaking communities, swearing can function as a mechanism for social bonding.

The functions of swear words extend beyond emotional expression alone. Swearing can be used to attract attention, provoke reactions, release psychological tension, or reinforce group identity (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Ljung, 2011). Lafreniere et al. (2022) observes that English swear words often function pragmatically as intensifiers or emphatic devices. Yani et al. (2017), in a comparative study of American and Balinese swear words, found that differences in cultural norms significantly influence how such expressions are interpreted. These findings suggest that swearing is deeply embedded within cultural frameworks and cannot be fully understood without considering its social context.

Intercultural communication further complicates the interpretation of taboo language. When speakers from different cultural backgrounds interact, they tend to interpret utterances based on their own linguistic norms. This can lead to misunderstandings, especially when an expression considered harmless in one culture is perceived as offensive in another. Gentile (2021) emphasize the importance of contrastive linguistic analysis for identifying potential communication barriers across languages. Such analysis helps reveal how differences in vocabulary, structure, and pragmatic usage reflect broader cultural distinctions. This issue is particularly relevant in Bali, where interactions between local residents and international tourists occur intensively due to the tourism industry. Australian tourists represent one of the largest groups of visitors, resulting in frequent contact between Balinese speakers and Australian English speakers. Differences in the use and interpretation of swear words may therefore influence interpersonal communication in tourism contexts. Misunderstandings arising from taboo language can create discomfort or even conflict, highlighting the need for greater intercultural awareness.

Previous research on swearing has largely focused on individual languages or specific communities. For example, Mahayoni (2025) shows that swear words in South Korean language are strongly influenced by social hierarchy and norms of politeness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for studying culturally embedded phenomena because they

allow researchers to explore meanings within natural contexts. Budasi (2018) also highlights the importance of selecting appropriate informants to ensure that sociolinguistic data are valid and representative. Nevertheless, comparative studies specifically examining Balinese and Australian English remain relatively limited. Comparative research is important because it can reveal both universal and culture-specific aspects of swearing. Many societies share similar taboo domains, such as sexuality or bodily functions, yet the social meanings attached to these references can differ significantly. Understanding these differences is crucial for improving intercultural communication and minimizing potential misunderstandings. Therefore, analyzing the forms, functions, and references of swear words across languages can provide valuable insight into how language reflects cultural identity and social structure.

This study aims to compare swear words in Balinese and Australian English, focusing on their linguistic forms, communicative functions, and referential meanings. By integrating sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and contrastive linguistic perspectives, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of swear word in cross-cultural contexts. Furthermore, the findings are anticipated to enhance awareness of linguistic diversity and support more sensitive and respectful communication among speakers from different cultural backgrounds, particularly in multicultural environments such as Bali. Based on these considerations, the research question of this study is how do the comparison between Balinese and Australian swear words.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with a contrastive analysis approach to examine similarities and differences in swear word references between Balinese and Australian English. Qualitative methods are appropriate for exploring language use in natural contexts and understanding meanings from the speakers' perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research focused on identifying categories of taboo references rather than measuring frequency statistically.

The data sources consisted of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with native speakers of Balinese and Australian English. The study involved six informants: three Balinese speakers and three Australian speakers. Informants were selected based on criteria such as linguistic competence, age, and social experience to ensure credible data (Budasi, 2025). Secondary data were collected from previous theses, linguistic studies, and academic documents related to swear words in both languages.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis and interviews. Document analysis involved reviewing relevant academic works to identify existing swear word references. Interviews were carried out using a structured guide to ensure consistency across participants. The researcher acted as the primary instrument,

supported by checklists and interview sheets to record examples and contextual information. This triangulation of methods enhances the credibility of qualitative research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

The data were analyzed using an inductive approach. First, all swear words collected from interviews and documents were extracted into tables. Second, the data were categorized according to their reference domains, such as religion/ supernatural being, sexual organs, excrement, animals, mental illness, sex activity and personal background. Third, a comparative descriptive analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences between the two languages. This process allows researchers to reveal how cultural factors influence the choice of taboo references (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). The findings were then interpreted within a sociolinguistic framework to explain the relationship between language use and cultural values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the research findings on the references used in Balinese and Australian swear words. The data were classified into reference categories based on the framework proposed by Hughes (1998). 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 Australian swear words.

1. Religion / Supernatural Being

Table 1. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Religion/Supernatural Being

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Religion/	<i>Memedi</i>	Ghost	<i>God damn</i>	God
Supernatural Being	<i>Liak</i>	The devil	<i>Jesus Christ</i>	God

As shown in the table 1, Balinese swear words referring to religion or supernatural beings include *memedi* 'ghost' and *liak* 'the devil'. These expressions draw on traditional spiritual beliefs and mythological figures within Balinese culture. In Australian English, swear words in this category include "god damn" and "Jesus Christ", both of which originate from Christian religious references. These expressions are commonly used to express anger, frustration, surprise, or emphasis rather than to literally refer to religious figures.

2. Sexual Organ

Table 2. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Sexual Organ

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Sexual Organ	<i>Naskeleng</i>	Head-dick	<i>Arsehole</i>	Ass
	<i>Pletan</i>	Male genital	<i>Knobhead</i>	Penis
	<i>Teli</i>	Female genital	<i>Cunt</i>	Female genital
	<i>Celak</i>	Male genital	<i>Bellend</i>	Penis
	<i>Jit</i>	Ass	<i>Dick head</i>	Male genital
	<i>Ndas celak</i>	Male genital	<i>Twat</i>	Female genital
	<i>Butuh</i>	Male genital	-	-

As shown in the table 2, Balinese swear words referring to sexual organs include *naskeleng* 'dick head', *pletan* 'male genital', *teli* 'female genital', *celak* 'male genital', *jit* 'ass', *ndas celak* 'male genital', and *butuh* 'male genital'. These expressions insult a person by associating them with genitalia or excretory organs, which are considered highly taboo and inappropriate in polite communication. In Australian English, swear words in this category include *arsehole* 'ass', *knobhead* 'penis', *cunt* 'female genital', *bellend* 'penis', *dickhead* 'male genital', and *twat* 'female genital'. These terms derive from sexual or excretory anatomy but are often used metaphorically to criticize a person's character, intelligence, or behavior rather than referring literally to body parts. The Balinese data show a slightly greater variety of expressions in this category compared to the Australian examples in the table.

3. Excrement

Table 3. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Excrement

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Excrement	<i>Tai</i>	Shit	<i>Pish</i>	Urine
	<i>Bangke</i>	Corpse	<i>Shit</i>	Feces
	<i>Dakin teli</i>	Vagina excrement	-	-
	<i>Jit bengu</i>	Stinky bottom	-	-

As shown in the table 3, Balinese swear words referring to excrement include *tai* 'shit', *bangke* 'corpse', *dakin teli* 'vaginal excrement', and *jit bengu* 'stinky bottom'.

These expressions insult a person by associating them with dirtiness, decay, or unpleasant bodily waste, which are socially considered disgusting and impure. In Australian English, swear words in this category include *pish* ‘urine’ and *shit* ‘feces’, which are also used to express anger, annoyance, or strong disapproval. The Balinese data show a greater variety of expressions related to excrement compared to the Australian examples in this table. This indicates that excrement-based swearing appears more lexically diverse in the Balinese data of this study.

4. Animal Names

Table 4. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Animal

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Animal Term	<i>Cicing</i>	Dog	<i>Cow</i>	Animal
	<i>Bojog</i>	Monkey	<i>Dog</i>	Animal
	<i>Kuluk</i>	Dog	<i>Pig</i>	Animal
	<i>Bangkung</i>	Pig (female)	<i>Swine</i>	Animal
	<i>Celeng</i>	Pig	-	-

As shown in the table 4, Balinese swear words referring to animals include *cicing* ‘dog’, *bojog* ‘monkey’, *kuluk* ‘dog’, *bangkung* ‘female pig’, and *celeng* ‘pig’. These expressions insult a person by comparing them to animals that are culturally associated with undesirable traits, such as dirtiness, stupidity, aggressiveness, or lack of manners. In Australian English, animal-related swear words include *cow*, *dog*, *pig* and *swine*, which similarly function to demean or criticize a person’s character or behavior. For instance, these terms may imply rudeness, unpleasant personality, or moral inferiority rather than referring literally to animals. Although both languages use animal terms as a source of verbal insults, the Balinese data in this table show a slightly greater number of expressions compared to the Australian examples.

5. Personal Background

Table 5. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Personal Background

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Personal Background	<i>Jeneng</i>	Face	<i>Bastard</i>	Unmoral person
	<i>Sundel</i>	Bitch/Whore	<i>Chav</i>	Lower- class
	<i>Bodo</i>	Ugly	<i>Minger</i>	Unattractive

person

As shown in the table 5, Balinese swear words related to personal background include *jeneng* ‘face’, *sundel* ‘whore’, *bodo* ‘ugly’, and *berung* ‘scar’. Such terms function to demean the individual by highlighting perceived physical flaws, social stigma, or immoral behavior, thereby lowering the person’s social value and dignity. In Australian English, swear words in this category include *bastard*, *chav*, *minger* and *bogan*. These terms commonly refer to a person’s social status, moral reputation, or physical attractiveness rather than to any specific body part or action. Although both languages use personal background as a basis for verbal insults, the number of expressions in this table is equal for Balinese and Australian English, with four terms each.

6. Mental illness

Table 5. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Personal Background

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Mental illness	<i>Lengeh</i>	Stupid	<i>Nutcase</i>	Crazy
	<i>Bengkung</i>	Obstinate	<i>Idiot</i>	Foolish
	<i>Buduh</i>	Crazy	<i>Dumbass</i>	Stupid
	<i>Belog</i>	Stupid	<i>Psycho</i>	Crazy
	<i>Matah gati</i>	Very cringe	-	-
	<i>Sedeng</i>	Crazy	-	-

As shown in the table 6, Balinese swear words referring to mental illness or cognitive deficiency include *lengeh* ‘stupid’, *bengkung* ‘obstinate’, *buduh* ‘crazy’, *belog* ‘stupid’, *matah gati* ‘very cringe’, and *sedeng* ‘crazy’. Such terms function to belittle the target’s cognitive ability or emotional control, implying that the person is foolish, unreasonable, or socially inappropriate. In Australian English, swear words in this category include *nutcase*, *idiot*, *dumbass* and *psycho*, which similarly refer to perceived mental instability or intellectual deficiency. Although both languages employ references to mental illness as a source of verbal insults, the Balinese data in this table contain a greater number of expressions compared to the Australian examples.

7. Sexual Activity

Table 7. The Reference of Swear Words and Meaning in the Term of Sex Activity

The References of Swearwords	Balinese		Australian	
	The Terms	The Meaning	The Terms	The Meaning
Sex Activity	<i>Katuk</i>	Fuck	<i>Screw</i>	Sex activity
	<i>Ngucut</i>	Masturbate	<i>Fuck</i>	Sex activity
	<i>Ngangkuk</i>	Have sex	<i>Root</i>	Sex activity
	<i>Nyundel</i>	Doing prostitute	<i>Motherfucker</i>	Sex activity
	<i>Nyelek</i>	Poke	-	-

As shown in the table 7, Balinese swear words referring to sexual activity include *katuk* ‘fuck’, *ngucut* ‘masturbate’, *ngangkuk* ‘have sex’, *nyundel* ‘doing prostitute’, and *nyelek* ‘poke’. Such terms function to demean the target’s morality, self-control, or social respectability, often conveying strong anger, contempt, or moral judgment. In Australian English, swear words in this category include *screw*, *fuck*, *root* and *motherfucker*, all of which originate from sexual acts but are frequently used as general insults or intensifiers of emotion rather than literal references to sexual activity. The Balinese data in this table contain a slightly greater number of expressions compared to the Australian examples.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that both Balinese and Australian English swear words employ a wide range of reference domains, indicating that swear word in both speech communities draws upon culturally meaningful sources. Similar patterns have been documented in studies of profanity across languages. Allan and Burridge (2006) argue that taboo expressions commonly originate from domains associated with social prohibition, such as sexuality, bodily functions, religion, and social identity. Likewise, Andersson and Trudgill (1990) emphasize that swearing reflects what a community considers emotionally charged or socially sensitive. Based on these perspectives, the references identified in this study include sexual activity, excretion, body parts, animals, religion or supernatural beings, personal background, and mental conditions. The presence of these shared domains suggests that certain taboo sources are cross-culturally salient because they relate to fundamental human concerns such as morality, purity, and social relations.

Despite the similarity in reference categories, the distribution and cultural prominence of specific domains differ significantly between the two languages. In

Balinese, swear words were found to rely heavily on references to animals, supernatural forces, and social hierarchy. This pattern is consistent with previous research on Balinese taboo language. Budasi (2012) reported that Balinese insults frequently employ animal metaphors and references to social identity to express contempt or disapproval. Similarly, research on Bali Aga communities in Sidetapa Village revealed that animal-based expressions and culturally embedded insults are dominant in local swearing practices (Wiyasa et al., 2017). This is further evidenced by Yogiantari et al. (2024) in *Balinese Taboo Words Used in Kerobokan Village, Badung Regency*, which reports that Balinese taboo words predominantly refer to animals, supernatural entities, and socially stigmatized behaviors shaped by local cultural norms. These references reflect the strong influence of traditional beliefs and communal values in Balinese society, where animals and spiritual entities often symbolize moral characteristics, impurity, or deviant behavior. The Balinese language itself operates within a complex system of social stratification and speech levels, reinforcing the importance of hierarchy and respect in communication (Arka, 2018).

In contrast, Australian English swear words were found to rely more heavily on sexual references and direct personal insults. When examined from a sociolinguistic perspective, these expressions primarily target individual attributes such as intelligence, competence, or behavior rather than social status or lineage. Studies of English profanity similarly indicate that sexual and bodily references are among the most productive sources of swearing in Western cultures (Allan & Burrige, 2006). Research specifically on Australian English also shows that swear words are frequently used in informal settings and often function as expressions of emotion rather than purely hostile insults (Widiantara, 2025). This tendency reflects a relatively egalitarian and informal communication style, in which direct personal expression is socially acceptable among peers.

Another important difference concerns references to supernatural beings and religious concepts. Balinese swear words sometimes invoke spirits, curses, or supernatural entities rooted in Hindu belief systems. Such references are culturally powerful because spiritual concepts play a central role in Balinese worldview and daily life. Previous studies confirm that Balinese taboo expressions often draw on religious or mystical imagery to intensify the insult (Budasi, 2012; Yani et al., 2017). In contrast, Australian English rarely uses supernatural references in everyday swearing. This absence may reflect the more secular orientation of contemporary Australian society, where religious imagery is less integrated into casual discourse.

However, both languages share references to sexuality and excretion, which are widely recognized as universal taboo domains. These topics are generally avoided in polite conversation across cultures, making them effective for expressing strong emotions such as anger or frustration. Andersson and Trudgill (1990) note that bodily functions are common sources of swearing because they violate norms of decorum and purity. Nevertheless, the pragmatic interpretation of these expressions differs. In

Balinese contexts, such words may be considered highly offensive due to cultural norms emphasizing politeness, social harmony, and respect. In Australian English, similar expressions may be used more flexibly and can even signal camaraderie or humor in informal interactions. Research on English swear words confirms that profanity can function as emphasis, emotional release, or group solidarity rather than purely as aggression (Lafreniere et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the comparison highlights that swear words in Balinese tend to reflect collective social values, while those in Australian English emphasize individual identity. Some Balinese expressions target lineage or social background, demonstrating the importance of communal belonging and social order. Sociolinguistic theory suggests that language in collectivist cultures often reinforces group norms and hierarchy (Wijana & Rohmani, 2007). In contrast, Australian English insults more commonly attack personal competence or character, reflecting individualistic cultural tendencies. The multifunctionality of swear words is evident in both languages. Beyond expressing anger, they can serve to intensify statements, attract attention, or release psychological tension. Similar patterns have been observed in other linguistic contexts. For example, research on Korean swear words shows that profanity functions as an emotional outlet and a marker of interpersonal stance (Mahayoni, 2025). This supports the view that swearing is a universal communicative strategy shaped by local cultural norms and social relationships.

Overall, the comparison demonstrates that although Balinese and Australian English share general taboo domains, the cultural meanings attached to these references differ substantially. The dominance of animal and supernatural references in Balinese reflects the influence of traditional beliefs, hierarchical social structure, and communal values. Meanwhile, the prominence of sexual and personal attack references in Australian English reflects a more informal, secular, and individual-oriented communication style. These findings confirm that swear words are culturally grounded linguistic expressions rather than merely vulgar language.

This study shows that analyzing the reference domains of swear words provides valuable insight into broader cultural patterns, including belief systems, social organization, and communicative norms. While universal themes of taboo exist across languages, the specific forms and functions of swearing are shaped by the sociocultural environment of each speech community. Understanding these differences is essential for interpreting meaning accurately and for promoting effective intercultural communication, particularly in multilingual settings where speakers from different cultural backgrounds interact frequently.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study shows that swear words in Balinese and Australian English are not merely expressions of impolite or offensive language, but represent

meaningful sociolinguistic phenomena shaped by cultural norms and social contexts. The findings indicate that both languages share several reference domains in swear words, including sexual activity, excretion, religion or supernatural beings, animals, personal background, mental conditions, and body parts. These shared domains suggest that certain sources of taboo language may be universal, as they relate to fundamental human concerns such as morality, purity, and social identity. Despite these similarities, significant differences were identified in the prominence and sociocultural interpretation of swear words in each language. Balinese swear words predominantly reflect references to animals, supernatural being, and social hierarchy, indicating the strong influence of traditional beliefs, religious values, and communal social structures. Some expressions also target lineage or social status, emphasizing the importance of social order and harmony in Balinese culture. In contrast, swear words in Australian English more frequently involve sexual references and personal insults. In Australian contexts, such expressions are often used flexibly in informal interactions and may serve functions beyond insult, including expressing solidarity, humor, or emphasis. This pattern reflects a communication style that is relatively egalitarian, secular, and informal.

Overall, the findings highlight that the use of swear words mirrors the cultural values, social relationships, and communicative norms of each society. Understanding these similarities and differences is essential for preventing cross-cultural misunderstanding and for promoting effective intercultural communication, particularly between speakers of Balinese and Australian English. Nevertheless, this study is limited to data drawn from the Buleleng dialect of Balinese, which may not fully represent other regional varieties of the language. In addition, the primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, which may not entirely capture the full range of swear word usage in naturally occurring interactions. Despite these limitations, the integration of primary and secondary data provides a meaningful contribution to sociolinguistic studies of taboo language and offers a foundation for future cross-cultural research.

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