

## (IM)Politeness: Swearing Among Youths in Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses on the issue of (im)politeness among youths in Malaysia, particularly in swearing. Youths are becoming more impolite in their communication. The act of swearing among youths is viewed as part of being impolite in communication based on the sociocultural background of Malaysia. Hence, this study aims to analyse the phenomenon of impoliteness among youths in Malaysia by focusing on selected swear words and their semantic connotations. Data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to 50 youths ranging from 18 to 28 years old. Results have shown that the swear words prominent to Malaysian youths are: fuck, shit, go to hell, motherfucker, what the fuck and damn. Comparison has been made to differentiate the meaning of the words denotatively and connotatively. However, there are also words which are uttered meaninglessly. This study suggests that swearing is polite among the speakers (youths) as it is accepted as a norm and is purposive, meaning that it expresses emotion and does not offend the listeners.

**KEYWORDS:** Impoliteness, Politeness, Swearing, Swear Words, Meaning.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the swearing phenomenon among youths in Malaysia. ‘Swearing words’ are defined as “the taboo language used with the purpose of expressing the speaker's emotional state and communicating that information to listeners” [13]. According to [11], swearing has been linked to impoliteness denoted as any social indiscretion that ought to be avoided. In [7] stated that this happens because the swear words and taboo phrases tend to deal with materials which are offensive in some manner. In [1] claimed that this act is not encouraged as it “sounds bad, harsh and impolite. Swearing has acquired the modern meaning of being offensive or grossly impolite. Word offensiveness according to [14] is highly contextual and depends on the sensitivity of the listener, where offensiveness is measured based on a few pragmatics variables such as speaker-listener relationship, social-physical setting, selection of words and tones of voice. According to [12], taboo words can be casual to the speakers but they can appear impolite to bystanders (i.e. those who do not participate in the conversation).

How does an individual acquire taboos? Caregivers’ (Parents’) role is crucial to control children’s taboo words acquisition. In [14] in their study inveterate that maturity helps individual to understand, where and when to avoid the development of taboo phrases. In [22] stated that speech perception is nearly automatic to mature individuals. Profane words have no boundaries in cultural, from ethnic, religious, sexual and social point of view [21].

Impoliteness among youths in Malaysia has been a viral phenomenon in the social media recently. According to [19, 23], “the language used by young people is getting worse and worse”. Swear words are uttered both intentionally and unintentionally in conversations, causing offence and discomfort among interlocutors in public. While it may be inappropriate to swear such a situation can also lead to miscommunication and conflict in communication, leading to destructive conflicts [5, 27]. More discussions and explorations are needed in the area of impoliteness due to a dearth of research in the Asian contexts [4]. Additionally, Malaysia was also ranked number 33 out of 35 participating countries in a survey conducted by Readers Digest on rudeness in behaviour and communication [28]. Swearing phenomenon in Asian context in particular, is still understudied. It is hoped that this paper could serve some insights on this sociolinguistics issue.

In Malaysia, there is a term in the Malay language called ‘berkias’ which means being indirect whenever people communicate. Malaysians thus share this cultural value which emphasizes on politeness and being indirect in speech. According to [26], in high-context cultures (HC), people communicate politely and indirectly. Communication in high-context culture is indirect, ambiguous, harmonious, reserved and understated [18]. Being direct is perceived as rather impolite in Malaysian culture. In fact, when people are direct in their speech, the listener will almost always be offended. For this reason, being indirect is a common practice among Malaysians.

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On the other hand, swearing is a direct act of using taboo words that does not belong to cultural values of Malaysia. ‘Pantun’ [24] which is a Malay rhymed lines poetry, along with other Malay saying or proverb [29-30] are two strategies which promote polite ways in communication in comparison to swearing, which is a direct use of certain words with negative implication(s) to the listener; swearing does not take face-saving into consideration.

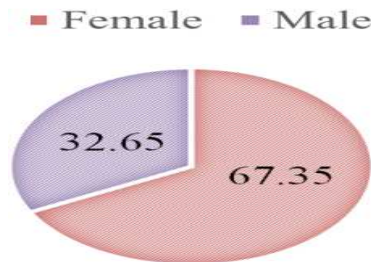
Hence, based on the scenario explained, the researchers have set out 3 objectives of this study which are:

- i. to identify and select commonly used swear words,
- ii. to investigate the meaning of swear words denotatively and connotatively,
- iii. to categorize the swear words among youths in Malaysia grammatically, lexically and semantically.

## METHODOLOGY

To obtain the objectives of this research, the method of data collection has been determined. Questionnaires were distributed to 50 youths. Questionnaire has been chosen as the method of data collection because it allows the researchers to obtain rich data and to sort out the themes for data collection [3].

Questionnaire provides an opportunity for the respondents to state the answers openly as it does not restrict what kind of swear words needed in this study. Rather than proposing answers, this strategy was expected to collect more varieties of swear words among youths in Malaysia. From the data gathered, the range of the respondents ages are between 18 to 28 years old.



**Figure 1: Percentage of the respondents' gender**

Figure 1 shows 67.35% are female respondents, while 32.65% are male respondents. Though it has been stated that amongst the two genders, women swear more [14], this paper cannot overgeneralize the result since the questionnaire was randomly distributed to the convenient sampling.

Theory of Impoliteness pioneered by [4-5] has been chosen to be the main theoretical framework for the study guideline. This model is used to determine impoliteness performance. The criteria stated by this theory are very important in providing the scope and definition of impoliteness in this study, as swearing can be both polite and/or impolite based on the interpretation of the listeners. The fundamental principle of this theory is that the intention of the speaker (or author) to ‘offend’ (threaten/damage face) must be understood by those in the receiver (listener) role.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Frequency of Swearing

**Table 1: The frequency of swearing occurrence among youths**

Frequency/%	Never	Sometimes	Always	Total
	7.15%	85.71%	7.15%	100%

Table 1 illustrates the frequency of swearing among youths in Malaysia. From the table, it can be concluded that 85.71% of youths do swear in the frequency of ‘sometimes’. 8.16% responded ‘always’ in frequency, while 6.13% responded ‘never’. Swearing is seen to be a new norm in the Malaysian culture among youths, but they swear only if they thought of doing it with reason(s). The frequency of swearing might also be due to the various life experiences and the emotional state of the speakers.

## Swear Words

**Table 2: List of common English swear words among youths in Malaysia**

1	shit
2	damn
3	go to hell
4	asshole
5	motherfucker
6	pussy
7	jeeez
8	fuck
9	WTF (what the fuck)
10	fool
11	bulls
12	loser
13	damn it
14	WTH (what the hell)
15	bitch
16	hell
17	jinx
18	nigger
19	son of a bitch
20	fuck you
21	fuck-face
22	dicthead
23	motherfucking
24	ass-wipe
25	slut
26	goat banger
27	cunt
28	faggot
29	jackass
30	stupid
31	blockhead

Swear words are words with negative connotations and are uttered to express emotions in different contexts. From the data obtained, Table 2 lists the following English swear words uttered by the respondents.

Some words given by the respondents are redundant, so the researchers had not restated them in the table. From the 50 respondents, some terms are repeated such as fuck, shit, what the hell, what the fuck and damn. In [14] have also discovered some of these words in their research: fuck, shitty, cunt and you fucking asshole. The table shows that some youths had not only uttered a single swear word, but had also used phrase levels such as the prepositional phrase, and the adjectival/adverbial phrase. The finding of this study has the similarities with the study conducted by [1] in terms of the swear words. However, they were focusing only to the swearing among the female youths in Malaysia. In the study, they have discovered shit, damn, fuck and bullshit as swear words prominent among the female youths in Malaysia.

English is a second language in Malaysia. However, swearing in English appears normal to the speakers. One reason which contributes to the occurrence is due to the prominent usage of the English language in communication. The researchers take [8] work on second language acquisition where according to him, swear words in mother tongue is stronger than the second language. However, in this case, swearing in English is no more alien to Malaysian youths. According to [14], swearing amongst bilinguals is deemed flexible and less offensive. Different sociocultural background leads to this circumstance that the speakers are less sensitive towards the taboo words uttered. Bilinguals also have prior knowledge about the language they are using.

Swearing is common and conversational according to the scholars. Hence, words that are familiar to them as taboo words, according to [12], are learnt through socialization of speech practices. It solely depends on the speakers' motivation for using it. Personal and interpersonal expressions have also been identified as the main reason for swearing.

The initial hypothesis of this study was "Swearing is impolite to youths in Malaysia". This was made based on the historical and sociocultural speech practices in Malaysia. Apparently, based on the analysis made, the researchers have discovered that, the speakers (youths) have a consensus in terms of their perspective about swearing. Opposing the Theory of Impoliteness by Culpeper, this study reveals that according to the speakers,

swearing is polite since their intention of swearing in different contexts was not to offend the listeners. Youths use swear words among themselves and the acceptance has created a new norm which is opposed to what has been socio-culturally practiced in Malaysia.

Politeness can be seen through the choice of words, as well as tone and body language. Swearing has never been promoted in polite communication especially in HC. Swearing acts will only violate Malaysia's sociocultural nature as it is a multi-ethnic nation where people share some cultural values. However, the functions of swearing in this context was to express emotional states. This can be supported by the presentation of the meaning of swear words in Table 3. The result is supported by the claim made by [16] stating that swearing is primarily intended to convey connotative or emotional meaning.

However, given the level of formality and the degree of appropriacy in context, the speakers are able to identify who their listeners are. The study by [15] for instance have revealed that parents are uncomfortable in using swear words (especially sex-related terms) around their children as they usually use taboo words in different contexts. To relate with this study, the youths use swear words with their peers who belong to the same speech community (SpCom). SpCom deals with competency, performance and acceptability in terms of behaviour according to [20]. In [25] in his first approach to define this concept, states that SpCom is "some kind of social group whose speech characters are of interest and can be described in a coherent manner". SpCom according to [2] is a community of practice, including its linguistics practice. Besides, he has addressed SpCom as a language-based unit of social analysis. He has made two claims regarding SpCom on "the uniformity of speech by different speakers" and "the possibility of identifying a group of speakers who share a single language, often by individuals". In [9] stated that SpCom leans more toward a description of a social unit rather than a linguistic unit. He added that some utterances and ways of speaking are the same in terms of: (i) the Form, (ii) Co-occurrence, (iii) Social distribution and (iv) the Appropriacy for social functions. In this case, in order to be recognized by the speakers, swear words would have to comply with some of the criteria stated by the scholars as defined. The language shared by this particular SpCom can be referred to taboo language, and this allows swearing phenomenon to be accepted among youths.

According to [17], swearing has a few functions within social interaction including creating solidarity among its speakers. This can also be supported by a study conducted by [6] where the swear word fuck is being strategized for solidarity construction, to release stress and to maintain rapport among the speakers. This statement provide a proof that swearing has become a norm among the youths of Malaysia as it has other underlying functions in communication other than only expressing the state of emotion. As swearing has been accepted as a norm, this hence creates the swearing SpCom among the youths.

Even though swearing perceived as something which has to be forbidden and avoided, in this case, it has created a cultural phenomenon among youths. The contributing factor to this phenomenon is the willingness of the people to break the cultural taboo in front of other hence creates a new informal atmosphere and sense of community [7].

From the questionnaires, the meaning of the most significant swear words are analysed by the researchers. Swear words analysed in Table 3 are common to the respondents. These words have negative connotations, but could possibly be conveyed as polite in most contexts from the perspective of the respondents.

### Meaning of Swearing Words

Table 3 provides some of the meanings of the swear words according to the respondents and the dictionary.

**Table 3: Meanings of the swear words**

Swear words	Connotative (by the respondents)	Denotative	(from the dictionary)
<b>Shit</b>	1) Depends on situation but it gives bad meaning 2) Damn 3) A worthless person 4) Really means shit 5) Idiot 6) Don't have meaning 7) Jahanam, tahi 8) It can be stupid or something very bad. 9) Got bad news like assignment or whatever	1) Faeces. 3) Something worthless; rubbish; nonsense especially personal belongings 6) An intoxicating drug, especially cannabis.	2) A contemptible or worthless person. 4) Things or stuff, vents or circumstances
<b>Asshole</b>	Private parts sometimes harsh and explicit meaning	a stupid, irritating, or contemptible person	
<b>Motherfuc</b>	In really bad situation	A despicable or very unpleasant person or thing.	

<b>ker</b>		
<b>Loser</b>	Useless	A person or thing that loses or has lost/a person who fails frequently.
<b>Fuck-face</b>	Fuck someone out	N/A
<b>Damn</b>	1) Very annoyed 2) Expressing anger or frustration 3) Similar as 'Oh no' 4) Why not think 5) I hate it, annoying,	1) (be damned) 2) Curse (someone or something) 3) Expressing anger or frustration:
<b>Go to hell</b>	It does not matter	Used to express angry rejection of someone or something:
<b>Son of a bitch</b>	Did not know the exact meaning because different people have their own thought about the words	A general term of contempt or abuse.
<b>What the fuck</b>	It's like 'oh no!' But I expressed it with another words	N/A
<b>Fuck</b>	1) The most bad thing 2) Not really means fuck. For me it is just like a normal swearing word. When I'm saying fuck, it doesn't mean true fuck. Just a fake fuck	1) Have sexual intercourse with (someone). 2) Damage or ruin (something). 3) An act of sexual intercourse.
<b>Nigger</b>	Bodoh, anjingbetina, orang negro, jahanam	A contemptuous term for a black person.
<b>Goat banger</b>	Horrible	N/A
<b>Fuck you</b>	When my friends pissed me of	Damage or confuse someone emotionally.
<b>Jackass</b>	Shit... Totally useless damn...when it not according to expectation	a stupid person/a male ass or donkey
<b>*N/A: Not Available</b>		

There are varieties of swear words uttered by the youths in Malaysia as shown in Table 3. In comparison with the denotations taken from the dictionary, some swear words have similarities and also differences in terms of the meaning conveyed by the speakers.

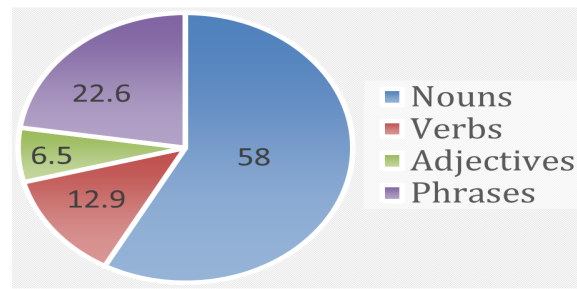
From the table, it has been analysed that most of the swear words possess the same connotation as their denotation such as shit, slut, nigger, fuck you, motherfucker, damn, fool, stupid and hell. The denotations are taken from the Oxford Dictionary. Swear word (at a phrasal level) which has a different connotation from its denotation is go to hell connoting "it does not matter" (of being indifferent) and denoting "to express angry rejection of someone or something" ([www.oxforddictionary.com](http://www.oxforddictionary.com)). According to [7], swear words are used as a tool for a powerful forceful insults and descriptor to communicate their feeling.

However, some swear words have no denotation and their meanings are not available, thus becoming very subjective. They are indicated as N/A in the table such as fuck-face and what the fuck. The expressions might be very offensive or colloquial that they are not recognized by the linguistic system. In this case, they are only recognized by the speakers. In fact, swear words/phrases in recent years have been coined by speakers and shared with everyone at <http://www.urbandictionary.com>.

Interestingly, there are also expressions of swear words which are not recognized by the respondents. They swear without actually knowing the meaning of the words and/or the reason for uttering them, for example, pussy and son of a bitch.

Based on the meanings given by the respondents, it can be concluded that the connotations are highly contextualized and have negative indications. Meanings are given based on the situation that they are facing at the time; this can be highly contextualized

### Grammar Categories of Swear Words

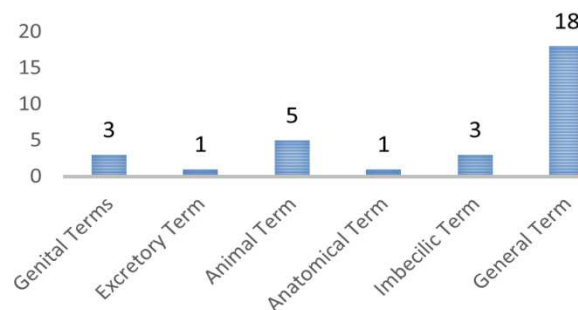


**Figure 2: Grammatical categories of swear words among youths in Malaysia**

From the data in Figure 2, 58% of the data received, most swear words are nouns while 12.9 % are verbs, followed by adjective with 6.5 %. The remaining 22.6 % are phrases: prepositional phrases and adjectival/adverbial phrases. From the result, it can be deduced that most of the swear words are nouns. Nouns are words used to name place, things, people, idea and animals. Since nouns are familiar to speakers, and mostly used in swearing, they contribute to the frequency of occurrences.

In addition, nouns are what learners usually acquire first when learning a language. This is especially common in foreign language acquisition. From the researchers' observations, learners in their teens usually engage in the acquisition of swear words or dirty words from another language, before being serious to learn it properly. Phrases, on the other hand, are longer and require basic syntactical knowledge to be learned. Thus, swear phrases are mostly acquired by imitation at first, before evolving into a somewhat creative manipulation of structure. In [8] work mentioned earlier can be related with this finding. For example, there have been instances of Malaysian youth altering the standard go to hell to question form such as wanna go to hell? or going to hell, huh? It is also interesting to note that adjective swear words such as stupid and motherfucking would usually end up as noun phrases in swearing. The researchers believe that pure adjectives carry a slightly weaker impact than nouns, and that attaching pure adjectives with other swear word nouns could ultimately make swearing more fun. For example, saying that "he/she is a stupid person" would not be as extreme as uttering "he/she is a stupid motherfucking jackass".

### Lexical Categories of Swear Words



**Figure 3: Lexical categories of the swear words among youths in Malaysia**

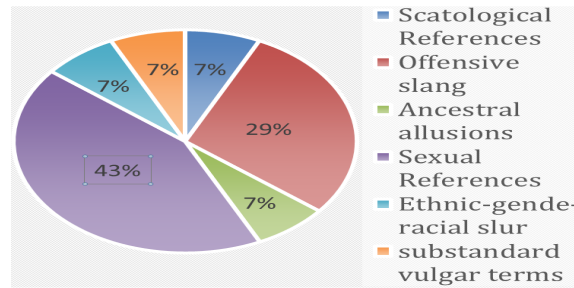
To categorize the swear words in Table 2, in [10] Categorical Swear Words is referred. According to him, at lexical level, there are 6 categories involved. They are: genital terms, excretory terms, animal terms, anatomical terms, imbecilic terms and general terms.

From the result, it has shown that general terms contribute the most in the occurrences of swear words among youths in Malaysia (18 general terms listed in total). According to [11], general terms refer to swear words that are used to give more emphasis on the utterance produced. Some examples of general terms found in this study are such as jinx, fuck, damn, hell and geez. Both genital term and imbecilic terms however recorded 3 words each. Genital term is words that are related to human's sex organ such as cunt and dickhead which are found in the study. 3 imbecilic terms discovered are fool, looser and stupid which these words are terms related to kinds of disability. Animal term which are found in this study are bitch, faggot and pussy are among the contributing swear words



among youths in Malaysia. Lastly, anatomical terms (only 1 discovered) is asshole. Words that belong to this category are words which are related to human anatomy.

### Semantic Categories of Swear Words



**Figure 4: Semantic categories of the swear words among youths in Malaysia**

From the results which have been presented in 3.3, the words are categorized semantically based on the references made by [12]. He states that swear words have negative connotations which are categorized as taboo words with “sexual references, scatological referents, disgusting objects, animal names, ethnic-gender-racial slurs, insulting references to perceived psychological, physical or social deviations, ancestral allusions, substandard vulgar terms and offensive slangs”.

From Figure 4, it has been discovered most of the taboo words used by youths in Malaysia are categorized as words with sexual references. In English, the semantic range of a referent that is considered taboo is limited in scope [12]. Most of the swear words are categorized as sexual references such as blow job, fuck, and cunt. Some words are referred as profane or blasphemous such as goddamn and Jesus Christ. The category is extended to scatological referent and disgusting objects such as shit and crap. There are other categories where taboo words are intended to insult which are (i) references to perceived psychological, physical or social deviation, (ii) ancestral allusion, (iii) substandard vulgar terms and (iv) offensive slangs. Examples of insulting references to perceived psychological, physical or social deviation are retard and lard ass while some instances for ancestral allusion are son of a bitch and bastard. For substandard vulgar terms, examples of taboo words are fart face and on the rag while examples for offensive slang are cluster fuck and tit run. By using this framework, the researchers have been able to categorize the swear words semantically.

However, as English is the second language in Malaysia, limited taboo words were collected by the researchers. Hence the findings are based on the familiar swear words to the youths in Malaysia which are asshole, what the fuck, fuck, goat banger, fuck you and jackass.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paper has listed the swear words prominent to the youths in Malaysia. From this research, it can be deduced that swearing is part of communication among youths in Malaysia. It is considered polite to swear in communication if the intention of the speakers were to express emotion. This claim is made based on the occurrence of swearing in accordance with the frequency shown in the result section.

Swear words are categorised lexically and semantically. However, there are limitations in terms of: (1) language of communication and (2) identification of an academic dictionary towards the swear words generated. This study only focuses on the English language. The researchers believe that more significant results can be gained if more local languages are collected such as Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin and Tamil.

One of the problems faced in generating the meanings of the swear words is the unavailability of the valid, academically recognized reference to identify the ‘new vocabulary’ hence it generates an N/A in the result table. However, the website called “The Urban Dictionary” can assist further research, albeit with restrictions.

Since this research was only being conducted at a macro level, it is proposed that in future researches, the factors for swearing are to be investigated at a micro level especially to identify the factors of swearing among youths in Malaysia, in depth, in the future study. This is to ensure that this sociolinguistics phenomenon is understood fully at both superficial and in-depth level.

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