

## **Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on the use of swear words by Singaporeans visiting the Canggu district. The objectives of this research were to identify the swear words, analyze their forms, determine their functions, and examine their references. Primary data were collected through interviews, with the researcher serving as the main instrument. Additional instruments included an interview sheet and a questionnaire. The data collection process involved gathering, reducing, displaying, drawing conclusions, and verifying findings. The study identified 33 swear words used by Singaporeans. In terms of form, these swear words were categorized into words (7), phrases (21), and clauses (5). Their functions included expressing emotions (10), drawing attention (5), aggression (13), social identity (7), and regressive behavior (6). Furthermore, the references of these swear words were associated with conditions (14), devils (2), objects (3), body functions (5), activities (5), and kinship (4). The results of this study provide insight into how Singaporeans incorporate swear words into daily conversations. This knowledge can be valuable for language acquisition, cultural analysis, and enhancing communication in multilingual settings.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Language is a fundamental tool for communication, enabling individuals to convey thoughts, emotions, and ideas (Yani, 2017). However, certain words, particularly swear words, may be perceived as offensive or inappropriate across different cultures. Miscommunication involving such language can lead to misunderstandings and even conflicts. For example, in DetikTravel reported an incident in Labuan Sait, South Kuta, where a foreign tourist clashed with a local resident due to a misunderstanding about the melasti ritual. The tourist became frustrated when he was not given way by the pecalang (traditional security guards). Had both parties communicated more effectively, the conflict might have been avoided. This case underscores the significance of understanding language, particularly words that could be considered offensive in various cultural contexts.

While numerous studies have examined swear words in Indonesian languages, research on the swear words used by Singaporeans remains limited. Swearing is often employed to express

strong emotions, frustration, or social identity (Hagen, 2013). Although typically regarded as impolite or taboo, it is an integral part of everyday conversation. Most existing studies focus on Indonesian languages, such as Balinese and Javanese, leaving a gap in the literature regarding Singaporean swear words. Given that many Singaporeans frequently travel to Bali for tourism and business, understanding their use of swear words is essential for facilitating effective cross-cultural communication.

This research aims to identify and categorize Singaporean swear words, analyze their linguistic structure, and explore their meanings and social functions. Additionally, it seeks to examine how Balinese individuals perceive these words, particularly within the tourism industry, where effective communication is critical. By identifying potentially offensive terms, this study aspires to enhance cross-cultural understanding and minimize misunderstandings.

Several studies have explored Indonesian swear words. For instance, (Dewi et al., 2017) documented Balinese terms such as *naskeleng* (male genitalia), *leak* (devil), and *bojog* (monkey), while, (Yani, 2017) recorded words like *pirate* (ancestor), *celak* (male genitalia), and *buduh* (crazy). However, research on Singaporean Hokkien swear words, especially in interactions with Balinese culture, remains scarce. Since Singaporeans frequently visit Bali, comprehending their swearing habits is crucial for reducing linguistic and cultural misinterpretations. Some commonly used Singaporean Hokkien swear words include *chao chee bye* (female genitalia), *lan pa chee* (male genitalia), and *kan ni na* (an expletive meaning "fuck you"). While both Balinese and Singaporeans incorporate swear words into daily conversation, variations in usage and perception exist. Miscommunication in this context could lead to unnecessary conflicts, potentially affecting Bali's tourism industry.

Thus, this research, titled "Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect," aims to enhance awareness of offensive language and contribute to improved cross-cultural communication, particularly in the tourism sector. A stronger understanding of how swear words function in different linguistic and cultural contexts can help prevent misunderstandings and foster more positive interactions between visitors and locals. Additionally, further engagement with existing literature on cross-cultural conflicts in tourism settings will provide a more robust rationale for the study's focus on Bali's tourism industry.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Swear Words Definition**

According to Hagen (2013), swear words are characterized as "durable words" that are integrated into expressive acts to convey emotions. The term "durable words" indicates that these expressions are both flexible and capable of effectively transmitting feelings. Typically, the employment of these words is associated with negative emotions such as anger, frustration, or hatred, and may contribute to an uncomfortable or conflictual atmosphere in social interactions. Nonetheless, within certain contexts and among specific social groups, swear words can serve alternative functions, such as reinforcing group cohesion or signaling closeness and solidarity. Despite these varied functions, prevailing cultural norms and values generally deem the use of swear words as inappropriate and undesirable in everyday communication.

### **Form of Swear Words**

Swear words can be categorized into three primary forms: words, phrases, and clauses. At the most basic level, a word is defined as the smallest unit of meaning (Richards, 2013). Word is a meaningful pattern of phonemes, and further distinguish words into two categories: monomorphemic and polymorphemic (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2002). Monomorphemic words, such as "run" and "cat," consist of a single morpheme, whereas polymorphemic words, like "unhappiness" and "rewriting," contain two or more morphemes. Moving beyond individual words, phrases are groups of words that function as a single part of speech and typically contain a subject and a verb (Delahunty, 2004). Swear phrases can take various forms, including noun

phrases (e.g., “that bloody idiot”), verb phrases (e.g., “screw this up”), adjective phrases (e.g., “so damn annoying”), adverb phrases (e.g., “really fucking quickly”), and prepositional phrases (e.g., “to hell with you”).

At the clause level, a clause is defined as a group of words that includes both a subject and a predicate (Delahunty, 2004). Examples of swear clauses in English include expressions such as “you are so stupid,” “go screw yourself,” and “shut the hell up.”

### **Function of Swear Words**

Although swearing is often regarded as socially unacceptable and inappropriate, it fulfills several important functions. Rothwell (1973) observed that swear words may serve to capture attention, insult, provoke, establish connections with others, and release pent-up emotions. Similarly, Wang (2013) identified four key purposes for swearing: expressing emotions, adding emphasis, reinforcing group identity, and exhibiting aggression. Additionally, (Bolton, 1997) categorized the functions of swear words into integrative, aggressive, regressive, and expletive roles. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that swearing primarily functions to express emotions, attract attention, display aggression, build social identity, and serve as a form of regressive expression.

### **References of Swear Words**

Two experts have provided insights into the references associated with swear words. Swear words classify into eight categories: condition, devils, things, animal terms, body functions, activities, kinship, and professions (Wijana, 2007). Building on this classification, Ramendra (2016) identifies four primary factors that drive the use of swear words: intimacy, power, solidarity, and anger. The intimacy factor reflects the influence of close personal relationships, which often encourage the use of swear words in communication. Similarly, the power factor—particularly in terms of age and gender dynamics—can also promote their usage. The solidarity factor represents the shared unity of feelings within a group, further facilitating the use of such language. Finally, the anger factor is the most common motivator, as individuals frequently resort to swearing to express their anger.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology, as outlined by Atkinson et al. (2010), to investigate the use of swear words among Singaporeans. It specifically examines the phenomenon of swearing within everyday communication in Singapore. By identifying, analyzing, and describing these expressions qualitatively, the study seeks to explore nuanced details that are not easily captured by quantitative methods.

The research employs semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data from three informants, all of whom are native Hokkien speakers. Given that this study focuses on Singaporean Hokkien dialect use in Canggu, the informants were selected from individuals visiting the area as tourists. This sampling strategy ensures that the participants align with the study’s objectives and contribute relevant linguistic insights.

The primary objective is to scrutinize the linguistic forms, functions, and references of Singaporean swear words. The semi-structured interviews included key themes such as the context of swear word usage, perceived offensiveness, and cultural interpretations. Sample questions included: “In what situations do you use swear words?” and “Do you think certain swear words have different meanings depending on context?” This structured yet flexible approach allowed for rich, contextualized data collection.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed to maintain research integrity. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study, ensuring their voluntary involvement and confidentiality. Additionally, researcher reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging potential biases and ensuring an objective analysis of the findings.

In this study, interviews served as the primary data collection method. Interviews, defined as a data collection technique involving a conversational exchange between the interviewer and the respondent to obtain insights or perspectives on a specific subject (Moleong, 1999), were employed. Specifically, a semi-structured interview format was utilized to allow for an open discussion of emerging issues, encouraging participants to freely express their opinions and ideas. Researchers ensured that all information provided by the participants was meticulously listened to and recorded, thereby minimizing the risk of omitting any pertinent details (Sidiq, U., Choiri, M., & Mujahidin, 2019).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data obtained from in-depth interviews with informants, a total of 33 (thirty-three) swear words were identified as being used by Singaporeans. The details of these swear words are presented in the table below.

**Table 1. Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect**

No.	Swear Words	Meaning
1.	<i>wah lau eh</i>	oh my god
2.	<i>siao</i>	you are crazy
3.	<i>chao chee bye</i>	smelly lady private part
4.	<i>bo geh</i>	no teeth or lack of teeth
5.	<i>simi lan</i>	what's your problem
6.	<i>simi lan jiao</i>	what's your problem but stronger in emphasis
7.	<i>chao kwan</i>	bad character
8.	<i>jialat</i>	very bad
9.	<i>kanasai</i>	unlucky or shit
10.	<i>mai lah</i>	don't do things in such a way
11.	<i>kia su</i>	scared to lose to other
12.	<i>kai see</i>	scared to die
13.	<i>chee bye</i>	woman private parts
14.	<i>chao geng</i>	not hardworking
15.	<i>si bei jialat</i>	worse
16.	<i>lan pa chee</i>	male testicles
17.	<i>kan ni na</i>	fuck your mother
18.	<i>lan jiao</i>	penis
19.	<i>lu ai kan ni na</i>	you like to look at your mother's private parts
20.	<i>siao kia</i>	crazy kid
21.	<i>kan si lang</i>	fuck everyone
22.	<i>kum gong</i>	damn
23.	<i>kao pei kao bu</i>	cry father, cry mother
24.	<i>bo tua bo suay</i>	no elder, no younger
25.	<i>gao sia</i>	troublemaker
26.	<i>ah kua</i>	effeminate man
27.	<i>san jua sai</i>	you are trash
28.	<i>buay song</i>	i am pissed off!
29.	<i>ni hai bu</i>	you messed me up!
30.	<i>ni hua hee tao hao</i>	don't act dumb!
31.	<i>bu liao</i>	useless
32.	<i>xiao nian ni</i>	you are just a kid!
33.	<i>ni zen swee</i>	you are so unlucky!

### Forms of Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect

This section classifies the Singaporean swear words used in Hokkian Dialect into three (3) categories: words, phrases, and clauses. A detailed explanation of each category is provided below.

#### 1. Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect in the Form of Word

The words were categorized into monomorphemic and polymorphemic word. Monomorphemic words consist of a single morpheme, while polymorphemic words are composed of two or more morphemes. Based on this classification, the swear words in both monomorphemic and polymorphemic word are presented in the table below.

**Table 2.** Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect in the Form of Word

No.	Swear Words	Meaning	Morphological Structure
1.	<i>siao</i>	you are crazy	monomorphemic
2.	<i>jialat</i>	very bad	polymorphemic
3.	<i>chee bye</i>	woman private parts	polymorphemic
4.	<i>gao sia</i>	troublemaker	polymorphemic
5.	<i>ah kua</i>	effeminate man	polymorphemic
6.	<i>bu liao</i>	useless	polymorphemic
7.	<i>kanasai</i>	unlucky or shit	polymorphemic

The list above presents the findings, indicating that there are six (7) swear words in the form of monomorphemic and polymorphemic words used by Singaporeans. These swear words include *siao*, *jialat*, *chee bye*, *gao sia*, *ah kua*, *bu liao*, and *kanasai*.

## 2. Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect in the Form of Phrase

After classification, several swear words were identified in the form of phrases, which were categorized into noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases, and adverb phrases. A noun phrase is a group of words that functions as a noun in a sentence. A verb phrase consists of a main verb that expresses an action or state of being. An adjective phrase is centered around an adjective and is used to modify a noun or pronoun. An adverb phrase functions as an adverb, providing additional information about a verb, adjective, or another adverb. The Singaporean swear words used in hokkien dialect in the form of phrases are presented in the table below.

**Table 3.** Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect in the Form of Phrase

No.	Swear Words	Meaning	Phrase
1.	<i>chao chee bye</i>	smelly lady private part	noun phrase
2.	<i>lan pa chee</i>	male testicles	noun phrase
3.	<i>lan jiao</i>	penis	noun phrase
4.	<i>siao kia</i>	crazy kid	noun phrase
5.	<i>san jua sai</i>	you are trash!	noun phrase
6.	<i>bo geh</i>	no teeth	noun phrase
7.	<i>simi lan</i>	what's your problem	verb phrase
8.	<i>simi lan jiao</i>	what's your problem but stronger in emphasis	verb phrase
9.	<i>kan ni na</i>	fuck your mother	verb phrase
10.	<i>kan si lang</i>	fuck everyone	verb phrase
11.	<i>kao pei kao bu</i>	cry father, cry mother	verb phrase
12.	<i>buay song</i>	i am pissed off	verb phrase
13.	<i>mai lah</i>	don't do things in such a way	verb phrase
14.	<i>chao kwan</i>	bad character	adjective phrase
15.	<i>si bei jialat</i>	worse	adjective phrase
16.	<i>kum gong</i>	damn	adjective phrase
17.	<i>bo tua bo suay</i>	no elder, no younger	adjective phrase
18.	<i>chao geng</i>	not hardworking	adjective phrase
19.	<i>wah lau eh</i>	oh my god	adverb phrase
20.	<i>kia su</i>	scared to lose to other	adverb phrase
21.	<i>kia see</i>	scared to die	adverb phrase

The list above presents the findings, indicating that there are twenty-one (21) swear words in the form of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb phrases used by Singaporeans. These swear words include *chao chee bye*, *lan pa chee*, *lan jiao*, *siao kia*, *san jua sai*, *bo geh*, *simi lan*, *simi*

*lan jiao, kan ni na, kan si lang, kao pei kao bu, buay song, mai lah, chao kwan, si bei jialat, kum gong, bo tua bo suay, chao geng, wah lau eh, kia su, kia see.*

### 3. Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect in the Form of Clause

After classification, several swear words were identified in the form of clauses, all of which were categorized as independent clauses. An independent clause is a complete thought that can stand alone as a sentence. The Singaporeans swear words used in hokkien dialect in the form of independent clauses are presented in the table below.

**Table 4. Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect in the Form of Clause**

No.	Swear Words	Meaning	Clause
1.	<i>lu ai kan ni na</i>	you like to look at your mother's private parts	independent clause
2.	<i>ni hai bu</i>	you messed me up!	independent clause
3.	<i>ni hua hee tao hao</i>	don't act dumb!	independent clause
4.	<i>xiao nian ni</i>	you are just a kid!	independent clause
5.	<i>ni zen swee</i>	you are so unlucky!	independent clause

The list above presents the findings, indicating that there are five (5) swear words in the form of independent clause used by Singaporeans. These swear words include *lu ai kan ni na*, *ni hai bu*, *ni hua hee tao hao*, *xiao nian ni*, *ni zen swee*.

### Functions of Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect

Based on their function, the Singaporeans swear words used in hokkien dialect in this study were classified into five categories; Expressing Emotion, Drawing Attention, Aggression, Social Identity, and Regressive. All of these functional categories were identified in the data. The specific details are presented in the table below.

**Table 5. Functions of Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect**

No.	Swear Words	Meaning	Function
1.	<i>wah lau eh</i>	oh my god	expressing emotion
2.	<i>siao</i>	you are crazy	expressing emotion
3.	<i>chao chee bye</i>	smelly lady private part	aggression
4.	<i>bo geh</i>	no teeth or lack of teeth	social identity
5.	<i>simi lan</i>	what's your problem	drawing attention
6.	<i>simi lan jiao</i>	what's your problem but stronger in emphasis	drawing attention
7.	<i>chao kwan</i>	bad character	aggression
8.	<i>jialat</i>	very bad	expressing emotion
9.	<i>kanasai</i>	unlucky or shit	expressing emotion / regressive
10.	<i>mai lah</i>	don't do things in such a way	drawing attention
11.	<i>kia su</i>	scared to lose to other	drawing attention / social identity
12.	<i>kai see</i>	scared to die	social identity
13.	<i>chee bye</i>	woman private parts	aggression
14.	<i>chao geng</i>	not hardworking	regressive
15.	<i>si bei jialat</i>	worse	expressing emotion
16.	<i>lan pa chee</i>	male testicles	regressive / aggression
17.	<i>kan ni na</i>	fuck your mother	aggression
18.	<i>lan jiao</i>	penis	regressive / aggression
19.	<i>lu ai kan ni na</i>	you like to look at your mother's private parts	expressing emotion
20.	<i>siao kia</i>	crazy kid	expressing emotion / aggression
21.	<i>kan si lang</i>	fuck everyone	aggression
22.	<i>kum gong</i>	damn	social identity / aggression
23.	<i>kao pei kao bu</i>	cry father, cry mother	expressing emotion

24.	<i>bo tua bo suay</i>	no elder, no younger	aggression
25.	<i>gao sia</i>	troublemaker	social identity
26.	<i>ah kua</i>	effeminate man	social identity / regressive
27.	<i>san jua sai</i>	you are trash	aggression
28.	<i>buay song</i>	i am pissed off!	expressing emotion
29.	<i>ni hai bu</i>	you messed me up!	aggression
30.	<i>ni hua hee tao hao</i>	don't act dumb!	drawing attention
31.	<i>bu liao</i>	useless	aggression
32.	<i>xiao nian ni</i>	you are just a kid!	social identity / regressive
33.	<i>ni zen swee</i>	you are so unlucky!	expressing emotion

### References of Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect

Based on their reference, out of the eight (8) reference categories for swear words used by Singaporeans, six (6) were identified in this study. These categories include Condition, Devils, Things, Body Function, Activity, and Kinship. The explanation, along with the specific table, is provided below.

**Table 6. References of Singaporean Swear Words Used in Hokkien Dialect**

No.	Swear Words	Meaning	Function
1.	<i>wah lau eh</i>	oh my god	condition
2.	<i>siao</i>	you are crazy	condition
3.	<i>chao chee bye</i>	smelly lady private part	body function
4.	<i>bo geh</i>	no teeth or lack of teeth	body function
5.	<i>simi lan</i>	what's your problem	things
6.	<i>simi lan jiao</i>	what's your problem but stronger in emphasis	things
7.	<i>chao kwan</i>	bad character	devils
8.	<i>jialat</i>	very bad	condition
9.	<i>kanasai</i>	unlucky or shit	condition
10.	<i>mai lah</i>	don't do things in such a way	activity
11.	<i>kia su</i>	scared to lose to other	condition
12.	<i>kai see</i>	scared to die	condition
13.	<i>chee bye</i>	woman private parts	body function
14.	<i>chao geng</i>	not hardworking	activity
15.	<i>si bei jialat</i>	worse	condition
16.	<i>lan pa chee</i>	male testicles	body function
17.	<i>kan ni na</i>	fuck your mother	kinship
18.	<i>lan jiao</i>	penis	body function
19.	<i>lu ai kan ni na</i>	you like to look at your mother's private parts	kinship
20.	<i>siao kia</i>	crazy kid	condition
21.	<i>kan si lang</i>	fuck everyone	devils
22.	<i>kum gong</i>	damn	condition
23.	<i>kao pei kao bu</i>	cry father, cry mother	condition
24.	<i>bo tua bo suay</i>	no elder, no younger	kinship
25.	<i>gao sia</i>	troublemaker	activity
26.	<i>ah kua</i>	effeminate man	condition
27.	<i>san jua sai</i>	you are trash	things
28.	<i>buay song</i>	i am pissed off!	condition
29.	<i>ni hai bu</i>	you messed me up!	activity
30.	<i>ni hua hee tao hao</i>	don't act dumb!	activity
31.	<i>bu liao</i>	useless	condition
32.	<i>xiao nian ni</i>	you are just a kid!	kinship
33.	<i>ni zen swee</i>	you are so unlucky!	condition

This study has successfully identified the swear words used by Singaporeans, along with their forms, functions, and references. The classification of swear word forms is based on the theories of Carstairs & McCarthy (2002) and Delahunty & Garvey (2004), which categorize them into words, phrases, and clauses. The functional aspects of swear words are analyzed using the

frameworks of Wang (2013) and Bolton & Hutton (1997). Furthermore, the categorization of swear word references follows the theory of Wijana and Rohmadi (2007), which defines eight reference categories: Condition, Devils, Things, Animal Terms, Body Function, Activity, Kinship, and Profession. However, this study identified only six (6) reference categories, namely Condition, Devils, Things, Body Function, Activity, and Kinship.

Overall, this study supports the empirical theory. The first study was conducted by Wen, S. T. J., binte Hassan, N. M., De Jun, L., and Kasra, N. A. (2021), titled "The Influence of Social Swearing on In-group Dynamics of Singaporean Youth," as well as the study conducted by Lidiantari, N. (2022), titled "The Analysis of Swear Words Spoken By Children in Dangin Sema Community." Both studies employed a qualitative method, similar to this study, namely the qualitative descriptive method. Additionally, this study shares the same objective, which is to analyze the forms of swear words, including word and phrase forms. While the previous study found that swear words appeared more frequently in word form, this study identified 33 swear words, consisting of word forms (7), phrases (21), and clauses (5), with phrases being the most dominant form.

Furthermore, in the study conducted by Lidiantari, N. (2022), only three functions of swear words were identified, where as this study found five functions, namely expressing emotion, drawing attention, aggression, social identity, and regressive. The third study, entitled "An Analysis of Balinese Swearwords of English Private Course Students in Buleleng Regency", also aligns with this study's purpose, which is to analyze references to swear words. The study conducted by Wisudayanti (2020) identified five references to swear words, including religion, sex, excrement, animal names, and mental illness. In contrast, this study found six references to swear words, namely condition, devils, things, body function, activity, and kinship.

Additionally, the study conducted by Wintari, D. P. A., Ramendra, D. P., and Juniarta, P. A. K. (2021), titled "The Analysis of Swear Words Used By the Children in Bungkulan Village Especially in Banjar Dinas Satria," shares similarities with this study in that it employs the qualitative descriptive method and examines the form, purpose, and references of swear words. Further research was conducted by Mahayana and Pratama (2023), titled "The Variation of Swear Word Kleng and its Flexibility in Denpasar," as well as the study by Agita, A. N. (2023), titled "Taboo in Balinese Language Spoken in Puri Tukadmungga," and the research conducted by Wibawa, I. P. G. S., Budasi, I. G., and Ramendra, D. P. (2024), titled "Taboo in Balinese Language Spoken in Mundeh Village." These studies utilized interviews as a data collection method and examined the form, purpose, and references of swear words or taboo words.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study systematically identified 33 Singaporean Hokkien swear words and analyzed them according to their linguistic forms, communicative functions, and semantic references. The swear words were classified into words, phrases, and clauses, with phrases being the most dominant form. Functionally, they served to express emotion, draw attention, convey aggression, establish social identity, and indicate regressive behavior. In terms of reference, the swear words were associated with conditions, devils, objects, body functions, activities, and kinship. These findings demonstrate that swearing among Singaporean Hokkien speakers is not merely an act of verbal aggression but a multifaceted linguistic phenomenon influenced by culture, social dynamics, and communicative intent. The results offer valuable implications for cross-cultural communication, especially in tourism-heavy regions like Bali, where linguistic misunderstandings can lead to social friction.

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The small sample size and the use of a single qualitative approach may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the focus on tourists in a specific area may not fully represent the broader usage of Hokkien swear words among Singaporeans in different contexts. Future studies are encouraged to adopt mixed-



method approaches, expand participant demographics, and include comparative cross-dialectal or cross-national analyses to enrich our understanding of swearing as a sociolinguistic tool. Such research could inform language education, cultural sensitivity training, and policies that aim to foster effective and respectful intercultural communication.

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