Swear Word Usage and Linguistic Expression in South Korean Hangug-eo: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of swear words by South Koreans, particularly those residing or traveling in Bali, Indonesia. It adopts a descriptive qualitative design to identify the forms, functions, and references of swear words used in the Korean language (Hangugeo). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with both primary and secondary informants, including South Korean tourists and expatriates. The study employs the Miles and Huberman (1994) model for data analysis, which includes data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that 26 swear words are commonly used by South Koreans, categorized into monomorphemic (8), polymorphemic (17), and phrase forms (2). Functionally, the words are distributed across five categories: expletives, abusive, humoristic, euphemistic, and habitual usage. Additionally, the study classifies these swear words into eight reference categories: circumstance, animal, object, body part, kinship, spirit, activity, and profession. The results highlight that swearing in Korean serves not only as emotional release or aggression but also functions in humor and habitual speech. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity in intercultural communication, as swear words can be easily misunderstood across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In multicultural settings such as Bali, where Korean tourists frequently interact with locals, misinterpretations of such expressions can lead to social tension. Therefore, this research emphasizes the need for heightened awareness of sociolinguistic differences to foster respectful and effective communication in globalized environments.

INTRODUCTION

Bali's status as a premier international tourist destination extends beyond its scenic beauty and rich cultural heritage; it functions as a vibrant nexus for social interaction among diverse communities, including a significant population of foreign tourists. This influx of global visitors fosters a complex multilingual and multicultural milieu (Picard, 2006). Within this environment, effective communication between the local Balinese population and foreign tourists is paramount for cultivating positive intercultural encounters. However, communication in such settings is frequently fraught with challenges, particularly when discourse involves culturally sensitive linguistic elements, such as profanity or swear words.

While language primarily functions as a conduit for human interaction, enabling individuals to articulate thoughts, emotions, and needs, it can also become a locus of misinterpretation and conflict. This is especially true when language is employed in ways that are perceived as offensive or inappropriate (Gudykunst, 2003). Swearing, a linguistic phenomenon present in nearly all languages, including Indonesian and Korean, serves a variety of pragmatic functions, such as expressing intense emotion, generating humor, or displaying aggression (Jay, 2000). Although the act of swearing is a common feature of human communication, the specific meanings, connotations, and social implications of swear words can vary drastically across different linguistic and cultural frameworks, creating a high potential for misunderstanding.

In the multicultural context of Bali, the potential for misunderstanding is particularly acute due to the divergent pragmatic interpretations of swear words between the local populace and foreign visitors. Such cross-cultural misinterpretations can lead to outcomes ranging from social friction and interpersonal conflict to, in extreme instances, legal entanglements. A recent incident in Bali, where a verbal dispute involving offensive language between a local resident and a foreign tourist escalated to a tragic conclusion, starkly illustrates the critical need for greater pragmatic competence in cross-cultural communication, especially concerning taboo language.

The use of swear words has undergone a process of normalization in many contemporary societies, pervading various forms of media and daily discourse. It is no longer confined to informal registers or specific social strata (Beers Fägersten, 2012). Swear words are frequently utilized as cathartic expressions of frustration, anger, or surprise, and can also function as markers of in-group solidarity or as humoristic devices in informal settings (Jay, 2000). Nevertheless, the inappropriate use of such language can engender confusion and hostility, particularly when one party lacks the cultural or contextual framework to interpret the intended meaning and function of the utterance.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the use of swear words within the South Korean linguistic community, with a specific focus on their morpho-semantic formation, pragmatic functions, and the cultural schemata that inform them. Through a comparative analysis of swearing practices in South Korean and Balinese contexts, this research seeks to illuminate the linguistic and cultural disparities that can impede effective communication in a multicultural setting like Bali. The ultimate objective is to contribute to a deeper intercultural understanding and facilitate more harmonious communication between the Balinese host community and foreign tourists, particularly those from South Korea, by exploring the cultural dynamics that shape the use and interpretation of swear words.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sociolinguistics is the field dedicated to examining the intricate relationship between language and society, analyzing how social factors such as culture, norms, and context mediate linguistic use. It illuminates the nexus between social structures and language itself, providing foundational insights for language learning theories and the study of pragmatics. This discipline interrogates how societal norms, such as those related to gender roles, can shape communicative practices. As Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) articulate, sociolinguistics explores the function of language in the fabric of everyday life, from casual conversations to social media interactions, and considers how both implicit norms and explicit laws regulate expression.

Within this sociolinguistic framework, a particularly rich area of study is taboo language, most notably swear words. Swear words, or profanity, are linguistic expressions generally deemed offensive, vulgar, or inappropriate, often employed to convey strong emotions. According to Crystal (1991), they represent one of the most common forms of emotional expression, especially

for anger, and serve as an outlet for frustration in situations where individuals feel a loss of control. This emotional function is central to their definition; as cited by Vingerhoets et al. (2013), Anderson and Trudgill define swear words as language used to reference taboo subjects, which is not intended for literal interpretation but is instead used to express potent emotions or attitudes. Structurally, these expressions can manifest as individual words, which may be monomorphemic or polymorphemic (Carstairs & McCarthy, 2002); as phrases, which are groups of words functioning as a single unit of meaning (Delahunty & Garvey, 2004); or as complete clauses containing a subject and predicate.

Beyond their structural properties, the pragmatic functions of swear words are multifaceted. Andersson and Hirsch (1985) delineate between primary functions, such as non-directed expletives for emotional release and directed abuse intended to insult, and secondary functions. These secondary uses include humoristic swearing in playful contexts, euphemistic swearing to soften an expression's impact, and habitual swearing that becomes part of a speaker's conversational style. Thus, depending on the context, swearing can signal anger and disappointment or, conversely, intimacy and solidarity. The semantic content of these words further reveals their cultural underpinnings, as they typically draw their power from proscribed domains. Wijana and Rohmadi (2007) categorize these referential sources into domains such as anatomy (body parts), animals, kinship, spiritual entities, and specific activities, demonstrating how societal taboos directly shape the lexicon of profanity.

The profound cultural specificity of swear words—their form, function, and reference—makes them a significant point of friction in intercultural communication. Defined as the exchange of information across cultural boundaries in a way that maintains respect and minimizes conflict, intercultural communication is deeply informed by sociolinguistic principles. A sociolinguistic perspective is vital for understanding how differing cultural norms, communicative styles, and power dynamics intersect in cross-cultural interactions. As Paulston et al. (2012) suggest, misunderstandings in these contexts can arise from both linguistic and cultural disparities, making the study of socially embedded language essential for navigating the complexities of global communication.

METHOD

To investigate the use of swear words in South Korean culture, this study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, an approach well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research focuses on identifying the forms, functions, and cultural references of swear words used by South Koreans, particularly within the cross-cultural context of Bali. Participants for this study were comprised of native South Korean speakers, including tourists and expatriates, selected through a purposive sampling strategy. This strategy involved identifying three primary and two secondary informants based on specific criteria, namely their fluency in the Korean language and their significant experience with both South Korean and Balinese cultures. Data were collected from these informants through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility in allowing participants to freely articulate their views and lived experiences. The interview protocol was designed to explore perceptions of profanity in both cultural settings, specific experiences with miscommunication involving swear words, and the perceived social implications of such language use. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The resulting textual data were then subjected to a systematic analysis following the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves the concurrent processes of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Initially, the transcribed data were organized by theme to identify emergent patterns and connections related to the forms, functions, and cultural references

of the swear words discussed. Finally, these findings were synthesized and contextualized by comparing them with existing scholarly literature to formulate robust conclusions about the role of swear words in cross-cultural communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on data collected through in-depth interview with the informants, it is found that there are 26 (twenty six) swear words used by South Korean. Those words are classified based on the forms of swear words, function swear words, references of swear words based on Muysken's (2000) typology (See Table 1).

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Tabel 1. Swear Words Used by South Korean in the Hangugeo Language

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No	Swear Words	Meaning
1	*shipal*	"fuck"
2	*saekkia*	"bastard"
3	*cegiral*	"damn" or "fuck."
4	*nyeon*	"bitch"
5	*nom*	"bastard" or "jerk."
6	*jenjang*	"damn" or "crap."
7	*jot*	"dick."
8	*gaesaekki*	"Son of a dog," or "son of a bitch."
9	*byungsin*	"idiot" or "moron."
10	*michinnom*	"crazy bastard."
11	*jiral*	"bullshit."
12	*gulrae*	sarcastic like "oh really?"
13	*dakcheo*	"shut up."
14	*yeom-byeong*	"damn it" or "curse you."
15	*jonna*	"fucking."
16	*jojdwaesseo*	"you're screwed" or "you're fucked."
17	*kkeojyeo*	"get lost" or "fuck off."
18	*horosaekki*	"bastard."
19	*chon-nom*	"hillbilly"
20	*ssibal-nom*	"fucking bastard"
21	*jot-gat-eun*	"like a dick"
22	*dwijyeo*	"die!"
23	*bal-byeong-shin*	"fucking idiot"
24	*ttong*	"shit"
25	*ttorai*	"weirdo"
26	*ssibsaekki*	"motherfucker"

Forms of South Korean Swear Words Used in Hangeul Dialect

This section classifies South Korean swear words used in the Hangeul dialect into two categories: words and phrases. A detailed explanation of each category is provided below.

1. South Korean Swear Words Used in Hangeul Dialect in the Form of Words

South Korean swear words in Hangeul can be divided into monomorphemic and polymorphemic types. Monomorphemic words consist of a single morpheme, while polymorphemic words are formed by combining two or more morphemes. Based on this

classification, both monomorphemic and polymorphemic swear words are detailed below.

1.1 Monomorphemic Words

Monomorphemic swear words in South Korean are single morphemes that cannot be broken down further. These words are simple, direct, and convey strong emotions or insults effectively. Below are common examples of monomorphemic swear words in South Korean:

Table 2. The Swear Words Used by South Korean in the Forms of Monomorphemic Word

No	Swear Words
1	*shipal*
2	*nyeon*
3	*nom*
4	*jot*
5	*cegiral*
6	*gulrae*
7	*ttong*
8	*ttorai*

The list above shows eight (8) swear words in form of word monomorphemic that are used by South Korean, the swear words are *shipal, nyeon, nom, jot, cegiral, gulrae, ttong, ttorai*

1.2 Polymorphemic Words

Polymorphemic swear words in South Korean consist of multiple morphemes that create a more complex meaning. These words are often more aggressive and specific, targeting particular aspects of a person or situation. Below are examples of polymorphemic swear words.

Table 3. The Swear Words Used by South Korean in the Forms of Polymorphemic Word

No	Swear Words
1	*gaesaekki*
2	*michinnom*
3	*yeom-byeong*
4	*jojdwaesseo*
5	*saekkia*
6	*horosaekki*
7	*chon-nom*
8	*ssibal-nom*
9	*jot-gat-eun*
10	*dwijeo*
11	*bal-byeong-shin*
12	*byungshin*
13	*ssibsaekki*
14	*jiral*
15	*dakcheo*
16	*jonna*
17	*kkeojyeo*

The list above shows thirteen (17) swear words in form of word polymorphemic that are used by South Korean, the swear words are *gaesaekki, michinnom, yeom-byeong, jojdwaesseo, saekkia, horosaekki, chon-nom, ssibal-nom, jot-gat-eun, dwijeo, bal-byeong-shin, ssibsaekki,*

byungshin, jiral, dakcheo, jonna, kkeojyeo.

2. South Korean Swear Words Used in Hangeul Dialect in the Form of Phrases

After classification, it was found that there were several swear words in the form of words which were then categorized into adjectival phrases (2) and can be seen as follows.

Table 4. The Swear Words Used by South Korean in the Forms of Adjectival Phrase

No	Swear Words
1	*jojdwaesseo*
2	*jot-gat-eun*

The list above shows two (2) swear words in form of adjectival phrase that are used by South Korean, the swear words are *jojdwaesseo and jot-gat-eun*

Function of South Korean Swear Words Used in Hangeul Dialect

Based on its function, of the 5 function categories for the swear word used by South Korean were found including: Expletives, Abuse, Humoristic, Euphemistic, and Habitual. The following is the explanation with the specific table.

Table 5. Function of South Korean Swear Words in Hangugeo Language

No	Swear Words	Function
1	*shipal*	Expletives
2	*cegiral*	Expletives
3	*jonna*	Expletives
4	*ssibal-nom*	Expletives
5	*jot-gat-eun*	Expletives
6	*dwijyeo*	Expletives
7	*saekkia*	Abuse
8	*nom*	Abuse
9	*gaesaekki*	Abuse
10	*byungsin*	Abuse
11	*michinom*	Abuse
12	*nyeon*	Abuse
13	*horosaekki*	Abuse
14	*chon-nom*	Abuse
15	*bal-byeong-shin*	Abuse
16	*ssibsaekki*	Abuse
17	*gulrae*	Humoristic
18	*jiral*	Humoristic
19	*ttong*	Humoristic
20	*ttorai*	Humoristic
21	*jenjang*	Euphemistic
22	*yeom-byeong*	Euphemistic
23	*dakcheo*	Habitual
24	*kkeojyeo*	Habitual
25	*jojdwaesseo*	Habitual

References of South Korean Swear Words Used in Hangeul Dialect

Based on its function, of the 8 reference categories for the swear word used by South Korean, in this all 8 reference categories were found including: Circumstance, Animal, Object, Body Part, Kinship, Spirit, Activity, And Profession. The following is the explanation with the specific table.

Table 6. References of South Korean Swear Words in Hangugeo Language

No	Swear Words	References
1	*jiral*	Circumstance
2	*cegiral*	Circumstance
3	*jot-gat-eun*	Circumstance
4	*dwijyeo*	Circumstance
5	*shipal*	Circumstance
6	*saekkia*	Animal
7	*gaesaekki*	Animal
8	*horosaekki*	Animal
9	*ssibsaekki*	Animal
10	*jot*	Object
11	*ttong*	Object
12	*nom*	Body Part
13	*bal-byeong-shin*	Body Part
14	*michinom*	Body Part
15	*nyeon*	Kinship
16	*ssibal-nom*	Kinship
17	*chon-nom*	Kinship
18	*yeom-byeong*	Spirit
19	*jenjang*	Activity
21	*jojdwaesseo*	Activity
22	*kkeojyeo*	Activity
23	*dakcheo*	Activity
24	*gulrae*	Activity
25	*ttorai*	Activity
26	*byungsin*	Profession

This study has successfully identified the swear words used by South Korean, examining their forms, functions, and references. The categorization of swear word forms is based on the theories of Carstairs & McCarthy (2002) and Delahunty & Garvey (2004), who classify swear words into three main types: words, phrases, and clauses. The study also analyzes the functional aspects of swear words using the framework proposed by Andersson and Hirsch (1985), which identifies various functions such as expletives, abuse, humoristic, euphemistic, and habitual. Furthermore, the classification of swear word references is guided by the theory of Wijana and Rohmadi (2007), which identifies eight categories of reference: Circumstance, Animal, Object, Body Part, Kinship, Spirit, Activity, and Profession.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that code-mixing is a prominent linguistic feature in Livy Renata's YouTube video. The analysis identified 30 instances of code-mixing, which were classified according to Muysken's (2000) typology. The most prevalent type was insertion, accounting for

12 utterances (40%), followed by alternation with 10 utterances (33.3%), and congruent lexicalization with 8 utterances (26.7%). The frequent use of insertional code-mixing, in particular, suggests a strategic deployment of language by the speakers to construct their social identity and effectively engage their predominantly Indonesian audience.

Regarding audience reception, the analysis of viewer comments indicates a predominantly positive response. Of the 19 comments examined, 16 were classified as positive, while only three conveyed negative sentiment. This favorable reception suggests that the speakers' use of code-mixing successfully creates positive perceptions and fosters an emotionally favorable impression among viewers. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of code-mixing in the selected YouTube content is not only a common linguistic practice but also one that is well-received by its audience.

Nevertheless, the limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The analysis of viewer perspectives was based on a small data sample, which restricts the external validity of the findings. Consequently, future research is encouraged to expand upon this study by analyzing a larger dataset of comments from more varied content. It is recommended that subsequent studies investigate multiple YouTube videos or broaden the scope to include other social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X. To improve the validity and robustness of the findings, collecting a minimum of 50 comments for such an analysis is strongly advised.

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