SWEAR WORD TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONS IN SASAK TEENAGERS' SPEECH IN MEKARSARI SUB-VILLAGE OF SUMBAWA

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Abstract

This study investigates the types and functions of swear words used by Sasak teenagers in Mekarsari Sub-Village, Sumbawa Regency. The research is guided by two main questions: (1) What types of swear words are used by Sasak teenagers? (2) What are the functions of these swear words in their daily interactions? A qualitative research design was employed, involving ten male teenagers as participants. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing). The findings reveal that Sasak teenagers frequently use various swear words, which can be categorized into five main types: swear words related to sex, excretion, body parts, devils, and animals. Among these, swear words from sex, devils, and animals were most dominant. Furthermore, the use of these expressions served four main pragmatic functions: expression, exploration, persuasion, and entertainment. The results indicate that swearing has become a habitual linguistic practice embedded in the teenagers' social interactions and emotional expressions. This study highlights the importance of understanding local linguistic behavior to inform language education, youth character development, and sociolinguistic awareness in multicultural settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a tool for social interaction, cultural identity, and emotional expression. Among adolescents, language use often reflects complex layers of identity construction and social bonding, including the use of taboo expressions such as swear words. Swearing is a linguistic phenomenon that, although widely stigmatized, serves pragmatic, expressive, and relational functions (Wu et al., 2024). While earlier studies have focused on adult language or urban dialects, there is a growing interest in understanding swearing behavior among teenagers, particularly in local, rural, and indigenous contexts (Oliverio, 2024).

In Indonesia, research on adolescent language use has explored the influence of slang, code-switching, and the digital sphere (Zai & Sihite, 2024; Namang & Ma'u, 2024). However, studies that delve into the structure, functions, and cultural underpinnings of swear words among ethnic youth—such as Sasak teenagers in Lombok, let alone in Sumbawa—remain scarce. Localized sociolinguistic behavior, including profanity, reflects underlying social dynamics, emotional regulation, and group identity (Adam et al., 2025). In adolescent peer groups, swearing can act as a marker of in-group solidarity, humor, emotional catharsis, or even resistance to authority structures (Jay, 2009).

The current study aims to address this research gap by examining the types and pragmatic functions of swear words used by Sasak teenagers in Mekarsari Sub-Village, Sumbawa Regency. While swearing is commonly viewed as deviant or disrespectful, this research adopts a sociolinguistic perspective that sees swearing as socially situated and functionally meaningful. Grounded in pragmatic theory and sociolinguistics, the study investigates how taboo language is employed not only to express emotion but also to negotiate social relationships and power structures.

Furthermore, by documenting these language practices, the study contributes to the broader understanding of youth discourse in Indonesia's multilingual society. It also provides insights for educators and language policymakers in managing linguistic diversity and fostering critical language awareness in education. In doing so, the paper aims to enrich the scholarly discourse on adolescent language behavior in Indonesia and highlight the sociocultural value embedded in everyday speech, even in its most informal and stigmatized forms

Theoretical Framework

Swearing, often dismissed as merely vulgar or inappropriate, is in fact a deeply social and pragmatic form of linguistic behavior. To understand the use of swear words among adolescents, particularly in localized cultural contexts such as Sasak-speaking youth in Sumbawa, a neighbor of Lombok, this study draws upon sociolinguistic theory, pragmatic linguistics, and the typology of taboo language.

a. **Pragmatic Functions of Swear Words**

At the core of this research lies pragmatic theory, which examines how language is used in context to achieve specific communicative functions. Swear words, though taboo, fulfill several speech act categories—particularly expressive, directive, and phatic functions (Suroso et al., 2025). According to Jay (2009), swearing serves to release emotion (catharsis), assert social dominance, create in-group bonding, or even act as a humorous device. This aligns with contemporary views that profanity can be strategic rather than simply offensive (Wu et al., 2024).

Illocutionary functions—those that reflect the speaker's intent—are particularly relevant. Swear words may function to criticize, praise ironically, vent anger, or signal intimacy, depending on tone and context (Ismayilli, 2025). In adolescent circles, swearing often forms

part of a shared communicative register that strengthens peer cohesion and identity (Zai & Sihite, 2024).

b. Typologies and Cultural Context of Swearing

Swear words can be classified into semantic categories such as those related to sex, excretion, religion, ethnicity, and bodily functions (Jay, 2009). However, cultural factors heavily influence which terms are considered taboo and how strongly they are stigmatized (Jamil & Hastuti, 2025). In the Sasak context, swearing may derive from localized religious norms, traditional social hierarchies, and masculine group dynamics.

The symbolic weight of swear words also varies. For instance, terms that might be humorous among friends could be considered highly offensive in cross-generational or formal interactions. This reflects the cultural relativity of linguistic taboos, especially in multilingual societies (Oliverio, 2024).

c. Youth Identity and Sociolinguistics

Swearing among teenagers is also tied to identity performance. Adolescents use language to negotiate belonging, autonomy, and resistance (Zai & Sihite, 2024). Sociolinguistically, this aligns with the idea that youth language is not deficient, but innovative—marking social boundaries and forming micro-cultures (Namang & Ma'u, 2024).

This study therefore applies a triangulated framework—drawing from pragmatic linguistics to analyze function, typological theory to classify expressions, and sociolinguistics to interpret the role of swearing in peer identity construction.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to explore the types and functions of swear words used by Sasak teenagers in Mekarsari Sub-Village. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for capturing nuanced linguistic behavior and interpreting it within its sociocultural context (Fatkhiyati et al., 2024). The focus of this research is not on quantifying the occurrence of swear words but on understanding their meaning, function, and social embeddedness through a sociolinguistic and pragmatic lens.

a. Participants

The participants comprised ten male teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17 years, selected through purposive sampling. The criteria for inclusion were: being a native speaker of Sasak, residing in Mekarsari, and having active daily interactions with peers in informal settings. This demographic was chosen because of its high exposure to peer discourse, where swearing is likely to occur as part of identity formation and group bonding (Restia et al., 2024).

b. Data Collection

Data were collected through three primary methods: non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documented transcripts of spontaneous speech in public and peer-group interactions. Observations were carried out over a three-week period in communal areas such as schools, fields, and small shops. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Sasak and later transcribed and translated into Indonesian and English. Each participant was asked open-ended questions about their language use, awareness of swear words, and reasons for using specific expressions. This triangulated approach enhanced the validity and contextual depth of the data (Arinti et al., 2024).

c. Data Analysis

The analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. First, raw data were coded to identify swear word types and contextual usage. These were categorized semantically (e.g., related to sex, animals, or supernatural entities) and functionally (e.g., emotional release, humor, insult). Then, the patterns were displayed in matrices to allow thematic clustering. Finally, interpretive conclusions were drawn regarding the pragmatic functions of the swear words within peer interactions. This model has been widely used in sociolinguistic and educational research for its flexibility and rigor (Arinti et al., 2024).

d. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from a local community leader, and informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians. Participants were assured of anonymity, and pseudonyms were used in all transcriptions. The study followed the ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, especially given the informal and potentially sensitive nature of swear word data

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the study, which aimed to investigate the types and functions of swear words used by Sasak teenagers in Mekarsari Sub-Village, Sumbawa Regency. Through naturalistic observation, recorded interactions, and semi-structured interviews, a rich corpus of expressions was collected. The findings are presented in two main subsections: types of swear words and their contextual usage in real-life interactions.

a. Types of Swear Words Used by Sasak Teenagers

The analysis revealed that Sasak teenagers frequently use a diverse range of swear words in their daily conversations, which can be grouped into five main semantic categories. The most commonly used were sex-related swear words, typically uttered in moments of anger, frustration, or playful teasing among peers. These expressions carried high emotional intensity and were generally considered highly taboo in adult settings. Animal-based terms followed closely, including references to pigs, dogs, and other animals that served as metaphors for insult or ridicule. Interestingly, many of these animal references held local

cultural significance, reflecting the rural lifestyle and symbolic associations of certain animals within the Sasak community.

Another notable category comprised supernatural and religious terms, such as references to devils or curses. These were often used to convey strong disapproval, yet paradoxically, they also appeared in moments of disbelief or surprise, blurring the lines between offense and exclamation. Body-part references formed a distinct group as well; while typically euphemized in adult discourse, these terms were spoken openly and without reservation among teenage peer groups, reflecting a shift in linguistic norms across generations. Lastly, excretory language, though less frequently used, appeared mostly in humorous contexts or as a means to mock awkward behavior, adding a layer of levity to social exchanges. Table 1 summarizes the most frequent swear words by type, with anonymized examples drawn from field transcripts.

Table 1. The most frequent swear words by type

Type	Sample Lexeme (Sasak/Indonesian)	Literal Meaning	Context of Use
Sex-related	"sundel"	bitch	Insults, anger
Animal-based	"asu", "acong", "celeng"	dog, pig	Teasing, ridicule
Supernatural/religious	"setan", "iblis"	devil, demon	Frustration, disbelief
Body-part	"kontol", "tetek"	penis, breasts	Crude humor, aggression
Excretory-related	"tai", "kencing"	feces, urine	Jokes, exclamations

Notably, these expressions were rarely used in mixed-gender interactions or in the presence of adults, indicating strong awareness of register shifting based on social context.

b. Patterns of Use Across Interactions

Beyond their semantic classification, the swear words used by Sasak teenagers also fulfilled important social and emotional functions. Observational data revealed that teenage boys employed these expressions most frequently in specific social contexts. One such context was during competitive games or sports, where swearing was used to provoke or challenge peers, often as part of performative bravado. Another common setting was storytelling, particularly when recounting humorous or frustrating experiences, where swear words added dramatic flair and emotional emphasis. Additionally, swearing appeared in casual greetings, with playful insults functioning as expressions of closeness and camaraderie rather than hostility.

A particularly illustrative example involved a participant who greeted a late-arriving friend by saying, *"Asu koq telat,"* which loosely translates to *"You dog, you're late."* Far from inciting conflict, the remark was met with laughter, suggesting that such language carried relational value within the peer group. It functioned as a signal of shared norms and informal bonding.

Furthermore, participants demonstrated a notable ability to code-switch between Sasak, Indonesian, and swear word variants depending on the intensity of emotion and the audience involved. This linguistic flexibility reflected not only pragmatic competence but also a high degree of cultural awareness. Even at a young age, these speakers skillfully navigated social dynamics through language, adapting their speech patterns to suit both context and relationship.

c. Teenage Perspectives on Swearing

Interviews revealed that most teenagers did not perceive swearing as inherently offensive. Instead, they framed it as a form of expression that allowed them to "sound brave," "be funny," or "be honest." One participant commented, *"Kalau sama teman, kata-kata itu biasa aja. Nggak kasar, justru seru."* (With friends, those words are normal. Not rude—actually fun.) However, several admitted they would never use such language in front of parents or teachers, highlighting a clear internalized boundary between informal and formal communication spaces.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that swearing among Sasak teenagers is not a random act of vulgarity but a structured form of social interaction rich in meaning, context, and intention. These results align with prior research indicating that profanity, particularly among adolescents, serves as a pragmatic tool for expressing emotions, navigating peer dynamics, and constructing identity (Jay, 2009; Kulikova, 2024). This section discusses the implications of these findings by relating them to existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

a. Pragmatic Dimensions of Swearing

Consistent with pragmatic theory, the swear words used by Sasak teenagers fulfill various communicative functions. Participants employed expressions not merely for aggression but for humor, exaggeration, and even phatic bonding—a finding echoed by Wu et al. (2024), who noted similar patterns among EFL learners. These multifunctional uses illustrate what Jay (2009) termed the "utility" of swearing—its adaptability to diverse emotional and social needs. In the Sasak context, swearing was seen not just as an act of speech, but as an emotional amplifier and a tool for peer solidarity.

b. Sociolinguistics and Youth Identity

Swearing appears to operate as a linguistic strategy that distinguishes adolescence from adulthood—a well-documented phenomenon across cultures (Nicolosi, 2024). Among Sasak boys, the use of swear words in storytelling, games, and casual greetings reflects an effort to assert autonomy, masculinity, and peer alignment. This supports Goffman's (1967) view of language as performance, where adolescents use marked language choices to enact particular social roles. The selective use of swearing in same-gender, peer-only contexts suggests a conscious regulation of register and awareness of sociolinguistic appropriateness.

This finding aligns with Kulikova's (2024) study in rural schools, which revealed that teenagers often equate profanity with maturity and status within their peer group. Similarly, Nicolosi (2024) documented how Turkish teenagers use cursing not only to shock but to create shared in-group meanings, reinforcing boundaries between "us" (peers) and "them" (adults or outsiders).

c. Cultural Specificity and Linguistic Relativity

The high frequency of sex- and animal-related swear words in the Sasak context underscores the cultural relativity of taboo language. While such expressions might be considered deeply offensive in other Indonesian regions or in formal Indonesian, among these teenagers they often signal camaraderie or jest. This parallels findings by Auriemma (2024), who observed that Italian teens increasingly treat profanities as linguistic trends or identity symbols rather than moral breaches. It also highlights the role of localized cultural norms, which influence both the perceived offensiveness and intended functions of swear words

d. Social Boundaries and Linguistic Reflexivity

Despite their frequent use of profanity, participants in this study exhibited awareness of linguistic appropriateness, refraining from swearing in the presence of adults or authority figures. This mirrors Adam et al.'s (2025) findings in Indonesian elementary schools, where students distinguished between peer talk and classroom talk, revealing early development of sociolinguistic reflexivity.

The Sasak teens' ability to code-switch and contextually adapt their language use also reflects a sophisticated understanding of audience and social hierarchy—skills often undervalued in descriptions of youth language.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the types and pragmatic functions of swear words used by Sasak teenagers in Mekarsari Sub-Village, Sumbawa. Through a qualitative approach involving observation, interviews, and contextual analysis, it was found that swearing among these adolescents is a rich and purposeful linguistic practice. Far from being random or merely offensive, the swear words employed by participants served multiple functions: to express emotion, build peer rapport, assert dominance, provoke humor, and mark in-group identity. These expressions were not only semantically diverse—covering categories such as sexual terms, animal references, and religious profanity—but also highly sensitive to social context and audience.

The findings affirm that adolescent language behavior, particularly in informal peer interactions, operates within a distinct sociolinguistic register. Swearing emerges here as a form of expressive communication deeply embedded in cultural norms, local identity, and youth solidarity. These teenagers demonstrate a nuanced awareness of when, where, and with whom such language is appropriate, showing evidence of linguistic reflexivity and code-shifting abilities. Importantly, the use of profanities among Sasak youth is not indicative of linguistic deficiency or moral decay, but rather of social positioning, emotional

management, and group belonging. Such insights challenge deficit-based views of youth language and emphasize the need for educators, parents, and researchers to approach adolescent speech with cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study reinforces the value of combining pragmatic analysis with sociolinguistic frameworks in understanding taboo language. It supports the view that swearing performs identifiable communicative functions and that its interpretation is culturally situated. This has broader implications for the study of language use in multilingual and multicultural societies like Indonesia, where language is often entangled with identity, power, and local norms.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, educators and language practitioners should consider integrating discussions of informal and pragmatic language into language awareness curricula, encouraging students to reflect on when and why certain expressions are used. Second, researchers should further investigate how swear word usage varies across gender, region, and media, especially given the rise of digital communication. Lastly, community stakeholders, including parents and local leaders, are encouraged to engage in open, non-punitive dialogues with youth about language use, recognizing it as both a cultural and developmental phenomenon rather than merely a disciplinary issue.

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