

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background of the study, problem identification, limitation of the study, statements of the problem, objective of the study, significance of the study, and the definition of key terms.

1.1 Background of The Study

Language is a fundamental human communication medium used to express ideas, share experiences and establish relationships between individuals (Nasution & Tambunan, 2022). Through language, people convey both rational thoughts and intense emotions, making it an important medium not only for information exchange but also for social bonding. One prominent example of emotional expression through language is swearing, a type of linguistic behavior that often conveys strong feelings, ranging from anger and frustration to shock and joy.

Swear words refer to the use of specific, negatively charged and often emotion laden terms, which are taboo in a particular language/culture and thus have a strong potential to offend (O'Driscoll, 2020; Beers Fagersten & Stapleton, 2017). This can be described as the use of words that are 'potentially offensive, inappropriate, unpleasant, or unacceptable in a particular social context (Trimadona, 2016; Fagersten, 2012). Common examples of swear words in English include “fuck”, “damn”, and “hell”. In line with that, McEnery (2006) said that swear words are dirty words of a language spoken by language

users that are insulting, disrespectful, homophobic, racist, and dirty, and which cause a violation of decency.

Generally, swearing is regarded as something that should not be spoken freely because it is avoided or forbidden. Swear words refer to words that are insulting, shocking, or disrespectful (McEnery, 2006). This avoidance is often influenced by social norms, religious beliefs, and cultural values that determine the appropriate use of language. However, culture plays an important role in shaping the origins and development of swear words, as every society has its own linguistic taboos (Setyaningtias, 2023). In some cultures, swear words are rooted in religious taboos, while in others, swear words may stem from bodily functions or family relationships. For example, in English-speaking countries, many swear words are related to bodily functions or profanity (Sukmaningrum & Hawa, 2022). On the other hand, in some Asian cultures, insults often involve family honour (Nguyen, 1993). This cultural variation reveals that swearing is not just a universal act but also a culturally nuanced linguistic phenomenon.

Several studies have been conducted to explore how swear words are used in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Setyaningtias et al (2023) investigate the use of swearing words by young multicultural students and reveal that there are five types of swearing words used by UNAKI students who live in dormitories: obscenity, abusive, blasphemy, expletive, and humorous. They use swear words to express their indescribable feelings, such as anger and annoyance, and show intimacy in a friendship relationship. The conclusion is that the swearing words used by UNAKI students who live in dormitories have five types and three functions. Furthermore, Tran (2024) compared the use of

swear words in Vietnamese and English, highlighting similarities and differences between the two. The findings of the study reveal ten common types of swear words in both languages, including words denoting animals, religions, scatologies, sex organs, sexual activities, bodily excretions, family members, diseases, loose morals, and mental incapacities. Each swear word or expression belongs to a specific type and has different meanings or functions based on the context in which it is uttered. Another is a study by Li et al (2020), they investigated the new variants of swear words used by young Chinese netizens on social media platforms. It is found that most new swearwords of focus have taken on new grammatical and pragmatic features compared with their linguistic origins. Some are undergoing semantic change, shaking off the original abusiveness to absorb new referential meaning.

This variation in swearing practices is also apparent in Mandarin Chinese, the most widely spoken language in China and a major branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. With over 800 million native speakers and many more using it as a second language, Mandarin plays a significant role in everyday communication across diverse regions (Plumb, 2016). One of its unique linguistic features is tone, which differentiates word meanings even when syllables are spelled identically in pinyin. For instance, "mā" means mother, "mǎ" means horse, and "mà" means to scold (Li & Thompson, 1977). In swearing, this tonal distinction is crucial, as it can alter both the meaning and intensity of an expression. Mandarin swearing expressions range from mild to highly offensive, often invoking family members as "tā mā de" is one of the common phrases that means "fuck your mother," while the use of the phrase

“cào nǐ ma” is an expression that has a more vulgar meaning, which reflect strong emotional intensity and deep-rooted cultural values (Murtadhoh & Arini, 2023).

Despite the cultural and linguistic richness of Mandarin Chinese, scholarly attention to swearing in Mandarin remains relatively limited. Zhao (2021) states that although general studies on swearing have increased, focused research specifically on Mandarin swearing, particularly outside the domain of social media, is still lacking. Prior studies tend to explore swearing only in online communication, without examining how it is used in daily spoken interactions, which may involve different motivations, structures, and functions.

This gap in the literature highlights the urgent need for more in-depth exploration of how swear words function in Mandarin, especially regarding their form, function, and referential meaning in everyday communication. Research in this area will not only contribute to our understanding of Mandarin linguistic expression but also enrich broader studies of language, culture, and emotion. Therefore, this research, titled "Mandarin Swear Words Used by Chinese: A Descriptive Qualitative Study," aims to explore the usage of swear words in Mandarin, providing a comprehensive understanding of their linguistic structure, sociocultural function, and emotional connotation.

1.2 Problem Identification

While many studies have examined the phenomenon of swear words in various languages, such as Indonesian and Vietnamese, in-depth and systematic studies on the use of swear words in Chinese are still very limited, especially in

analyzing their form, reference, and function. In fact, China has unique cultural and linguistic diversity, with many dialectal variations and social norms that influence language use. In addition, the transformation of the meaning of swear words that occurs in the modern era, especially on social media, shows pragmatic and semantic changes that have not been widely studied in the broader Chinese context. The social and emotional functions of swear words, such as showing solidarity or expressing intimacy, are also less understood, even though this phenomenon plays an important role in Chinese informal communication. This lack of literature suggests the need for more in-depth research to fill the gap in linguistic studies, particularly regarding the form, function, and reference of swear words in Chinese. Thus, this research is important to provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional and social expression through swear words in Chinese culture.

1.3 Limitation of The Study

The limitation of this study was that it only investigated and analyzed the contextual use of swear words in Mandarin Chinese, with a specific focus on their forms, references, and functions as used by Chinese speakers.

1.4 Statements of The Problem

This research is an attempt to investigate the following questions:

1. What Mandarin swear words are used by Chinese speakers?
2. What are the forms of Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers?
3. What are the references of Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers?

4. What are the functions of Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers?

1.5 Objective of The Study

Based on the statement of the problems above, the purpose of this study is as follows:

1. To identify the Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers.
2. To analyze the forms of Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers.
3. To analyze the references of Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers.
4. To analyze the function of Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers.

1.6 Significance of The Study

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance

This research will contribute to the body of knowledge in linguistics about vocal expressions of profanity, particularly in the setting of Chinese, where research on this topic is still lacking. This study significantly advances linguistic theory on how emotions impact language use by elucidating the structure, meaning, and usage of Chinese swear words.

1.6.2 Practical Significance

- a) For English Language Department

This research provides important benefits for students in the English Department, particularly in the Cross-Cultural Understanding course, as it

can provide insight into the cultural and linguistic aspects of swearing in Mandarin. Understanding swear words is not just about learning the offending language, it is important to understand the deeper social, historical, and cultural values embedded in language use. Furthermore, by analysing how swear words function in Chinese society, students can develop a broader perspective on how language reflects cultural identity, politeness strategies, and taboos to avoid any miscommunication and foster intercultural competence, especially in multilingual and multicultural interactions.

b) For Language Educators and Professionals

Language teachers, translators, and other professionals who work with Chinese might use this study as a guide to recognize and accurately translate swear words. Accurately communicating the meaning without disregarding the emotional context associated with offensive terms in Chinese culture will be made easier with this understanding.

c) For Other Researchers

Other researchers who focus on linguistics can conduct more in-depth research on the linguistic structure and semantic meaning of swear words used by Chinese. They can analyze the phonetic, morphological, and syntactic aspects of swear words to understand how they function in the grammatical system of each language.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

a. Definition of Swear Words

Swear words are powerful expressions used by people to communicate their intense emotions. Swear words refer to words or phrases that are indecent, rude, and highly insulting, often associated with genitalia, sexual activity, excrement, or expressions such as *damn* and *hell* (Trimadona, 2016). Swear words are also considered profanities used by speakers to express offensive, disrespectful, homophobic, racist, or dirty content that violates social norms of decency (McEnery, 2006). In this study, Mandarin swear words were the focus of analysis.

b. Forms of Swear Words

In this study, the forms of swear words are categorized into three categories: word, phrase, and clause. A word refers to the smallest linguistic unit that carries meaning, either independently or as part of larger structures. It can be identified as a meaningful phonological unit (Carstairs & McCarthy, 2002). A phrase is defined as a group of words that functions as a single part of speech without forming a complete sentence, as it lacks both a subject and a predicate (Delahunty & Garvey, 2004). A clause is a group of words that contains both a subject and a predicate and functions as part of a sentence (Delahunty & Garvey, 2004). In this research, clauses are understood as syntactic units that may convey complete or incomplete thoughts.

c. References of Swear Words

In this study, references in swear words are understood as the underlying themes or topics that swear words point to. There are six references to swear words: religion, sex, excrements, animal names, mental illness, and personal background (Huges, 2006; Wijana & Romadi, 2007)

d. Functions of Swear Words

Functions of swear words refer to the various communicative purposes they serve, including expressing emotion, drawing attention, social group identity, aggression, and regressive (Rothwell, 1973; Wang et al., 2014; Bolton & Hutton, 1997).

