The Use of Swear Words in The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): Sociolinguistics Study

[1]Angela Ten, [2]Ervina CM Simatupang

ABSTRACT---The title of this study is The Use of Swear Words in The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): Sociolinguistics Study. The aim of this study is to analyse and scrutinize the frequently used swear words in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) in the view of their themes and functions. The method used in carrying out the study is descriptive analysis method. The source of data used is taken from the official website of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The result of the research demonstrates that there are four frequently used swear words in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). They are motherfucker with 770 occurrences (2%), asshole with 2386 occurrences (5%), fuck with 11098 occurrences (22%), shit with 17008 occurrences (34 %) and damn with 18407 occurrences. There are four themes of swear words found: the religious theme, the scatological theme, the sexual activity theme and the mother (family) theme. All the four themes are represented with the same amount of data. There are four functions of swear words found. They are stand-alone functions: (1) expletive interjections (28%), (2) name-calling (29%); and slot filler functions: (3) emphasis (29%), (4) adverbial/adjectival intensifier (14%).

Keywords---swear words, corpus, COCA, theme of swear words, function of swear words, sociolinguistics, politeness

I. INTRODUCTION

Generally, swear word is known as the term used to describe words that are offensive and is usually used to express the state of psychological emotion of the speaker. It is also known as four-letter words, dirty words or bad words. According to Ljung (2011), the researchers in the field of swear word use the term swearing as the resultative form of '*swear*', since the word '*swear*' does not actually derive from one. For this reason, as this research paper goes on, the term *swearing* will be used as the act of using swear words. In the Macmillan English Dictionary, swearing has at least three meanings: (1) to use words that are deliberately offensive, (2) to make sincere statement that someone is telling the truth and (3) to make a promise to do something. From these different meanings of swearing, this research paper aims to identify the use of swear words as the words that might be considered offensive and abusive. As the definition suggests, swearing is often objected as a negative approach of communication to perform. It has a tendency to be an indicator of low social status, bad manner and poor education.

[1]*English Department, Widyatama University*
2English Department, Widyatama University
CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: angela.ten@widyatama.ac.id

On the contrary, Holmes (2013) argues that swear words actually may "serve many different functions in different social contexts". This statement supports the fact seen in the society across nations where usually in casual setting and with the participants close to each other, the use of swear words is undeniable. He also adds that swear words "may express annoyance, aggression and insult, for instance, or they may express solidarity and friendliness". In other words, even though swearing can be associated with crime, lack of raising and poor education, it has become regular in people's everyday-life speech. Jay & Janschewitz (2008) suggest that there are seven words that can be categorised as swearing: *shit, fuck, motherfucker, piss, cunt, cocksucker* and *tits.* Other than those previously mentioned, words like: *nigger, hell, damn, bullshit, dolly* and *asshole* are also commonly regarded as swear words.

Nowadays, it is arguable to say that the paradigm of politeness and appropriateness has shifted to a more open and loose view. It includes the use of swear words that is becoming more and more acceptable. They are used by people coming from variable range of ages and social status in a lot of distinct settings from formal, professional to casual. As an example, in a casual setting and with a very close peer group, a football club leader can use "Fuck yeah! We've *gotta* win this. We are the Tigers!" as an utterance for building the team's confidence and boosting positive energy. On another occasion, in a more formal setting where a group leader says "Shit, you fool!" to a person during his/her speech, it may serve as an attempt to abuse or to embarrass a person. In regard to the examples explained, it is plausible to state that swearing can be abusive while it can also be performed to maintain solidarity. Therefore, the use of swearing may also be considered as an act of politeness. As Holmes (2013) proposes that "positive politeness is solidarity oriented. It emphasizes shared attitudes and values".

This phenomenon can be studied through one of the linguistics sciences i.e. sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship between language and the context in which it is used (Simatupang, 2019). One of the topics discussed in sociolinguistics is the relationship between politeness and swearing. As previously suggested, politeness is an attempt to maintain a harmonious relationship within society (Hendar, 2019).

Through this view, the research is carried out using the data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The reasons for choosing the corpus-based data are: (1) The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is the only large, genre-balanced corpus of American English. It is notably the most widely-used corpus of English, which offer unparalleled insight into variation in English and (2) The corpus contains more than 600 million words of text (20 million words each year 1990-2019) and it is equally divided among many forms, including spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts.

In light of the definitions and relationship mentioned, this research paper aims to examine the theme and the function of swear words frequently appeared in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

II. METHODS

In accordance with the title of the research, that is "*The Use of Swear Words in The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA): Sociolinguistics Study*," the object of the study is the swear words that are frequently used in the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Furthermore, the data source is obtained from the only official website of COCA, https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/.

The method used in conducting the research is descriptive analysis method. Nazir (2006:64) states that "Descriptive method is a method in examining the case of a group of people, an object, a set of conditions, a system of thought, or a

class of events in the present. The purpose of this descriptive study is to make a picture or painting systematically, factually, and accurately about the facts of the nature and the relationship between the phenomena under investigation". To put it simply, descriptive analysis method approaches the research through classifying, analysing and explaining the data obtained according to the theories related to swear words and its function in the society.

Identification of problems

The main problems that are going to be analysed are:

1. What is the theme of swear word represented by the swear words frequently used in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)?

2. What is the function of swear word that frequently used in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistics is included into one of the main big divisions of linguistics study, that is *macro-linguistics* (Romaine, 2000). Macro-linguistics puts the society as the core and considers language as one of the factors contributing to the organization of the community. Hence, language may vary depending on the particular community. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) points out that sociolinguistics is a study that observes the everyday life of humans and how language used in simple conversations using media and with social norms and policies being present. Additionally, Holmes (2013) accentuates that sociolinguistics is a study of language that sees how humans communicate with a lot of different ways in a lot of different social contexts. Furthermore, he also explains that humans construct and modify the way they communicate and use a language considering two things: social factors and social dimensions. Social factors include the participant, the setting, the topic and the function of particular utterances or conversations. Whereas, social dimensions consider social distance, status, formality, and referential and affective function of communication. Likewise, social contexts also take into account the importance of social variables: ethnicity/races, religions, occupations, gender, education, age, economic situation, politics and culture. Moreover, in this era of rapidly changing technology and excessively increasing number of users of social media, it is debatable to add up technology development and social media as part of the variables already mentioned.

Montagu (1967) and Hardaker (2019) in her podcast *'En Clair'* mention that there at least seven terms, including swearing, that are used interchangeably. They are swearing, profanity, blasphemy, cursing, vulgarity and euphemistic swearing. *Swearing* is the term that involves aggressive emotions followed by the use of words showing disappointment and it has a strong emotional association. *Profanity* is the use of 'religion' related terms to refer to something that is in accordance with the terms, for example 'God dammit!' or 'Jesus Christ!'. *Blasphemy* is the one which has similarity with profanity; however, it covers more than just an inappropriate use of religion-related terms since it also concerns the actual physical action of insulting religious attributes and figures. *Obscenity* is the term that refer to dirty words or taboo ones, for example *shit, shag, wanker, cocksucker, motherfucker, bastard, arse* and *cunt*. *Cursing* is a wish to a superpower entity for evil to be called on somebody. *Vulgarity* is a form of swearing that uses rude words, like *'bloody'*. Lastly, *euphemistic swearing* is form swearing that attempts to substitute the taboo word into a more acceptable word, for instance *'fuck'* becomes *'f word'*.

With those definitions mentioned above, Ljung (2011) discusses that a phrase like '*Jesus fucking Christ!*' may all at one serve more than one term. In this case, the phrase serves the term of *profanity* due to the use of the words '*Jesus*' and '*Christ*'. Simultaneously, it also serves the term of *obscenity* and *vulgarity* due to the use of the word '*fucking*'. Nonetheless, researchers sum up the terms by using one term that is swearing.

Swearing is the use of taboo words by a speaker to express feelings and to communicate that information to the hearer (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Furthermore, Pinker (2007) also suggests that swearing performs cathartic function. This corresponds to the statement Jay & Janschewitz (2008) that there are *propositional swearing*, which is the intentional, controllable, and *nonpropositional swearing*, that is the opposite and seems to illustrate the cathartic function of swearing.

From the explanation above, it can be presumably argued that swearing may perform emotional states of the user. These emotional states comprise anger, sadness, surprise and even happiness.

In regard of swearing typology, Montagu (1967) classifies swearing into nine types: (1) abusive, (2) adjurative, (3) assertive, (4) ejaculatory or exclamatory, (5) execratory, (6) expletive, (7) hortatory, (8) interjectional and (9) objurgatory swearing. Meanwhile, Pinker (2007) in '*The Stuff of Thought*' specifies that there are at least five ways of how a person deliver swearing:

1. Descriptive swearing: defining literal meaning;

2. Idiomatic swearing: using swearing as idioms without literal intentions;

3. Abusive swearing: emphasizing on the use of swearing as a mean to be rude, cruel, intimidating and insulting;

4. Emphatic swearing: emphasizing surprising thing (in a positive mean);

5. Cathartic swearing: using swearing as interjection because something unexpectedly bad happens.

However, McEnery (2006) classifies swearing into fifteen categories:

(1) Predicative negative adjective: The film is shit.

(2) Adverbial booster: fucking marvellous, fucking awful

(3) Cursing expletive: Fuck you/me/him/it.

(4) Destinational usage: Fuck off! He fucked off.

(5) Emphatic adverb: He fucking did it.

(6) Figurative extension of literal meaning: to fuck about

(7) General expletive: (Oh) Fuck!

(8) Idiomatic set phrase: fuck all, give a fuck

(9) Literal usage denoting taboo referent: We fucked.

(10) Imagery based on literal meaning: kick the shit out of

(11) Premodifying intensifying negative adjective: the fucking idiot

(12) Pronominal form with undefined referent: got shit to do

(13) Personal insult referring to identified entity: You fuck/That fuck

(14) Reclaimed usage – no negative intent: Niggers/Niggaz as used by

African American rappers

(15) Religious oath used for emphasis: by God!

Considering those swearing categories, Ljung (2011) claims that swearing mainly has four criteria:

1. Swearing is the use of utterances containing **taboo words**;

2. The taboo words are used with ***non-literal meaning***;

3. Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to severe lexical, phrasal and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as ***formulaic language***;

4. Swearing is ***emotive language***: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speaker's feelings and attitudes.

Moreover, there are two classifications of swearing (Ljung, 2011):

1. Themes

2. Functions

Themes of swearing including:

1. The religious theme: uses religion related terms in swearing, e.g. *Holy ghost!*

2. The scatological theme: uses excrement and excretion terms in swearing, e.g. *Shit! Asshole!*

3. The sex organ theme: uses sex organ to swear, e.g. *dick, cunt* or *prick*.

4. The sexual activity theme: uses sexual activity i.e. sexual intercourse, e.g. *fuck, cocksucker, wanker* or *jerk*.

5. The mother (family) theme: uses mother, other female close relatives, or mother-child relationship in swearing, e.g. *motherfucker* or *son of a bitch*. Other than those five major themes, Ljung (2011) also mentions that there are at least five categories included in *Minor Themes*:

1. Ancestors: related to passed relatives and usually linked to death;

2. Animals: related to animal, e.g. *bitch, cow*.

3. Death: related to dying, e.g. *...eat shit and die.*

4. Disease: related to sickness or particular epidemic ones, e.g. *A pox on both your houses!*

5. Prostitution: related to the occupation of commercial sex worker, e.g. *She is a whore.*

Functions of swearing including:

1. Stand-alone

Stand-alone functions represented by swearing that perform as utterances of its own. It covers:

a. Expletive interjections: the most common one. They are often considered to represent cathartic function. Therefore, it is not objected to other people but one's own self;

b. Oaths: the original function of swearing. To take or to confess something truthfully in the name of God;

c. Curses: the intended swearing to invoke a supernatural power to call harm or devil upon others;

d. Affirmation and contradiction: the swearing used to show discrepancy or denial on something;

e. Unfriendly suggestions: swearing that are used to express aggression. Its form often takes literal meaning of suggesting something; while it is not;

f. Ritual insults: this function is considered as formulaic expressions connected to mother theme;

g. Name-calling: the use of epithets e.g. *bitch, motherfucker,* in: (1) addressing an addressee with direct insult, (2) referring to a third party, (3) describing either the addressee or a third party;

2. Slot fillers

As it is presumably argued by the name, the slot filler functions are instances of swearing that provide a mean to a longer construction of utterances.

a. Adverbial/adjectival intensifier: the most common slot filler function of swearing. It is to intensify the high degree of the following adjective or adverb;

b. Adjectives of dislike: to indicate dislike of a speaker to the objected one (hearer);

c. Emphasis: to place emphasis in a following noun or immediately after an interrogative form;

d. Modal adverbials: swear words which modify modals and certain words, e.g. *No, you bloody can't copy*;

e. Anaphoric use of epithets: the use of epithets (swearing) to refer to the previously mentioned entity, possibly human. It is closely related to name-calling;

f. Noun supports: swear words, usually epithets that perform as 'filler' on which to hang an adjective.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the findings, there are four themes of swearing found in the swear words frequently used in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) namely the *religion theme*¸ the *scatological theme*, the *sexual activity theme* and the *mother theme*. Thereafter, this analysis also studies the function of swear words frequently used in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) namely *stand-alone* function and *slot fillers* function. To specify, stand-alone functions that are discovered are expletive *interjections, curses* and *name-calling*. In addition, for the latter function consisted of *adverbial/adjectival intensifier* and *emphasis*. The main theories used in this research dealing with swearing are taken from Ljung, and regarding sociolinguistics view, it will be viewed according to Holmes. the following are the data based on the themes of swear words frequently appeared on COCA.

The Religious Theme

Data 1

"This is our city. I'm **damn** proud of that…"

<div align="right">(Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, NEWS)</div>

From the data above, the swear word found is **damn**. It represents the religious theme due to its connection to religion in this case Christian culture. It is a diabolic swearing involving the Devil and hell. Its literal meaning according to Lexico Dictionary by Oxford is "be condemned by God to suffer eternal punishment in hell".

Furthermore, the function of swear word it holds in this sentence is *slot filler* function particularly *adverbial/adjectival intensifier*. This is caused by its placement in the sentence, before an adjective, and its meaning contribution that serve to make a longer string. It also functions to intensify the degree of the following adjective. With that in mind, the swear word **damn** in this sentence may as well be substituted with other intensifying adverbs, e.g. very, really or extremely.

The sentence may also be observed as an act of positive politeness and that it provides the hearer with an information of the speaker's feelings. The former means that the sentence proposes a more casual and friendlier setting which therefore emphasizes solidarity or sense of belonging. Accordingly, the hearer may be given an information that the speaker has a strong positive feeling towards their hometown.

Data 2

"Chicago accent you've ever heard is the best **damn** thing to come out of *da* Windy…"

<div align="right">(Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, NEWS)</div>

As previously mentioned in data 1, **damn** is the swear word that covers the religion theme.

Nevertheless, in data 2, the swear word **damn** serves a different function of swear words. It has *slot filler* function specifically *emphasis* function. This is to the following word of **damn**, 'thing'. The word 'thing' is a noun and as it is mentioned in literature review *emphasis* may be put before a noun. In this case, the swear word **damn** stresses how much the speaker appreciates Chicago diction. The word **damn** is used to show the speaker highest and maximum appreciation.

The Scatological Theme

Data 3

"…And once again he played it brilliantly. How do you look like an **asshole** to all these hundreds of people?"

(Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, NEWS)

The swear word found in data 3 is **asshole**. It serves the swear word theme of *scatological* due to its use of excrement and excretion terms.

The function that it serves as the swear word in this case is *stand-alone* function particularly *name-calling*. It is due to the use of **asshole** as the epithet for someone not doing so great. In this case, the speaker criticizes the person he/she talks to for not playing as 'brilliantly' as the man mentioned by saying "*he played it brilliantly*". It can be concluded that in this case, the speaker particularly refers to the addressee's performance which is also one of the characteristics of *name calling* function.

It is debatable to say that in this particular case the speaker is not trying to show positive emotions, yet the speaker attempts to insult and abuse the addressee. It is also conceivable to say that the speaker might have expected so highly of the addressee's performance.

Data 4

"…Before True has time to think -- Oh **shit**, what do we do now?"

(Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, FIC)

The word **shit** in data 4 is approached as included to the *scatological* theme because the swear word **shit** is undeniably known as the term for excretion. It is indeed the synonym of feces (biological term).

In this data, the word **shit** represents the function of *stand-alone* of swearing notably the function of *expletive interjection*. It is due to its uses that can be seen from how the word shit contributes meaning in the sentence. It does not refer to anyone and in fact it is a mere expression of panic and confusion because the situation is unexpected provided with the speaker saying "what do we do now?". To put it simply, the word **shit** in this case serves to fulfil cathartic function/emotive function of swearing.

The case represented in data 4 shows a positive approach of swearing, i.e. it makes the setting more relatable without an intention to harm someone's dignity.

The Sexual Activity Theme

Data 5

"The one lambasting American imperialism? Our cover of "**Fuck** the police"?"

(*Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, MAG*)

The swear word found in data 5 is **fuck**. It represents the *sexual activity* theme since the word **fuck** is usually used to describe a sexual intercourse in a more explicit way. Its meaning indeed is to 'have sex'.

On the other hand, the word **fuck** in this precise case represents *stand-alone* function specifically *expletive interjection*. It is an *expletive interjection* because it shows more of how the speaker feels or should it be restated that it shows how the creator of the cover saying "**Fuck** the police" feels about the police. In the beginning of the sentence, it is said "the one lambasting American imperialism…". It clearly builds the setting and the purpose of the talk that is to criticise the government, or in this case the police. By saying or by making the cover stating so, it illustrates how much they are disappointed either by police services or attitudes. This might be a call for protest and further should be seen as a strong indicator of public distrust towards the police. With this in mind, the creator uses language i.e. swear word, to step up and speak up about their dissatisfaction.

Data 6

"Oh my God, what the **fuck**! I just want to go bigger and bolder."

(*Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, MAG*)

In data 6, the swear word shown is **fuck** which serves the swear word theme of *sexual activity*. It is due to the uses of the swear word **fuck** which clearly to denote 'having sex".

The function of the swear word **fuck** in this data is *slot filler* notably *emphasis* function. It is due to its uses in an interrogative form of sentence and that it serves to stress the speaker intention, in this case "to go bigger and bolder". As it is written, the speaker emphasizes possibly his/her anger or madness. It is usually an indicator how disappointed a person is.

However, it is presumably agreeable to also say that the intention of the speaker might go towards a more positive point of view in which the speaker is very excited about what he/she is going to do. Either way, the swear word **fuck** in this particular form provide emphatic force of how great the feeling the speaker experiences.

The Mother Theme

Data 7

"Sometimes Sweet would distract himself, thinking, I am going to hit that **motherfucker**? That tan skin. Yes, I am."

(*Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, FIC*)

The swear word presented by data 7 is **motherfucker**. The swear word **motherfucker** serves the theme of swearing of *mother (family) theme*. **Motherfucker** is usually considered indecent since it takes into its part the word 'mother' which should have been a word considered full of positive feelings namely affection and caring. However, when put into one word with 'fucker' which in literal meaning viewed as bad word, the swear word **motherfucker** becomes a taboo word.

On the other hand, the function of swear word that is represented is *stand-alone* specifically *name-calling*. It is due to the context of the sentence which regard 'motherfucker' as an epithet for someone who probably has been previously mentioned. **Motherfucker** in this data is used to refer to the addressee with direct insult.

Furthermore, it can also be observed that the word **motherfucker** in this specific context does not show any solidarity oriented since it does not put any positive word relating to it. The swear word is used mainly to abuse the addressee. Moreover, it mentions "that tan skin". Talking about colour which can be a strong sign of racial power inequality.
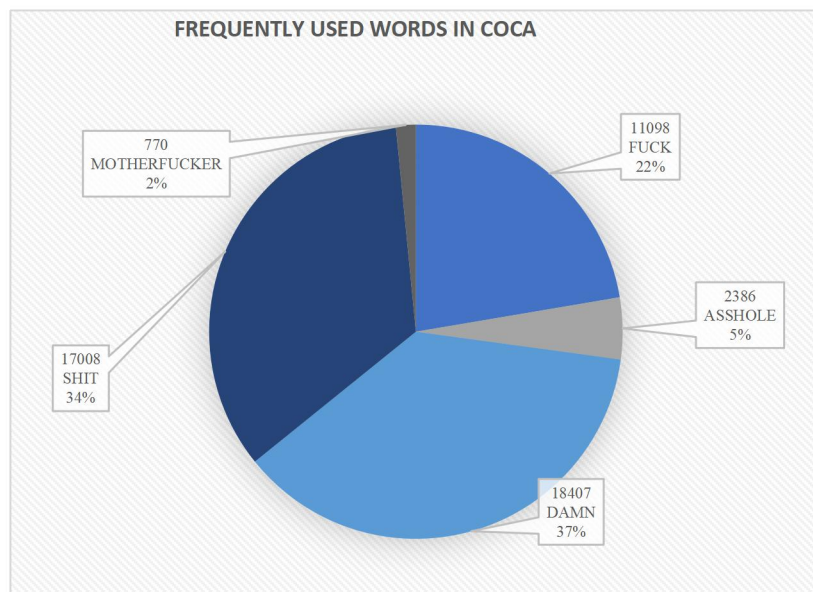
Data 8

"Brian interrupts their laughter when he says, "Did she really say, '**Motherfucker**'? To her professor?"…"

(Corpus of Contemporary American English, 2019, FIC)

In data 8, the swear word demonstrated is also **motherfucker**. In viewing **motherfucker** using theme of swearing, it might not show any difference from the previous data as it clearly represents the *mother (family) theme*.

However, viewing the data from the perspective of swear word function might be a surprise. The swear word **motherfucker** in this exact data does not belong and does not represent any of the swear word function mentioned in literature review. This is due to the context and meaning given in the sentence. Apparently, people may use swear words without swearing. In other words, using or uttering swear words with neither intention to express feelings (*cathartic*), to abuse someone nor to give sign for solidarity. In this specific data, the word **motherfucker** is simply uttered to describe and to retell what has been said previously by the addressee, which in this sentence is evidently a woman.

Regarding the speaker question about whether she really say **motherfucker** to her professor, it can conceivably be concluded that a woman uses swear words.

FREQUENTLY USED WORDS IN COCA

770 MOTHERFUCKER 2%

11098 FUCK 22%

2386 ASSHOLE 5%

17008 SHIT 34%

18407 DAMN 37%

V. CONCLUSION

From this research, it is found that there are five frequently used swear words in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). They are **motherfucker** with 770 occurrences (2%), **asshole** with 2386 occurrences (5%), **fuck** with 11098 occurrences (22%), **shit** with 17008 occurrences (34 %) and **damn** with 18407 occurrences. For this reason, the most frequently used swear word in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is the word **damn**.

On the other hand, there are four themes of swear words that are represented in the data, which are: the religious theme, the scatological theme, the sexual activity theme and the mother (family) theme. All the four themes are represented with the same amount of data.

Additionally, there are in total of four functions of swear word that represented by the frequently used swear words in COCA. They are stand-alone functions: (1) expletive interjections (28%), (2) name-calling (29%); and slot filler functions: (3) emphasis (29%), (4) adverbial/adjectival intensifier (14%).

Moreover, from the analysis, it can also be concluded that the purpose of the use of swear words by English language users may vary through a range of cathartic, abusive and solidarity-oriented purposes. In that way, people may use swear words to vent emotional feelings either bad or good ones, to insult or abuse someone and to build a friendlier communication. Consequently, this view applies for both men and women. For this reason, it is also supported by the demonstrated data that women may also use swear words despite the 'traditional view' of women that ought women to be graceful and gentle. From the data can be shown that the swear word does not always have negative expression, but it sometimes has positive expression. Some swear words can be used to show highest appreciation and maximum satisfaction of expressing something

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