

\$#@% mak!: the oil in the multicultural machine

SCENE 1: A middle-aged Malay male walks out of my local barber shop run by a Tamil-Hindu proprietor. A few seconds later, he returns and points indignantly at hair stubbles on his chin that had somehow escaped the barber's blade. Before the bemused barber could react, he storms out dramatically and utters, 'pundik!' (Tamil for vagina).



SCENE 2: A few months later, I am at my local car accessories shop to purchase a button battery for my car keys. The Chinese male attending to me is not sure about something and he consults the shop manager, a young Malay woman. In response to his query, she punctuates her sentence with 'Soh hai!' (Cantonese for stupid vagina).



OBVIOUSLY, MALAYSIANS are not unique when they swear or utter obscenities. Like most of humanity across space and time, 'dirty words' are used during moments of intense emotions like anger, frustration or even during its apparent antithesis, elation. They convey the force of feelings when other words falter. But these same words can evoke quite different responses from their hearers under varying circumstances. For instance, when used in jest or playfully among lovers, friends, relatives and even newly found acquaintances, these words *connect* rather than alienate human relationships.

Swear words, together with slang, insults, slurs, oaths, blasphemies and curses, have not escaped the attention of scholars. While linguists might study them for their etymological origins and transformations over time, and psychologists for their cognitive and psychosexual sources, anthropologists usually direct their analytical gaze elsewhere.

Taboo

Despite hailing from different emphases, their foci, nevertheless, tend to be on the historical and social contexts in which the cultural meanings of these words are suspended. Simply put, they see language as part of this artefact called 'culture', not a thing in itself and detached from cultural activities. In this perspective, swear words are classified as 'taboo', that is as language that should be avoided from public hearing. Nevertheless, as a 'non-language' of things not said, they still shape and structure individual thinking and behaviour in quite tangible ways.

In polyglot and multi-ethnic Malaysia, swearwords—like the artefacts of cuisine, dressing and worldviews—are open to the forces of hybridisation. And they are also equally subject to the codes of appropriate public linguistic and social behaviour as powerfully mediated by the schooling system.

Yet, at the same time, there runs an undercurrent of contrapuntal education. For instance, while I was in lower secondary school, graphic 'dirty words' from the Malay, Chinese and Tamil lexicon were uttered with ease among male friends and foes without fear of intellectual property infringement. In as much as these words arguably worked to bridge ethnic and cultural domains, they also skirted the boundaries of supposed civic behaviour. As far as possible, they were out of the earshot of the figures of authority—teachers and prefects—to escape disciplinary retribution.

Not surprisingly, 'dirty words' were on abundant display in the private-not-so-private space of bodily exudation—the boys' toilet walls. Anonymously etched on them were Picasso-like and grotesque artistic renditions of the human genitalia and acrobatic coital positions. Sometimes, to make doubly sure that there is no doubt as to the target of their pieces of work, they would be eloquently captioned with the names of individuals, local and foreign.

For many in adult life, the spectrum of the polyglot lexicon of local swearwords has dwindled or lapsed through infrequent use. They have been overshadowed by English expletives popularised in commercial movies and pornography.

'Dirty words'

I interviewed friends and colleagues of both sexes and of different ethnic ancestries. I asked them to 'talk dirty' to me. I requested them to list all the swearwords that they know and describe how they would use them. Though most of my 'findings' were not novel, there were some surprises.

SCENE 3: I am working late into the night on a document that is due early the next day. I am tired and am not in an inspired mood given the last minute nature of the request. Suddenly, the computer screen turns pitch black, losing the hard intellectual labour of the last one hour. I raise my hands in exasperation with the expletive 'fuck!' exploding out of my mouth.

Yeoh Seng Guan



Firstly, a large proportion of 'dirty words' that they could remember in their own vernacular usually referred to human genitalia. Female genitalia (eg., Malay: *pantat*, *puki*; Tamil: *pundik* or *kitthe*; Hokkien: *cebai*) were far more readily recalled than those of the male's (eg., Malay: *butuh*; Tamil: *kottai*; Hokkien: *lang cheao*). If the male's genitalia are used, it would be to highlight its shortcomings and impotency.

Tamil slang has the additional feature of including pubic hair in the repertoire of insults. So, one can have the option of saying *pudungu mayiru* ('pluck your pubic hair') to get one's offensive point across. This is not surprising if one is familiar with the cultural grammar of hair still salient in South Asian cultural and religious practices. For instance, loose and unbounded hair is associated with brazen sexuality and the loosening of social control, whilst a shaven head signifies asceticism and order. By comparison, the Hokkien-Chinese equivalent seems to make great play on the bad odour of the female genital (*chow cebai*) as a metonym for the despicable character of the person intended. Clearly, the politics of olfaction (smell) is foregrounded here.

Another thread cutting through my interviewees' comments is one that would not be surprising to feminists. If the speaker's intention is to denigrate the hearer more sharply, he/she has the option of resorting to phrases highlighting the latter's mother's genitalia as a focus of attention (eg., Malay: *puki mak*; Tamil: *pundik amma*). By contrast, references to the father's genitals are less prevalent or even absent. Indeed, to launch a calculated verbal attack focusing on the hearer's mother is highly likely to elicit a robust retaliation, suggesting a gradation of 'dirty words'.

Yet another category of vernacular insults refers to the act of copulation. Again, the persona of the mother is a popular trope. In this regard, the Cantonese-Chinese version is quite potent combining the concoction of smell, genitalia and one's mother for derision. Interestingly, coital insults also suggest a suspension of sexual decorum with the mother acquiring whorish tendencies or, equally worse, turning into a victim of predatory rape. The force of these phrases, of course, is a suggestion of a gnawing uncertainty of one's blood or kinship ties. By contrast, when directed at males, the verbal accusation of sodomy reduces the hearer to an effeminate figure and an object of 'unnatural sex'.

Not all vernacular insults listed out for me were preoccupied with the human genitalia or copulation. There are phrases casting scathing dispersions at the listener's intelligence or

even humanity. In the former, for example, these would include Malay phrases like *sakai*, *prak* and *ulu*, which liken the victim to the putative simple-mindedness and primitiveness of indigenous peoples in the context of modern urban living. Similarly, one could invoke the words *monyet* (monkey) or *kerasumbang* (macaque) to suggest an absence of the distinctive qualities of a human being.

Finally, all my interviewees admitted to a familiarity with polyglot swearing, a bonus of living in racialised and multicultural Malaysia. Whether through active learning or by osmotic enculturation over the years they have acquired a working knowledge of a smattering of 'swear words' in different vernaculars.

For me, this suggests an arresting visual image. Picture on the surface a heavily invested Babel-like structure of a common language that supposedly facilitates intercultural communication and therefore unifies all speakers of diverse linguistic origins. Beneath and out of sight runs a subterranean network of intersecting tunnels (sewers?) laden with picturesque vocabularies that flow and mix in the heavy traffic of everyday interactions.

While all Malaysians might not be fully aware of each other's entire lexicon and the nuances in deploying them, what remains interesting, as a subject for anthropological research and for constructive engagement, are the unintended ways in which subaltern 'dirty words' have the power to shock, insult and disrupt as well as to connect forcefully and meaningfully across diverse cultures.

Yeoh Seng Guan
Monash University
yeoh.seng.guan@sass.monash.edu

COMMENT

Deep play with the forbidden

Multiculturalism is often understood as a collection of taboos: the things one must be politically correct about, whether one is convinced of them or not. Yet every catalogue of what to do also implies an unwritten and informal para-catalogue of what may be done despite politeness and correctness and, often, those breaches of fixed codes are the oil in the sometimes machine-style mechanisms of multicultural coexistence. In anthropology, we have the odd term 'joking relationships' (coined by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown) for such cultured breaches of taboos. The term is odd because a 'joking relationship', despite how it may appear superficially, is not about disrespect at all; on the contrary, it demonstrates a shared confidence that can breach and bridge the boundaries that politeness usually demands. Most of us know such 'joking relationships' as family matters: odd confidences with your grandparents (*psst: never tell your parents I told you that*), with your sister-in-law (again: *psst!*), or with the much-maligned mother-in-law or her daughter-in-law.

When such taboo breaches occur in public, they take on an extra dimension: they become cultural-structural. Of course they must hide their face, as they establish a bond of confidence against the reigning rules. So they seek refuge in the unspeakable or, to put it better, the unprintable. The favourite hang-outs and hide-outs of this informal multiculturalism are shared swear words, insults and even ethnic jokes. All of them play with obscenity, prejudice and even racism; but the point is, they *play* with them.

And play has a deeply human potential of sharing liberation from the sometimes all too serious life with another person who appreciates that momentary liberation from normal norms.

Gerd Baumann
University of Amsterdam

Don't take it 'easy' in Indonesia

Yeoh Seng Guan is such a talented writer! Why isn't he more famous? I love the phrase 'osmotic enculturation' and will steal it for sure. Three Malay swear words I find particularly interesting are *butuh*, *pantat* and *gampang*. This is because all three words are perfectly innocuous in Indonesia, a country I used to live in. How did these differences come about? You don't have to be a social science professor to surmise that, symbolically, we in Malaysia have more taboos than the Indonesians.

I recall once in Jakarta, I was about to sit on a bench. A well-meaning bloke who noticed the bench was wet told me, 'Jaga-jaga! Nanti pantat basah!' (Watch out! Your butt/vagina (Indonesian/Malay) will get wet!). I was too shocked for words.

Malaysian audiences always snigger when someone in an Indonesian film *butuh* (needs) something. And as for *gampang*, it's not difficult to see how 'easy' in Indonesian can become the moral laxity needed to produce an illegitimate child.

Amir Muhammad
Writer, publisher and occasional movie-maker

This is a chapter from the book *The Malaysian Way of Life*, edited by Julian C. H. Lee (Shah Alam: Marshall Cavendish). It features over 30 contributions from authors including Janet Carsten, Bill Watson, Kees van Dijk, Joel Kahn, Alberto Gomes and Michael Billig. These contributions appeared in the *Malaysian arts, culture and politics magazine, Off The Edge*, over 2008 and 2009. The book is available from www.kinibooks.com