SNĚNE 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, ‘pundiki’ (Tamil for vagina). O_

SNĚNE 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!’ (Canonteze for stupid vagina). O

SNĚNE 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 ‘f*ck!’ exploding out of my mouth.

Firstly, a large proportion of ‘dirty words’ that they could remember in their own vernacular usually referred to human genitalia. Female genitalia (eg., Malay: point; pudi; Tamil: pundik or kitthe; Hokkien: oboe) were far more readily recalled than those of the male’s (eg., Malay: butch; Tamil: kotki; Hokkien: long ching). If the male’s genitalia are used, it would be to highlight its shortcomings and impotency.

In polyglot and multiethnic 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 codification of appropriate public linguistic and social behaviour as powerfully mediated by the schooling system.

Yet, at the same time, there runs an undercurrent of contra-political 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 exuviation - the boys’ toilet walls. Anonymously etched on them were Picasso-like and grotesque artistic renditions of the human genitalia and toilet walls. Anonymously etched on them were Picasso-like and grotesque artistic renditions of the human genitalia and toilet walls. Anonymously etched on them were Picasso-like and grotesque artistic renditions of the human genitalia and toilet walls.

For instance, loose and unbound hair is associated with brazen sexuality and the loosening of social control, whilst a shaved 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 oboe) as a metonym for the despicable character of the person intended. Clearly, the politics of obscenity (smell) is foregrounded here.

Another thread cutting through my interviewees’ comments is one that would not be surprising to feminists. If the speaker’s intent 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: poni mak; Tamil: pundik amma). By contrast, references to the father’s genitalia 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 offending or ‘plucking’ (monkey) or ‘psst!’ exploding out of my mouth.

Taboo

Despite hailing from different empires, their foes, nevertheless, tend to be on the histories 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 multiethnic 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 codification of appropriate public linguistic and social behaviour as powerfully mediated by the schooling system.

Yet, at the same time, there runs an undercurrent of contra-political 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 exuviation - 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 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 connote 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 empires, their foes, nevertheless, tend to be on the histories 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.

Yet, at the same time, there runs an undercurrent of contra-political 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 exuviation - 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 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 connote 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 empires, their foes, nevertheless, tend to be on the histories 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.

Yet, at the same time, there runs an undercurrent of contra-political 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 exuviation - 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 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 connote 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 empires, their foes, nevertheless, tend to be on the histories 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.

Yet, at the same time, there runs an undercurrent of contra-political 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 exuviation - 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 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 connote 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.