AN ANALYSIS OF TABOO LANGUAGE IN HIP HOP SONG LYRICS

Vivi Maisura; Meristika Moetia

[1,2]*STKIP Muhammadiyah Aceh Barat Daya,Indonesia*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Received: August 21, 2025 Revised: August 25, 2025 Accepted: August 28, 2025 Published: August 31, 2025 *Keywords:* Language Taboo Song Lyrics	This study discusses the use of taboo language in hip-hop lyrics, focusing on its various types. The study aims to identify the types of taboo words, including cursing, profanity, obscenity, blasphemy, vulgar language, sexual harassment, name calling and insults in Cardi B songs lyrics. Data were collected through a text analysis of three songs by Cardi B, as well as a literature review on the linguistic and social functions of vulgar and taboo language. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in the use of taboo language within the context of hip-hop music. The results show that six out (cursing, profanity, obscenity, sexual harassment, vulgar language, name-calling and insults) of seven types of taboo language (cursing, profanity, obscenity, blasphemy, sexual harassment, vulgar language, name-calling and insults) appear in Cardi B's lyrics, with two types appearing most frequently (cursing and profanity). *This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.*

This study discusses the use of taboo language in hip-hop lyrics, focusing on its various types. The study aims to identify the types of taboo words, including cursing, profanity, obscenity, blasphemy, vulgar language, sexual harassment, name calling and insults in Cardi B songs lyrics. Data were collected through a text analysis of three songs by Cardi B, as well as a literature review on the linguistic and social functions of vulgar and taboo language. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns in the use of taboo language within the context of hip-hop music. The results show that six out (cursing, profanity, obscenity, sexual harassment, vulgar language, name-calling and insults) of seven types of taboo language (cursing, profanity, obscenity, blasphemy, sexual harassment, vulgar language, name-calling and insults) appear in Cardi B's lyrics, with two types appearing most frequently (cursing and profanity).

INTRODUCTION

Language plays an important role in social life because it is a means of communication between humans and other creatures. Through language, speakers can identify themselves because they understand their language as a system of symbols. Human language has meaning and meaning plays a crucial role in all areas and helps us understand language.

As a means of human communication, language serves to convey information, express identity, and communicate emotions. According to Mailana (2022), language plays a role as a means of communication as well as an expression of cultural and personal identity in human social life.

This definition emphasizes that language is the result of deliberate sound production by humans for communication. According to Diah & Wulandari (2015), language is a system of arbitrary sound symbols used by humans to communicate and collaborate with other members

of society. Language is a systematic product consisting of symbols consciously produced by the human vocal tract.

This meant that language was not something static but a system of symbols governed by certain rules and conventions, used for communication within a community.

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, encompassing its nature, structure, and function in human communication. According to Kridalaksana (1983), it is the science that examines language in general a tool humans possess for communication including regional languages, Indonesian, and foreign languages. John Lyon emphasized that linguistics is the scientific study of language, conducted through systematic and empirical observation, which can be proven true. Language itself is defined as an arbitrary and conventional system of sound symbols used by members of social groups to communicate and identify themselves (Chaer, 1994). Thus, linguistics studies language not only as a communication tool, but also as a dynamic, complex system with characteristics such as productivity, variation, and uniqueness within its social context.

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, encompassing its nature, structure, and function in human communication. According to Kridalaksana (1983), it is the science that examines language in general a tool humans possess for communication including regional languages, Indonesian, and foreign languages. John Lyon emphasized that linguistics is the scientific study of language, conducted through systematic and empirical observation, which can be proven true. Language itself is defined as an arbitrary and conventional system of sound symbols used by members of social groups to communicate and identify themselves (Chaer, 1994). Thus, linguistics studies language not only as a communication tool, but also as a dynamic, complex system with characteristics such as productivity, variation, and uniqueness within its social context.

One of the main branches of sociolinguistics that is closely related to the theory of taboo language is variationist sociolinguistics. This branch studies the variation of language that occurs in society, including how and why taboo words are used by certain social groups. Research in this field often analyzes factors such as age, gender, social class, and cultural background that influence the frequency and perception of taboo language use. Additionally,

variationist sociolinguistics also highlights how cultural norms and values are reflected in word choices, including words that are considered taboo or sensitive. According to Labov (1966), language variation including the use of taboo language, is a reflection of social structure and group identity in society.

Definition of Taboo Language

Taboo song lyrics were expressions of language that contained elements of social prohibitions and cultural norms considered sensitive to be openly expressed. According to Jay (2009), taboo words in song lyrics were classified into several categories such as curses, obscene words, sexual harassment, and insults, which functioned as tools for emotional and social expression within certain cultural contexts. Thus, taboo song lyrics did not only function as a medium of entertainment but also as a reflection of social and cultural dynamics that regulated the boundaries of communication within society.

Types of Taboo Language

Taboo language types in hip hop song lyrics had become a focus of linguistic studies that revealed various classifications of taboo words based on Timothy Jay's theory (2009). That classified taboo words into seven main types:

1.   **Cursing**

According to Steven Pinker (2007), cursing had five main functions: insult aimed to offend or intimidate, catharsis as an expression of pain, dysphemistic swearing that forced the listener to think negatively, emphatic swearing to draw attention to important matters, and idiomatic swearing used in informal conversations without a specific purpose. Pinker explained that cursing was a powerful and complex linguistic behavior related to emotions and social interactions, and it had deep psychological and neurological roots.

From an etymological and cultural perspective, the word curse was derived from the Latin cursare, which meant to curse or swear, and in social and spiritual contexts, was often considered a wish for harm to befall others. Research also revealed that bilingual individuals tended to use profanity more easily in their second language due to reduced social pressures

in that language. Although considered taboo and impolite in many cultures, experts argued that cursing served as an emotional and social mechanism in human communication.

2. Profanity

Profanity has been studied by experts as a complex psychological and emotional phenomenon with both positive and negative effects. Higher profaners experienced notably lower levels of depression and stress compared to lower profaners, suggesting that profanity could help alleviate emotional distress by allowing individuals to express their feelings more freely This research emphasized profanity as a form of emotional expressivity crucial for psychosocial wellbeing, contrasting with emotional suppression which is linked to various mental health problems.

From a neurological and cognitive perspective, the habitual use of profanity influences brain regions associated with emotion and impulsivity, such as the amygdala and limbic system. This can strengthen neural pathways that favor quick emotional reactions while possibly diminishing self-control and reflective thinking. Repeated exposure to swear words may therefore reinforce negative emotional patterns and impair stress management, affecting cognitive self-regulation Furthermore, profanity triggers physiological arousal that can have performance-enhancing effects but also risks reinforcing impulsive responses if overused.

Culturally and socially, profanity often violates societal norms and taboos but remains prevalent due to its powerful emotional impact. Studies suggest that profanity can communicate honesty and authenticity, potentially increasing social bonding when used appropriately. However, excessive or inappropriate profanity may offend and damage interpersonal relationships Thus, while profanity carries a social cost, its use also supports emotional release and genuine communication, making it a complex and nuanced element of human language and behavior.

3. Blasphemy

Blasphemy had been defined by experts as an act of showing contempt, disrespect, or lack of reverence toward God, sacred objects, or religious beliefs. (Nugroho, R., & Faisal, A., 2024) emphasized that blasphemy crossed a sensitive boundary between freedom of expression and

respect for religious convictions, involving statements or actions intended to insult or undermine faith in the eyes of others.

Legal scholars like (Hairi, P. J., 2023) had studied blasphemy in its judicial context, explaining that it was criminalized when it deliberately tried to damage respect and belief in God or religion through insulting words or writings. The law often distinguished between protected intellectual critique and provocative blasphemy aimed at offending adherents. From a historical and cultural standpoint, blasphemy had been treated seriously in many religious traditions and legal systems worldwide.

4.   Obscenity

Firstly, from the perspective of United States law, obscenity was defined as material that offensively violated community decency standards and induced excessive sexual arousal. In the context of crime and social norms, obscenity was often viewed as an act that violated propriety norms and caused destructive effects on public morality. Obscenity was not only explicit sexual content but also unwanted sexual verbal harassment. Jay (1996) classified obscenity as inappropriate sexual comments, dirty jokes, and verbal insults related to sexual behavior or orientation.

5.   Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is commonly defined as any unwanted sexual behavior that violates the personal boundaries of an individual. According to Jay, T. (2009), it is a sexual behavior that crosses personal limits, involving physical coercion, sexual exploitation, or manipulation using power positions. The Indonesian legal context also provides a detailed overview of sexual harassment. The Indonesian Law Number 35 of 2014 defines violence, including sexual violence, as any act that causes physical, psychological, or sexual suffering or harm. Sexual harassment includes forced sexual acts, attempts, verbal suggestions, or non-consensual sexual behavior (WHO, 2017). Moreover, sexual harassment has been recognized as a critical social issue violating human rights with profound impacts on victims. These definitions underscore the urgent need for laws and social systems to prevent sexual harassment and protect victims.

6.Vulgar language

Vulgar language is broadly defined as the use of coarse, rude, or offensive words that are often considered socially inappropriate or impolite. According to Chaer (1995), vulgar language is a social variation characterized by usage among less educated or uneducated groups and is regarded as lacking politeness and good manners in society. This type of language tends to include harsh or obscene words and is frequently seen as a lower level of language compared to formal speech, often linked to showing strong emotions like anger or frustration Mastang (2022) adds that vulgar language involves words or expressions perceived as dirty or impolite, typically used by those with limited educational background.

Researchers also highlight that vulgar language has social functions and varies depending on context. For example, a study of motorbike communities showed that vulgar language served multiple purposes such as expressing anger, establishing social closeness, or delivering sarcastic remarks. The forms of vulgar language include words derived from references to animals, body parts, occupations, or taboo activities, which carry layers of meaning understood within specific social groups Setiawaty et al. (2018) explain that speakers often resort to vulgar expressions when they cannot control their emotions or when they want to show solidarity among peers, illustrating how vulgar language is tied to social relationships and emotional expression.

Furthermore, vulgar language is often seen in youth and informal settings, where it sometimes serves as humor or social bonding, but also raises concerns about social norms and respect. Aslinda (2007) notes that vulgar language reflects the speaker's intellectual and social background, frequently used by adolescents and people with lower social status. While some communities consider it acceptable or normal in daily interaction, educated groups tend to avoid vulgar expressions due to their impolite connotations. This complexity suggests that vulgar language is both a linguistic and social phenomenon connected to identity, group membership, and emotional expression.

7.Name-calling and insults

Vivi Maisura et al (An Analysis of Taboo Language in Hip Hop Song Lyrics)
English Language Teaching Methodology

Name-calling and insults are forms of verbal aggression aimed at belittling or humiliating others by attaching negative labels or offensive names. According to Wasono (2007), name-calling is a propaganda technique that involves using derogatory labels with the intention of lowering a person's status or discrediting ideas without proper examination.

Insults, closely related to name-calling, function as linguistic tools to express aggression or disdain. Milić (2018) outlines that an utterance is considered an insult based on several factors including the semantic content of the expression, the speaker's intent to offend, and the listener's perception. Insults can take various forms in language, such as epithets, nicknames (name-calling), metaphors, or other pejorative expressions that disparage a person's character, appearance, ethnicity, or social identity (Allan & Burridge, 2006). For instance, in literature, insults appear as "disfemisms" or dysphemisms, where harsh or offensive terms replace neutral or polite expressions, often to convey contempt or criticism (Sudjiman in Fiiarum & Savitri, 2018).

In modern communication contexts, name-calling and insults are also prominent in social media and cyberbullying, where they contribute to emotional harm and social conflict. Linguistic studies reveal that these expressions frequently involve pejorative words, offensive nicknames, or derogatory slang aimed at demeaning others (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; DiFranco, 2014). The social effects are profound, as insults not only damage individual dignity but also reinforce social hierarchies and group distinctions. Thus, understanding name-calling and insults involves recognizing their linguistic forms, psychological impacts, and social functions as negative communicative acts.

Definition of Hip Hop Song

From a sociolinguistic perspective, hip hop became an important arena for language study because the language in hip hop reflected group identity, cultural resistance, and linguistic innovation that created new language variations unique to urban communities, so hip hop played a role as a medium for the formation and dissemination of dynamic social language varieties.

Hip hop was a cultural movement that emerged in the early 1970s in the Bronx, New York, developed by African-American and Latin-American communities as a form of artistic expression and social resistance. According to Cepeda (2004), hip hop was a dynamic combination of four main elements, namely MCing or rapping, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti, which later evolved with the addition of elements such as beatboxing, fashion, and slang language.

Additionally, previous study on Nicki Minaj's hip hop lyrics found seven types of taboo language, highlighting their primary functions in attracting attention, expressing disgust, and provoking reactions (Jay, 2009). In the context of Indonesian hip hop, the use of taboo language such as vulgarisms and harsh words was also employed to express emotions and social criticism. Therefore, the types of taboo language in hip hop song lyrics encompassed various categories that functioned as tools for emotional, social, and cultural expression distinctive to the genre.

The purpose of this study is to identify and categorize the types of taboo language used in Cardi B's song lyrics and analyze the frequency of their use. The research questions asked include: first, what types of taboo language are found in Cardi B's song lyrics; second, what types of taboo language are most frequently used in the song lyrics. This study aims to provide a deep understanding of the patterns of taboo language use in hip hop song lyrics as part of a discourse analysis of popular music.

Research Methodology

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research approach to analyze taboo language in Cardi B's album. Researchers conducted this study because they wanted to understand the use of taboo language in the context of music and its implications, as well as to determine how culture and society influence the use of such language in Cardi B's song lyrics. According to Alwasilah (2011) and Creswell (2012), this method focuses on patterns in the data being analyzed, including words, phrases, and sentences. These patterns are then selected to answer the research questions. Since descriptive qualitative research involves collecting data in the form of images, this method does not emphasize numbers. For this study, the data collection technique involved listening to and reading the lyrics of three Cardi B songs: "Bartier Cardi"

(feat. 21 Savage), "Bodak Yellow," and "Money Bag." These songs are included in Cardi B's 2018 album, Invasion of Privacy. Then, lyrics containing taboo words or language were collected for analysis. The data collection technique was carried out by listening to and reading the song lyrics repeatedly, then the researcher noted all the taboo words contained therein, and the researcher grouped the taboo words based on their type (Pinker, 2017). After data analysis, the researcher will describe all data in the results and discussion section.

Result

1). Like in the song Cardy B - Bodak Yellow :

Said, "Lil _bitch_, you can't fuck with me if you wanted to"

These expensive, these is red bottoms, these is bloody shoes

(The lyrics of the song are included in the type **Cursing**)

2). Like in the song Cardy B Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

This is sweet _pussy_ Saturday, that's just what Plies say

I said "Bae, it's a snack," he said it's an entrée

(The lyrics of the song are included in the type **Profanity**)

3). Like in the song Cardy B-Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

This is _sweet pussy Saturday_, that's just what Plies say

I said "Bae, it's a snack," he said it's an entrée

(The lyrics of the song are included in the type **Obscenity**)**.**

4) .Like in the song cardy b Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

My pussy feel like a lake

He wanna swim with his face, I'm like, "Okay"

(The lyrics of the song are included in the type **Sexual harassment**)**.**

5). Like in the song Cardy B - Bodak Yellow :

I put _hot sauce on her titties_

Vivi Maisura et al (An Analysis of Taboo Language in Hip Hop Song Lyrics)
English Language Teaching Methodology

I'm in a Bentley truck, she keep on suckin' like it's tinted

(The lyrics of the song are included in the type **Vulgar language).**

6). Like in the song Cardy B-Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

Bitch, you ain't gang, you _lame_

Bentley truck lane to lane

(The lyrics of the song are included in the type **Name-calling and insults).**

Discussion

In the process of translating Cardi B's song lyrics, translation techniques suggest repeatedly listening to and reading the lyrics to understand the singer's intended meaning The following is a data analysis of taboo language of three Cardi B songs: "Bartier Cardi" (feat. 21 Savage), "Bodak Yellow," and "Money Bag." in 7 type of taboo language that's follow:

1.   Cursing

Words that fall into this category are swear words or curses used to express anger, frustration, or self-assertion (Mutia Damayanti et al, 2021). An example is "bitch," which is used repeatedly as a form of insult or assertion of power. The use of this word falls under the category of cursing because it functions as a crude and offensive swear word.

Like in the song Cardy B - Bodak Yellow :

Said, "Lil _bitch_, you can't fuck with me if you wanted to"

These expensive, these is red bottoms, these is bloody shoes

2.   Profanity.

Profanity is coarse language or words related to the misuse of things considered sacred or holy, such as the name of God or religious matters. This language is often used to express anger, frustration, or as a form of mockery, insult, or intimidation. Jay (2016) classifies profanity as part of swear words related to insults, sarcasm, and verbal attacks. Profanity is closely related to violations of social norms and politeness in language.

Like in the song Cardy B Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

This is sweet _pussy_ Saturday, that's just what Plies say

I said "Bae, it's a snack," he said it's an entrée

In these lyrics, there is the word "pussy," which is vulgar language and falls under the category of profanity because it is a taboo word that refers to a body part in a crude manner and is often used to express something in a crude or vulgar way.

3.   Blasphemy

Blasphemy is language that insults or demeans religion or belief. In these three Cardi B songs: "Bartier Cardi" (feat. 21 Savage), "Bodak Yellow," and "Money Bag" lyrics, there are no words or phrases that directly insult a particular religion or belief, so this category is not relevant to this song.

4.   Obscenity

According to Zhou (2010), obscenity refers to indecent words that refer to sexual matters and excretion. Jay (2009) also divides taboo language into categories and refers to obscenity as a type of taboo word that is obscene and related to sexuality or sexual organs.

Like in the song Cardy B-Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

This is _sweet pussy Saturday_, that's just what Plies say

I said "Bae, it's a snack," he said it's an entrée

These lyrics contain sexual and vulgar language, such as "sweet pussy Saturday" and explicit descriptions of the body that contain sexual elements, which fall under the category of obscenity because they are inappropriate and vulgar.

5.   Sexual harassment

Sapiro (2018) states that sexual harassment is an abuse of power based on gender and sexuality expectations in a context of inequality. Sexual harassment can be physical or verbal, direct or indirect, and is not just about sex, but rather an abuse of power (Burn, 2018). Explicitly describing someone in a sexual and material way.

Like in the song cardy b Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

My pussy feel like a lake

He wanna swim with his face, I'm like, "Okay"

Phrases such as "My pussy feels like a lake" fall into this category because they contain explicit sexual language and could potentially be considered verbal sexual harassment.

6.   Vulgar language

Vulgar language often contains words that are rude, dirty, or indecent, and its use is often considered inappropriate in formal or official situations (Chaer, 2010).

Like in the song Cardy B - Bodak Yellow :

I put *hot sauce on her titties*

I'm in a Bentley truck, she keep on suckin' like it's tinted

"hot sauce on her titties" is phrase that openly mention sexual activity are considered vulgar language because they touch on sexual aspects in an explicit and crude manner.

7.   Name-calling and insults

Name-calling and insults are forms of verbal aggression aimed at belittling or humiliating others by attaching negative labels or offensive names. According to Wasono (2007), name-calling is a propaganda technique that involves using derogatory labels with the intention of lowering a person's status or discrediting ideas without proper examination.

Like in the song Cardy B-Bartier Cardi (feat.21 Savage) :

Bitch, you ain't gang, you *lame*

Bentley truck lane to lane

The use of the word "lame" to refer to people who do not belong to a gang or are not cool falls under the category of name-calling and insults, as it directly demeans others.

CONCLUSION

analyzing taboo words in three Cardi B songs: "Bartier Cardi" (feat. 21 Savage), "Bodak Yellow," and "Money Bag," the researchers obtained several results from this study. First, the researchers found that there are six types of taboo language in three Cardi B songs: "Bartier Cardi" (feat. 21 Savage), "Bodak Yellow," and "Money Bag." Second, of the six types, there are two types of taboo language that are often used in three Cardi B songs: "Bartier Cardi" (feat. 21 Savage), "Bodak Yellow," and "Money Bag." This second type is Profanity and Cursing language. This study also found that one type

REFERENCES

Anderson, L., & Lepore, E. (2013). What did you call me? Slurs as prohibited words. Analytic Philosophy, 54(3), 350-363. https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12023

Aslinda. (2007). Bahasa vulgar sebagai refleksi latar belakang intelektual dan sosial penuturnya. [Penerbit].

Cepeda, R. (2004). Hip hop culture: An evolving art form. [Penerbit].

Chaer, A. (1994). Linguistik umum (Edisi revisi). Rineka Cipta. URL https://repository.ut.ac.id/4729/3/PBIN4101-M1.pdf

Diah, A., & Wulandari, S. (2015). The function of language as a human communication tool includes five basic functions: expression, information, exploration, persuasion, and entertainment. Journal of Education, Science, Geology, and Geophysics, 5(4), 447-456 . https://doi.org/10.29303/geoscienceed.v5i4.447

Fiiarum, Y., & Savitri, D. (2018). Linguistic analysis of insults and dysphemisms in literary works. [Penerbit].

Haerul. (2012). Efektivitas pembelajaran Kanji dasar dengan menggunakan multimedia Power Point (Bab I Pendahuluan). Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. http://repository.upi.edu/1373/2/s_c0551_0608784_chapter1.pdf

Hairi, P. J. (2023). Implementasi Undang-Undang Nomor 12 Tahun 2022 tentang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual. Negara Hukum: Membangun Hukum untuk Keadilan dan Kesejahteraan, 14(2), 163-180. https://doi.org/10.15294/ciils.v2i1.59064

Jay, T. (2009). The utility and ubiquity of taboo words. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 4(2), 153-161. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01115.x

Kridalaksana, H. (1983). Linguistik: Pengantar ilmu bahasa. Gramedia. https://ojs.stkippgri-lubuklinggau.ac.id/index.php/JPP/article/download/353/216/

Labov, W. (1966). The social stratification of English in New York City. Center for Applied Linguistics. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808811

Mailana, I. (2022). Language as a means of communication and expression of identity. Journal of Transformative Education,

2(4), 595-605 . https://jupetra.org/index.php/jpt/article/download/634/385/29

Nugroho, R., & Faisal, A. (2024). A comparative study of blasphemy law in Indonesia and America. *Contemporary Issues on Interfaith Law and Society*, 2(1), 1-30. https://doi.org/10.15294/ciils.v2i1.59064

Pinker, S. (2007). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*. Viking. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808811