

SWEAR WORDS IN BAD BOYS II: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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SWEAR WORDS IN *BAD BOYS II*: A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

English movies have become a medium for the global spread of English swear words. However, not all people from non-English speaking countries know and understand the literal meanings of these words. This qualitative research aims to figure out the semantic referents of swear words in the film *Bad Boys II*. Content analysis was employed as its method. The results of this study show that nine semantic referents of swear words were used in the movie, namely sexual references, profane or blasphemous, scatological and disgusting objects, animal names, ethnic-racial-gender slurs, psychological-physical-social deviations, ancestral allusions, substandard vulgar terms, and offensive slang. Thus, *Bad Boys II* has a vast variety of swear words.

Keywords: swear word, semantic referent, *Bad Boys II*

Introduction

As English is considered to be an international language, the use of English is increasing in many countries including Indonesia. English has become one of the obligatory subjects in schools and it can be heard in daily conversations, especially among the young generation. Not every Indonesian is fluent in English and uses English fully in their daily conversations. However, it cannot be denied that sometimes Indonesian people insert some English vocabularies in their utterances. English swear words are among the vocabularies used by Indonesian people.

The use of swear words is spread mostly through social interactions. Jay (2000) states that children may acquire swear words in their vocabulary even as soon as they start to speak. Children acquire the swear words from what they hear and learn to use them through social learning. People whose native language is not English acquire English swear words through more-or-less the same way. They learn the words from daily conversations or other media, such as English movies, and imitate the words in their speech.

This study focuses on the semantic referents of swear words in an English movie entitled *Bad Boys II*. The underlying reason for this study is that the use of swear words is often taken connotatively rather than denotatively (Wajnryb, 2005; Goddard, 2015). It is also the reason why there are relatively few semantic studies on swear words. Goddard (2015) states that most linguists consider swearing to belong to the field of pragmatics rather than semantics. It can also be assumed that

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people who only imitate English swear words do not really understand the literal meanings of the swear words that they utter. An English movie has been chosen as the object of the study since English movies are a popular medium that helps to spread the use of English around the globe, including the use of English swear words.

Swear words can be described as the lexicon of offensive language (Jay, 2009) and are usually considered inappropriate and to be avoided by certain cultures (Wajnryb, 2005). Meanwhile, the action of uttering swear words is called swearing. To be specific, Jay (2000) describes swearing as “the utterance of emotionally powerful, offensive words or emotionally harmful expressions that are understood as insults” (p. 9). The connotative use of a swear word is what is considered offensive (Allan & Burridge, 2006). The words used in a swearing utterance function to express certain emotions. Those emotions may be negative emotions (e.g. anger, shock, frustration (Ljung, 2011)), positive emotions (e.g. joy, joke (Jay, 2000)), or as a response to pain (Stephens, Atkins, & Kingston, 2009).

To avoid using swear words and in order to be polite and less offensive, people often use euphemisms in their speaking. Euphemisms are described as words chosen to replace any word that is considered offensive or unpleasant for the listener (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008; Jay, 2009; Gao, 2013; Finn, 2017). A euphemism is usually used to lessen the inappropriateness of the reference, such as to sexuality, death, body products, and so forth. As an example, the phrase *make love* will be preferred to *fuck* in a conversation between mixed participants (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Euphemisms can also enable a speaker to talk about ideas that may have been avoided had a more offensive word been chosen (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011). Mohr (2013) states that “a euphemism is the opposite of swearing” (p. 197) as it hides the swear words which emphasize the feelings expressed. However, as the context of the swear words and their substitutions are still the same, using a euphemism is still considered to be swearing. Utilization of a euphemism is propositional swearing, which is done intentionally and in full awareness (Finn, 2017).

Although swear words are usually used connotatively, it is also possible that the literal meaning of a swear word is also offensive. For example, some English swear words contain body excretion or sexual intercourse meanings that are taboo in some cultures and should be avoided (Gao, 2013). This demonstrates that different standards of the offensiveness of a word may apply to different cultures. Besides body excretion and sexual intercourse, there are many other topics that are discussed using swear words. According to Napoli and Hoeksema (2009), religion, health, sex, and bodily excretion are four big topics for swear words. Ljung (2011) also provides some other themes for swear words, such as mothers, animals, death, prostitution, ethnic backgrounds, and levels of intelligence.

Another classification of the literal meanings of swear words is from Jay (2009), who distinguishes swear word referents into nine categories, namely sexual references, profanity or blasphemy, scatological and disgusting objects, animal names, ethnic-racial gender slurs, psychological-physical-social deviations, ancestral allusions, substandard vulgar terms, and offensive slang.

Sexual references are related to sexual acts (e.g. *fuck*), sexual anatomies (e.g. *cock*, *dick*, *cunt*), and sexual deviations (e.g. *motherfucker*, *cocksucker*). Profane and blasphemous swear words refer to religious terms (e.g. *Jesus Christ* or *damn*), while scatological and disgusting objects refer to faeces (e.g. *crap*), excretion organs (e.g. *asshole*), excretion processes (e.g. *shit*), and body products (e.g. *piss*). Swear words may also be in the form of animal names (e.g. *bitch*, *monkey*) and ethnic-racial-gender slurs (e.g. *nigger*, *fag*). Psychological-physical-social deviations are also often used as swear words (e.g. *moron*, *pox*, *whore*). Ancestral allusions are swear words which involve or relate with family relationships and ancestors (e.g. *son of a bitch*, *bastard*). Substandard vulgar terms are vulgar words of which the constructions are below the satisfactory standard of language (e.g. *on the rag*, *fartface*). Lastly, offensive slang refers to offensive substandard words that are invented to ease communication (e.g. *bang*, *suck*).

Method

This qualitative study employed document analysis as its method. The object of this study was *Bad Boys II*, a film that was released in 2003. *Bad Boys II* was chosen as this movie contains many swear words in its dialogue. The data gathering process included the listing of all the swear words uttered in the dialogue. To check whether the listed words were swear words, the words were compared to the list of swear words from *wiktionary.org*, *www.cs.cmu.edu*, *www.noswearing.com*, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing*, and *The Big Black Book of Very Dirty Words*. Since there were some swear words which were used more than once in the dialogue, only one of each word was taken to be analysed.

In analysing the data, the classification from Jay (2009) was used as the base of the classification. To determine the semantic referents of the swear words, some dictionaries and encyclopedias were used, namely *Merriam-Webster*, *Cambridge Dictionary*, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, *Oxford Dictionary of Slang*, and *An Encyclopedia of Swearing*. Some meanings of the swear words were also checked using *www.urbandictionary.com*.

Since *www.urbandictionary.com* is not a legitimate source to validate the meanings of the swear words, the researchers conducted several adjustments in consulting the meanings. Since it was possible to get some different meanings for a swear word from this website, the researchers chose the meaning with the suitable context for the utterance. Then, the meaning with the most “likes” was chosen with the assumption that it was the meaning which most people agreed on.

Findings and Discussion

After analyzing the dialogue of *Bad Boys II*, the researchers found that the characters of this movie uttered swear words 449 times. Those utterances consisted of 53 different swear words. The researcher categorized the referents of the swear words from *Bad Boys II* into nine categories based on Jay’s (2009) theory. The categories are sexual references, profanity or blasphemy, scatological and disgusting objects, animal names, ethnic-racial-gender slurs, psychological-

physical-social deviations, ancestral allusions, substandard vulgar terms, and offensive slang.

All of the nine categories of semantic referents of swear words were found in this movie. Profane and blasphemous referents was the category with the most words (12). The category with the least amount of words was ancestral allusion with only one swear word.

Sexual References

The researcher found six swear words containing sexual references in *Bad Boys II*. There were variations of the word *fuck* (*fuck, fucks, fucking, fucked, fucker*), *motherfucker*, *motherfucking*, *fucking mother*, *tit*, and *titties*, which were classified into sexual references. The variations of the word *fuck* were used 108 times in the movie, which made it the second-most used swear word after *shit*. This could indicate that the use of the word *fuck* is more flexible than the other five sexual-related swear words.

The swear word *motherfucker* was listed in this category not only because it contains the word *fuck*, but also because it is considered to be a deviant sexual act (Jay, 1992). Ljung (2011) considers this word to carry both sexual and mother themes, with the mother theme being more dominant. The word *motherfucking* is the adjective form of *motherfucker*. This can be seen from the functions of the word *motherfucking* in the dialogue, which were as adjectives of dislike and emphases in which the swear word preceded a noun. The phrase *fucking mother* has more or less the same meaning as *motherfucker*. The researcher considered that the speaker of this swear word intended to say *motherfucker* instead of *fucking mother* as this expression is quite rarely heard in movies. Besides, the speaker of this word was a Russian character whose first language was not English.

The words *tit* and *titties* have the denotation of a sexual organ. These words refer to a woman's breast. Although there were some other swear words denoting sexual organs found in the movie, only these two words that were put in this referent. The other words belong to the category of substandard vulgar terms.

Profane and Blasphemous

Profane and blasphemous swear words refer to religious terms or references (Hughes, 2006). There were 12 swear words of this referent in the movie. All of those served as profanity or without any intention to attack a certain religion or belief. This finding was similar with what Mahayana (2017) found, which is that blasphemy was not used in *Bad Boys II*. The swear words included in this category were *Christ, damn, devil, gee, God, goddamn, gosh, hell, jeez, Jesus, Jesus Christ, and Lord*. While *God, devil* and *hell* are general terms for some religions, the words *Christ, Jesus, Jesus Christ, and Lord* are more familiar to Christianity. The words *damn* and *goddamn* are related to condemning or provoking a divine power.

Euphemisms were used in the words *gee, jeez, and gosh*. *Gee* and *jeez* were substitutions for the use of the word *Jesus*, while *gosh* replaced the use of the word *God*. Such euphemisms might be used as the speaker avoided using the word *Jesus* and *God* in swearing for fear of them feeling inappropriate.

Scatological and Disgusting Objects

There were 6 swear words in *Bad Boys II* movie which referred to scatological and disgusting objects. Scatological and disgusting objects refer to excretion and bodily products (Jay, 2000). Excretion organs and other things that are considered to be disgusting by most people are also included in this referent. The words containing this referent were *ass*, *butthole*, *crap*, *piss*, *shit*, and *shithole*. The words *shit*, *bullshit*, and *crap* are excretion products. *Piss* is also an excretion product, but the movie used derivations of this word, which were *pissed* and *pissing*. These two words have the sense of an excretion process rather than the product.

The words *ass*, *butthole*, and *shithole* denote organs or body parts that are related to an excretion process. Jay (2009) actually uses the word *ass* as an example of animal names referent since *ass* can denote an animal as well. However, these days the use of the word *ass* in this context has been replaced by the word "donkey" (Hughes, 2006). The researcher put this word into the scatological referent category since it commonly denotes a human body part in its modern use. Besides, the word *ass* is the American version of the British word *arse*, which also denotes the same human body part. Even though *butthole* and *shithole* denote the same excretion organ, *shithole* also has another meaning. *Shithole* has developed into a slang word used to refer to an unpleasant place.

Shit was the most frequently employed swear word in this movie as it was uttered 114 times. The high frequency of this word in the dialogue may be explained by Ljung's (2011) statement that "*shit* is a very useful word used as an expletive interjection ..., and as an expletive epithet in utterances ..., and also in other expressions ... " (p. 38). This is also an indication that the word *shit* has flexible functions.

Animal Names

Some animal names were also used as swear words in the dialogue of *Bad Boys II*. There were five animal names which were used as swear words, they were *bitch*, *dog*, *jackal*, *pussy*, and *rat*. The word *bitch* means female dog, while *jackal* is an animal which looks like a dog and eats dead animals. *Pussy*, which is often used to refer to a woman's genitals, also refers to cats. Lastly, the word *rat* refers to a species of rodent. The animal name chosen for a swear word is usually influenced by the addressee's behavior (Allan & Burridge, 2006). An example is that the word *rat*, which is often considered to be a pest, was used to describe one of Johnny Tapias' men named Roberto, who often caused problems.

Ethnic-Racial-Gender Slurs

The researchers found five swear words containing this referent in *Bad Boys II*. However, none of them was a gender slur. Those words were ethnic and racial slurs, such as *black*, *gringo*, *negro*, *nigga*, and *nigger*. The words *black*, *negro*, *nigga*, and *nigger* share the same meaning of a group of people who have dark pigmentation. The word *nigger* is a modification of the term *negro*. Furthermore, the word *nigga* is a variation of the word *nigger*. Even though it was used several times to express anger in name-calling swearing, this word is less offensive than *nigger* as it is commonly used in communities of black people. This is supported by the fact that the word *nigga* was only used between black characters of the

movie. The word *nigga* is considered to be a sign of identity and solidarity among African-American people (Allan & Burridge, 2006). The word *black*, however, is occasionally considered to be an offensive word that is less insulting. Allan and Burridge (2006) suggest that the word *black* "... should probably be marked as orthophemistic ..." (p. 84), meaning it is usually considered to be straight talk rather than an offensive word. In this movie, this word became offensive because it was used in an unfriendly suggestion swearing, "*kiss my black ass.*" From these four words, the word *nigger* is considered to be the most offensive.

Meanwhile, the slur *gringo* is derived from a Spanish word. The offensiveness of the word *gringo* is still debatable. The researchers browsed through some forums on the Internet and found that some people claimed that this word is commonly used by its native speaker without any derogatory meaning. In the other hand, some who had experienced being called *gringo* felt insulted by this word.

Psychological-Physical-Social Deviation

There were six swear words in this referent in *Bad Boys II*. However, the researcher found examples of all three of the sub-categories within this referent. The swear words from the movie which belonged to this referent varied between *dumb*, *fool*, *freak*, *lunatic*, *maniac*, *punk*, and *stupid*. The words connoting psychological deviation are *dumb*, *fool*, *freak*, *lunatic*, *maniac*, and *stupid*. These words denote psychological states or levels of intelligence. The terms *dumb* and *freak* also have physical deviation meanings, *dumb* means unable to speak and *freak* means a person with strange physical attributes. Meanwhile, only *punk* belongs to the category of social deviation. *Punk* belongs to the social deviation referent as it denotes a certain culture or social group. Using its archaic meaning, *punk* is a word for prostitute.

Jay (1992) states that these referents are often employed as insults. He adds that they function "... to hurt the person directly through the particular word or phrase" (p. 8). In this movie, the researchers found that the use of these referents was not limited to direct insults. It was also used to describe a third party, which means it did not directly insult the person. Moreover, there were also some uses of this referent to describe something.

Ancestral Allusions

There was only one phrase that belonged to the ancestral allusion referent, *son of a bitch*, and it was only used three times in the movie. This phrase alludes to the relation between a male addressee and his mother. This is supported by Ljung (2011), who states that this phrase contains the "mother" theme, and Jay (1992), who argues that it is commonly directed to male addressees. Jay's argument was demonstrated by the finding that *son of a bitch* was only used between male characters in this movie.

Substandard Vulgar Terms

Wardhaugh (2006) states that substandard English sounds like poorly arranged utterances. Therefore, the swear words from *Bad Boys II* which were below the satisfactory standard of English were put in this category. Five substandard vulgar terms were found in the movie. The swear words with this referent were the suffix *-ass* (*big-ass*, *little-ass*, *freak-ass*, *kick-ass*, *dumb-ass*,

thick-ass, and *grown-ass*), *bullshit*, *cock diesel*, *dickhead*, and *shit-storm*. These words were considered substandard as their uses in the sentences could not be taken as grammatically correct. Moreover, these swear words contain vulgar terms, which ties up with Jay's (1992; 2000) explanation that vulgar terms are often related to sexual acts, body parts, products, and processes.

The suffix *-ass* was used in the movie by compounding it with the preceding words. This suffix functioned as an intensifier or to create a new meaning (as in *kick-ass*). *Bullshit* and *shit-storm*, which carry the same vulgar term *shit*, have different meanings. *Bullshit* means something nonsensical, and *shit-storm* means a big problem. Meanwhile, *cock diesel* and *dickhead* contain sexual organ terms in their constructions, yet they do not contain the same meaning. The phrase *cock diesel* is for a very muscular or stout person. On the other hand, *dickhead* means a stupid or contemptible person.

Offensive Slang

Out of all of the swear words in *Bad Boys II*, seven of them were offensive slang. The swear words belonging to this referent were *ball*, *bang*, *bimbo*, *gangbanger*, *hump*, *screw*, and *scumbag*. Corroborating Jay (1992)'s statement that slang as a new vocabulary is developed to ease communication, slang was used as a new label or a new name for something that already existed. These slang words found in the movie were used as new labels for something, such as the word *balls* to refer to a man's genital parts. The words *bang*, *hump*, and *screw* are other terms relating to sexual intercourse. *Screw* can also mean "to make a mistake" or "to make a mess of something." Slang is also used to refer to a person with certain attributes, such as the word *bimbo* for an attractive but stupid woman, *gangbanger* for a member of street gang, and *scumbag* for an unpleasant person. In its other use, *scumbag* also means a contraceptive.

Conclusion

From this research, it was found that *Bad Boys II* employed 53 different swear words in its dialogue. It was also found that all the nine semantic referents of swear words from Jay (2009) were referred by those swear words. The profane and blasphemous referent was the referent with the most words (12 words) and ancestral allusion was the least referred with only one word. The swear words used in this movie also varied in terms of their offensiveness. Not only were the offensive words used in the dialogue, but some less offensive words in the form of euphemisms were also found. The research results show that *Bad Boys II* contains a wide variety of swear words, both in the expansiveness of its vocabulary and in the offensiveness of the words themselves.

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