

Original Research

## Swear words in the Dayak Ngaju community

*Kata-kata kasar yang digunakan dalam komunitas Dayak Ngaju*

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### Abstract

Recognizing that language serves as a powerful reflection of culture intricately woven into societal norms and expressions, this research aims to analyze swear words used in the Dayak Ngaju community. The primary focus is on compiling a list of these words and investigating their linguistic and cultural references. Employing a qualitative approach and the descriptive method, data were collected through direct observations of individuals residing along the Kahayan River. Direct-question interviews were conducted, and recordings were made to document the data. Six villages were selected for direct observations, and nine residents along the Kahayan River, representing various occupations and age groups, were interviewed. The data analysis followed the three steps outlined by Miles and Huberman: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. The primary theoretical framework relies on Wardhaugh's categorization of swear words, complemented by Hughes's supporting theory. The findings reveal twenty-two commonly used swear words in the Dayak Ngaju community, categorized into mother-in-law (puki indum), animal (metu, asu, bakei, sabajai), sex (puki indum, latak, bawak, selak, kirang), death, religious matter, and oath (liau, kambe, setan, raung, saki raung, pandak umur, matei badaha, matei munu), bodily function (paleng param), and mental illness (paleng param, mameh, humung, bureng, paleng). Addressing the limitations of this research, including a diverse sample, longitudinal data, and comparative analyses with other communities, is crucial for robust and culturally contextualized research on swear words.

### Keywords

Swear words, Dayak Ngaju community, linguistic, cultural references

### Intisari

Menyadari bahwa bahasa berfungsi sebagai refleksi kuat dari budaya yang teranyam secara rumit dalam norma-norma sosial dan ekspresi, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kata-kata kasar yang digunakan dalam komunitas Dayak Ngaju. Fokus utamanya adalah menyusun daftar kata-kata ini dan menyelidiki referensi linguistik dan budaya yang terkandung di dalamnya. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif dan metode deskriptif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi langsung terhadap individu yang tinggal di sepanjang sungai Kahayan. Wawancara langsung dengan pertanyaan terbuka dilaksanakan, dan rekaman dibuat untuk mendokumentasikan data. Observasi langsung dilakukan di enam desa, dengan sembilan warga yang tinggal di sepanjang sungai Kahayan, mewakili berbagai pekerjaan dan kelompok usia, dijadikan informan wawancara. Proses analisis data mengikuti tiga tahap yang diuraikan oleh Miles dan Huberman: reduksi data, tampilan data, dan penarikan kesimpulan atau verifikasi. Kerangka teoritis utama penelitian ini merujuk pada klasifikasi kata-kata kasar oleh Wardhaugh, dengan dukungan teori dari Hughes. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan keberadaan dua puluh dua kata kasar yang umum digunakan dalam komunitas Dayak Ngaju, yang dikategorikan menjadi kata-kata kasar terkait ibu mertua (puki indum), hewan (metu, asu, bakei, sabajai), seks (puki indum, latak, bawak, selak, kirang), kematian, urusan agama, dan sumpah (liau, kambe, setan, raung, saki raung, pandak umur, matei badaha, matei munu), fungsi tubuh (paleng param), dan gangguan mental (paleng param, mameh, humung, bureng, paleng). Menanggapi keterbatasan penelitian ini, termasuk sampel yang lebih beragam, pengumpulan data longitudinal, dan analisis perbandingan dengan komunitas lain, sangat penting untuk penelitian yang kokoh dan kontekstual mengenai kata-kata kasar.

### Kata kunci

Kata-kata kasar, masyarakat Dayak Ngaju, referensi kebahasaan dan budaya

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Dayak Ngaju (hereafter called DN) community, located in the Central Kalimantan province of Indonesia, boasts a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Language, as a fundamental aspect of this culture, not only serves as a tool for communication but also functions as a sociocultural resource. In the context of the DN community, the DN language takes center stage as the primary medium of communication, intricately woven into daily interactions, cultural rituals, storytelling, and various other practices.

Language holds a profound significance in any culture, and the DN community is no exception. As elucidated by Halliday (1978), language transcends mere communication to become a dynamic vehicle for expressing identity and preserving traditions within the community. This research delves into the intricate layers of the DN language, focusing not only on its conventional functions but also on the unconventional and often taboo aspects represented by swear words.

Daily communication within the DN community relies heavily on the DN language, recognized as a versatile tool for conveying thoughts, emotions, and ideas. Halliday (1978) underscores the multifunctionality of language, emphasizing its pivotal role in both interpersonal and ideational communication. Within this linguistic landscape, swear words emerge as an integral component of the community's linguistic repertoire, serving a nuanced role in the expression of emotions. As noted by Jay (2009), swear words are powerful vehicles for conveying intense emotions such as frustration, anger, or surprise, while Hughes (2006) adds that they can also function as linguistic markers, emphasizing points or infusing humor into discourse.

The informal use of swear words within the DN community, typically reserved for interactions among close friends or special occasions, aligns with the broader field of sociolinguistics that investigates taboo language. Crystal (1997) and Hughes (2006) highlight the general taboo nature of swear words across societies due to their potential to be offensive or disrespectful. However, delving into the study of swear words in the DN community offers a unique lens through which to gain valuable insights into their social dynamics, cultural practices, and linguistic diversity.

The primary objective of this research extends beyond the compilation of a list of swear words. While this compilation is a central aspect, the broader aim is to unravel the linguistic and cultural references embedded within these words. By exploring the nuances of swear words in the DN community, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between language, culture, and social dynamics within this distinctive cultural context. Through this exploration, the goal is to shed light on the less-explored dimensions of the DN language, unraveling layers of expression that contribute to the rich tapestry of this cultural heritage.

Additionally, the study of swear words within the DN community offers a unique opportunity to examine how

these words reflect broader societal attitudes and values. Swear words, often laden with cultural significance, can reveal underlying tensions, societal norms, and the ways in which individuals navigate complex social landscapes. This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that not only documents these words but also contextualizes them within the broader framework of DN cultural practices and social interactions.

Furthermore, the exploration of swear words in the DN language can serve as a window into understanding how language evolves within a specific cultural context. It highlights the adaptability and resilience of the DN language in the face of external influences and internal changes. By focusing on this often-overlooked aspect of language, this research underscores the importance of studying all facets of linguistic expression to gain a holistic understanding of a community's cultural identity and social fabric.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive method, as the primary data consists of swear words in the DN language. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), qualitative research is inherently descriptive, collecting data in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. Ary (2002) similarly asserts that descriptive qualitative research gathers data through understanding and meaning derived from verbal narratives and observations instead of numerical analysis.

The data collection process involved direct observations of individuals living along the Kahayan River to examine the use of swear words in their daily lives. Direct-question interviews were conducted with informants, and recordings were made to document all the supplied data. Direct observations took place in six villages, and nine residents along the Kahayan River, who met the research's eligibility criteria, were selected as interview informants. These criteria included being native speakers of the DN language and representing diverse occupations such as students, merchants, farmers, and civil government officials. The informants were also chosen from three different age groups: three under 20, three between 20 and 40, and three over 40, ensuring a comprehensive representation of the community.

The data analysis followed the method outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. Data reduction involves filtering and simplifying the collected data, data display organizes the data for easier interpretation, and conclusion drawing or verification involves identifying patterns and drawing meaningful insights from the data.

Given the objectives of this research—to compile a list of swear words in the DN language and investigate their references—the primary theoretical framework used is Wardhaugh's (2006) classification of swear words. Wardhaugh categorizes swear words into seven types:

mother-in-law, animal, sex, death, excretion, bodily function, and religious matter. Additionally, this research incorporates Hughes's (2006) supporting theory, which expands on different types of swear words associated with sex, excrement, animal names, personal background, mental illness, sexual activities, taboos, religion or oaths, and racism. This dual-theoretical approach provides a robust framework for analyzing the collected data and understanding the cultural and linguistic nuances of swear words within the DN community.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings and discussion on the swear words used in the DN community. According to Wardhaugh's (2006) theory, there are seven different categories of swear words: mother-in-law, animal, sex, death, excretion, bodily function, and religious matter. Furthermore, Hughes (2006) lists the various categories of swear words connected to sex, excrement, name of animal, personal background, mental illness, sex activities, taboo, religion or oath, and racism. In this research, they describe the data found. This research only focuses on compiling swear words utilized in the DN community and examining their cultural and linguistic references. There are twenty-two swear words that are commonly used in the DN community, namely *mameh*, *humung*, *bureng*, *paleng*, *liau*, *pan-dak umur*, *matei badaha*, *raung*, *saki raung*, *matei munu*, *kambe*, *setan*, *puki indum*, *latak*, *bawak*, *kirang*, *selak*, *paleng param*, *metu*, *asu*, *bakei*, and *sabajai*. Here is a discussion of the data analysis.

#### 3.1 Swear Words Associated with Mother-in-Law and Sex

The explicit terms such as "*puki indum*," which denotes the mother's vagina, and expressions like "*latak*," "*bawak*," and "*selak*," referring to the penis, along with "*kirang*," associated with semen, within the DN swear words underscore the intimate nature of these terms related to human sexuality. These terms, by their very nature, evoke strong imagery and emotions tied to sexual anatomy and functions, making them potent expressions within the DN language.

The categorization of these words as swear words is deeply rooted in societal norms and cultural taboos surrounding discussions about sex. In many cultures, including the DN community, conversations about sexual anatomy are considered private, sensitive, or inappropriate for public discourse. This cultural context significantly influences why these terms are deemed offensive or inappropriate when used in everyday language. They break the unwritten rules of decorum that govern what is considered acceptable to discuss openly, especially in mixed company or formal settings.

Using these terms as swear words reflects a cultural stance on maintaining a level of decorum and respect regarding intimate subjects. In the DN community, like in

many other societies, there are clear boundaries about what can be said in public versus private spheres. Swear words related to sex and anatomy often cross these boundaries, violating social expectations about propriety and respect. The use of such explicit language in inappropriate contexts can be seen as a deliberate act of transgression, a way to shock, insult, or emphasize a point with emotional intensity.

Furthermore, the explicit and direct nature of these words contributes to their classification as swear words. They are not euphemisms or softened terms; they are blunt and vivid, leaving little to the imagination. This directness can be jarring and confrontational, touching upon personal boundaries and societal expectations regarding the appropriateness of language. The discomfort or offense these words can cause is a significant factor in their power as swear words.

In essence, the explicit sexual terms within the DN swear words highlight the intersection of language, culture, and societal norms. They reveal how language can both reflect and challenge the values and taboos of a community. By studying these terms, we gain insight into the cultural fabric of the DN community, understanding better how they navigate issues of sexuality, propriety, and expression through language.

#### 3.2 Swear Words Associated with Animal and Name of Animal

Swear words such as "*metu*" (animal), "*asu*" (dog), "*bakei*" (monkey), and "*sabajai*" (like a crocodile), serve various expressive functions within the DN community, including the expression of disdain, frustration, or humor. These terms, which refer to animals, are considered swear words because the community often associates animals with negative qualities such as being disgusting, scary, or mindless. The use of these animal-related terms as swear words is deeply tied to cultural norms and societal expectations, where explicit language directed at individuals is seen as a strong indicator of disapproval.

In the DN community, calling someone an animal name like "*metu*" or "*bakei*" is not merely a descriptive statement but a significant cultural act. It invokes the undesirable traits associated with these animals. For instance, "*asu*" (dog) might be used to imply that someone is behaving in a despicable or untrustworthy manner, while "*bakei*" (monkey) might suggest foolish or erratic behavior. Similarly, "*sabajai*" (like a crocodile) could be used to highlight someone being sneaky or dangerous. These animal comparisons draw on the community's shared understanding and perceptions of these creatures, leveraging cultural symbolism to communicate strong negative judgments.

The classification of these terms as swear words is intertwined with societal norms that dictate what is considered acceptable language, especially in interpersonal interactions. Using such explicit language signals a breach of the expected decorum and conveys strong emotions such as anger, contempt, or derision. By linking certain human behaviors or characteristics to negatively perceived animals,

these swear words function as potent linguistic tools that convey disapproval with considerable emotional impact.

The collective recognition of these linguistic boundaries and cultural associations with animals contributes to the labeling of these terms as swear words. This shared cultural knowledge ensures that when such terms are used, they are understood within the context of community values and social expectations. The fact that these words can elicit strong reactions underscores their power within the DN language and culture.

The use of animal-related swear words reflects broader societal attitudes toward both language and behavior. It demonstrates how language can be used to enforce social norms, by penalizing behaviors deemed unacceptable through verbal reprimand. This practice also highlights the community's values, illustrating the traits and behaviors that are most disapproved of, as well as the communal mechanisms for addressing social transgressions.

In summary, the use of animal-related swear words in the DN language is a vivid example of how language reflects cultural values and societal norms. These words, laden with cultural significance, serve as tools for expressing strong emotions and enforcing social expectations, thereby playing a crucial role in the community's linguistic and social fabric.

### 3.3 Swear Words Associated with Death and Religious Matter

The swear words of the DN language, particularly "*liau*," "*kambe*," "*setan*," "*raung*," and "*saki saung*," provide a distinctive window into the religious and cultural fabric of the DN people. These terms, deeply embedded in the DN language, are not just casual expressions but carry significant cultural and spiritual connotations.

"*Liau*" and "*kambe*," both meaning "*ghost*," and "*setan*," meaning "*evil spirit*," are terms that invoke the supernatural realm, reflecting the DN community's beliefs and fears surrounding the spirit world. The frequent use of these words as swear words underscores the cultural impact and emotional weight these supernatural entities hold within the community. The invocation of ghosts and evil spirits in derogatory contexts illustrates how deeply ingrained these beliefs are, and how they are used to express strong negative emotions such as fear, anger, or disgust.

"*Raung*," which is connected to a "*coffin*" in the Hindu Kaharingan religion, the traditional spiritual belief system of the Dayak ethnic group, is another example of a culturally loaded term. The use of "*raung*" as a swear word brings to the forefront the community's views on death and the afterlife. The Hindu Kaharingan religion has elaborate death rituals, and the coffin is a significant symbol within these practices. Therefore, using this term in everyday language as a form of insult or expression of frustration highlights the deep-seated cultural associations with death and the afterlife.

The term "*saki raung*" specifically refers to the ritualistic act of smearing blood on the coffin, an integral part of the

death rituals within the Hindu Kaharingan tradition. This practice is a profound and sacred act, meant to honor the deceased and ensure their safe passage to the afterlife. The use of "*saki raung*" as a swear word taps into the cultural and emotional intensity of these rituals. It is not merely a reference to a physical act but encapsulates a broader cultural significance and respect for the deceased, making its use in swearing particularly potent and taboo.

These terms, related to death and the spirit world, encapsulate a profound intersection of linguistic expression and cultural understanding. The discomfort elicited by these words is rooted in the cultural sensitivity surrounding discussions of death, spirits, and the supernatural. In many cultures, including the DN community, such topics are considered deeply personal and sacred, not to be trivialized or disrespected through casual or angry speech.

The use of these terms as swear words illustrates how language reflects the values and beliefs of a culture. By examining these words, we gain insight into what the DN community holds as sacred, the fears and respect surrounding death and the supernatural, and how these elements are interwoven into their daily communication. This linguistic practice also highlights the community's boundaries regarding what is considered respectful or disrespectful, showcasing the power of language to reinforce cultural norms and values.

The swear words "*liau*," "*kambe*," "*setan*," "*raung*," and "*saki raung*" offer a unique glimpse into the religious and cultural essence of the DN people. They reveal the deep connections between language, spirituality, and cultural practices, and how these elements shape the way the DN community expresses strong emotions and navigates social interactions.

### 3.4 Swear Words Associated with Death and Oath

The swear words in the DN language, such as "*pandak umur*," "*matei badaha*," and "*matei munu*," carry explicit and vivid meanings, transforming them into powerful cursing expressions with deep cultural resonance.

"*Pandak umur*" suggests a brief life, invoking fears of mortality. This phrase, which literally translates to "short life," carries with it the dread of an untimely death, a universal fear that resonates deeply within the human psyche. In the DN community, using "*pandak umur*" as a curse is particularly potent because it directly threatens one's lifespan, highlighting the fragility and unpredictability of life. This expression taps into the collective anxiety about death, making it a powerful linguistic tool for conveying intense emotions.

"*Matei badaha*" translates to a death characterized by bloodshed, vividly portraying the tragic and violent circumstances surrounding such a demise. The term evokes strong imagery of a brutal and bloody end, which is particularly horrifying and evocative. In the context of the DN language, where such explicit descriptions are used as swear words, "*matei badaha*" serves as a stark reminder of the violent aspects of human existence. This term's use in

swearing not only conveys anger or disdain but also evokes a sense of tragedy and horror, making it a deeply impactful expression.

The term "*matei munu*," which refers to death by spearing, is strongly associated with particular historical or cultural events within the DN society. Stabbing or spearing has historically been a customary method to vanquish adversaries in this cultural setting. The use of "*matei munu*" as a swear word therefore carries historical weight and cultural significance. It conjures images of conflict and warfare, drawing on the community's collective memory of past struggles and battles. This term is not just a curse but a reference to a specific and violent method of killing, adding an extra layer of intensity and historical context to its usage.

The discomfort elicited by these words arises not only from their explicit connotations but also from their ability to touch upon deep-seated fears and cultural sensitivities. These swear words go beyond mere vulgarity; they invoke profound and often unsettling aspects of human experience, such as mortality, violence, and historical trauma. Their power lies in their capacity to evoke strong emotional reactions and to articulate feelings that might otherwise be difficult to express. As a form of linguistic expression, these swear words become a vehicle for the DN community to convey intense emotions. They serve as outlets for frustration, anger, or fear, allowing individuals to articulate their deepest anxieties and resentments in a culturally resonant way. Additionally, by using these culturally specific terms, individuals can assert their cultural identity and connect with their heritage, even in moments of intense emotional expression.

In summary, the swear words "*pandak umur*," "*matei badaha*," and "*matei munu*" are powerful expressions that reflect the community's cultural and historical context. They are not only vivid and explicit but also deeply meaningful, resonating with the community's collective fears and experiences. Through these swear words, the DN people can convey complex emotions and maintain a connection to their cultural identity, illustrating the profound role that language plays in expressing and shaping human experience.

### 3.5 Swear Words Associated with Mental Illness

The DN community residing along the Kahayan River employs a set of swear words such as "*mameh*," "*humung*," "*bureng*," and "*paleng*," all of which convey the notion of "stupid." These words are categorized as derogatory adjectives that specifically target intellectual capacity, reflecting cultural attitudes towards intelligence and wisdom.

In the DN language, these words are not just casual insults but carry significant weight as expressions of disapproval or frustration. When someone is labeled as "*mameh*" or "*humung*," for instance, it signifies more than just a critique of their behavior; it conveys disappointment in their perceived lack of intelligence or wisdom. These terms function as potent tools for communicating criticism,

highlighting shortcomings in a way that is culturally resonant and impactful.

The classification of these words as swear words is deeply rooted in cultural values and norms within the DN community. Intelligence and wisdom are highly esteemed qualities, revered for their role in guiding decisions and actions. Thus, when individuals use words like "*bureng*" or "*paleng*" to criticize someone's intellectual capacity, it reflects a broader cultural emphasis on the importance of cognitive abilities and sound judgment.

Moreover, these swear words serve as markers of cultural identity and communal expectations. They reinforce the community's collective standards for behavior and achievement, emphasizing the value placed on intellect and rational thinking. By using these terms, individuals uphold and transmit these cultural norms, ensuring that respect for intellectual prowess remains integral to social interactions and interpersonal dynamics.

The cultural significance of these swear words extends beyond mere linguistic expression. They embody a complex interplay of societal values, personal expectations, and communal identity. Labeling someone as "*mameh*" or "*humung*" is not just about criticizing their actions; it reflects a profound respect for the virtues of intelligence and the societal implications of intellectual capacity within the DN community.

In summary, the use of swear words underscores the community's attitudes towards intelligence and wisdom. These words are more than insults; they are cultural markers that communicate deep-seated values and expectations regarding intellectual capacity. By understanding their usage and cultural context, we gain insight into how language reflects and shapes societal norms, reinforcing the importance of intellect and wisdom within the DN cultural framework.

### 3.6 Swear Words Associated with Bodily Function and Mental Illness

The use of words like "*paleng param*" within the DN community provides insight into their tendency to employ explicit language when expressing disapproval or frustration towards individuals perceived as behaving foolishly. This phrase, composed of "*paleng*" which denotes stupidity, and "*param*" referring to the human butt, is categorized as a swear word within their cultural context.

The designation of "*paleng param*" as a swear word is deeply rooted in cultural norms and societal expectations regarding the appropriateness of language. In DN culture, where discussions about bodily functions are often considered private or inappropriate for polite conversation, associating foolish behavior with a term related to the human butt makes "*paleng param*" explicit and unsuitable for more formal settings.

Swear words like "*paleng param*" serve as potent linguistic tools to convey strong disapproval or frustration. By using explicit language that directly links foolish actions with a bodily function, individuals emphasize the severity

of their criticism and heighten the emotional impact of their words. This explicitness is intended to grab attention and underline the seriousness of the perceived wrongdoing, making it clear that the behavior in question is not only foolish but also socially unacceptable.

The categorization of "*paleng param*" and similar terms as swear words underscores the DN community's shared understanding of linguistic boundaries and social norms. It reflects their awareness of the potential impact of using such language in specific contexts, signaling strong expressions of disdain or criticism. In DN society, where respect and decorum are valued, the use of explicit language like "*paleng param*" is reserved for situations where strong emotions need to be conveyed or when addressing behavior that deviates significantly from accepted norms.

In summary, the use of swear words like "*paleng param*" within the DN language reveals a deliberate choice to employ explicit language for expressing disapproval or frustration. These terms not only convey strong emotions but also reflect cultural attitudes towards language use and social norms, highlighting the DN community's nuanced approach to communication and the expression of criticism.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

There are several conclusions that can be drawn in light of the previous discussion of swear words among the DN community. Firstly, there are twenty-two swear words that are commonly used in the DN community. Secondly, the DN community employs the five categories of swear words proposed by Wardhaugh (2006) and Hughes (2006). There is one swear word with a mother-in-law reference (*puki indum*). Four swear words are related to animal and name of animal (*metu, asu, bakei, sabajai*), five swear words have to do with sex (*puki indum, latak, bawak, selak, kirang*), eight swear words are connected to death, religious matter, and oath (*liau, kambe, setan, raung, saki raung, pandak umur, matei badaha, matei munu*), one swear word is related to bodily function and mental illness (*paleng param*), and four swear words are associated with mental illnesses (*mameh, humung, bureng, paleng*). Meanwhile, the DN

community did not contain any swear words pertaining to excretion, personal background, sex activities, or racism.

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