

# Swear Words Used by Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* Movie

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*This study analysed the swear words that were used by the main character Jordan Belfort in The Wolf of Wall Street movie. Data, consisting of 322 occurrences of swear words, were collected from the movie. The data source was the transcripts of The Wolf of Wall Street movie and discourse analysis was applied in this study to identify the language use in the movie. The data were analysed based on Pinker's (2007) typology. Results showed that Jordan Belfort used five types of swear words, namely descriptive (twelve times; 3.7 per cent), idiomatic (19 times; 5.9 per cent), cathartic (26 times; 8.1 per cent), abusive (29 times; 9 per cent) and emphatic swearing (236 times; 73.3 per cent).*

**Keywords:** *main character, discourse analysis, language use, swear word, The Wolf of Wall Street*

## 1. Introduction

Swearing is a form of language which is often used by people in daily conversation. People swear in various contexts (see Culpeper, 1996 & Beers Fägersten, 2007), and when they are in a conflict, for instance, they will more likely use linguistic expressions which are often referred to as bad language because some people think that it is taboo (Karjalainen, 2002, p. 6; see also Stone, McMillan, & Hazelton, 2015; Van Lancker & Cummings, 2016; Andang & Bram, 2018; Kristiano & Ardi, 2018). Ljung (2007) notes that although swear words are associated with crime, rawness, and lack of raising and poor education (p. 35), they have become regular in people's speech. Nevertheless, in some countries, for instance, in Indonesia, using swear words is highly prohibited because they are considered as taboo – or at least impolite.

In his monologue entitled *Class Clown*, Carlin (1972) states that there are seven words categorized as swear words. The seven words are banned on television because they are considered aggressive words and they may hurt other people's feelings. The words are *shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, and tits*. Since the monologue contains so many swear words, there appeared numerous complaints about it. Thus, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), an agency to regulate communication in all 50 states, included in the District of Columbia and U.S. territories, responded to the complaints by declaring that the monologue is considered as indecent.

In the education world, swearing is also restricted. Pyle (2001, p. 616) explains that different contexts may give different rights when speaking in public school. However, Stenström, Gisle and Hasund (2002, p. 203) argue that the use of swear words is a way to establish group identity. Rayson, Leech, and Hodges (1997, p. 10) add that swear and taboo words are linguistic devices to establish boundaries between all members in a group and it is to affirm social norms for language use.

By exploring *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie scripts as the object of the study, the current researchers attempted to identify various aspects related to the use of swear and taboo words. The main reason for choosing the movie was the characters of the movie used many swear words when communicating with one another. In other words, the movie scripts were a rich

source of data containing swear words. Furthermore, the second reason for choosing the movie was that it was popular as it became the Oscar nominee for five categories in 2014 and won the Golden Globe for the best performance by an actor in a motion picture in 2014. However, the current researchers only focused on the swear words used by Jordan Belfort, the main character of the movie. The main character was chosen because this movie is a first-person perspective movie, so the main character has the biggest role in the movie. Moreover, Jordan Belfort used swear words in most of his daily conversations, even in formal ones. The fact that this character uses swear words in any situation does not mean that other characters do, or even tolerate that; the same is true of any real life situation as well (see De Klerk, 1991, 1992 & Beers Fägersten, 2012).

Based on the research background above, the research question was formulated as below: What types of swear words are used by Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie? The objective of this research was to identify and analyse the types of swear words used by Jordan Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie. Besides, this study aimed to help students to understand that there are some different types of swear words so that they can become wiser in using swear words and preventing misunderstandings in formal and informal contexts of conversations.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Swear words and taboo words*

Swear words are considered taboo, and therefore, it is important to know the concept of taboo itself. Freud (2004: 3) defines taboo in the context of ancient Aboriginal Australian, and explains that Aboriginal Australians profess totemism as their system of tribal life. Totems can be a form of animals, plants, and some natural phenomena which are believed as their “guardian spirit” protecting them from danger by its oracle. The totem symbolises a power to prevent incest among the totemic clans.

Hughes (2006: 462) says that taboo in present context transforms into some prohibitions and restrictions varying in all societies. It means that taboo in particular places will be different from other places. Hughes (2006: 463) adds that taboo is only strictly prohibited in printed words and broadcasting but observed less frequently in the conversations among men. Thus, it can be concluded that taboo is a prohibition based on people’s belief and culture in a particular place.

Taboo words are part of language and they are a product of society. Lehtonen (2000: 10) explains that language can be an important factor to identify a group, group solidarity, and it can be the signal of difference. Language is not only a medium to communicate with each other, but also it is an inseparable part of being humans (see also Jay & Janschewitz, 2008). Nevertheless, Karjalainen (2002: 18) states that although swear words are taboo, not all taboo words are swear words. Ljung (2011: 4) further elaborates that taboo and swear words are two different cases, and proposes the following four criteria of swear words:

1. Swearing is the use of utterances containing taboo words.
2. The taboo words are used with non-literal meaning.

3. Many utterances that constitute swearing are subject to serve lexical, phrasal, and syntactic constraints which suggest that most swearing qualifies as formulaic language.
4. Swearing is emotive language: its main function is to reflect, or seem to reflect, the speakers' feeling or attitude (Ljung 2011: 4).

Based on Ljung's (2011) explanations above, it is clear that swear words can be used as metaphors to refer to anything else which may not be taboo. For example, the word *fuck*, which refers to "having sex with someone", but in the utterance "it is fucking brilliant!", the word *fuck* can be the medium or tool to emphasise something. Based on the fourth point, Ljung (2011: 4) states that swear words can be used as a tool to show the emotion or feeling of the speaker, especially their feeling about what they are talking about. As a symbol of emotion, swear words can be expletive interjections (to show anger, disappointment, and joy), emphasisers (to emphasise the meaning of the words that the speakers want to convey), and expletive slot-fillers.

## 2.2 Types of swear words

According to Pinker (2007: 219), there are five different ways which people can choose to express or use swear words, namely descriptively, idiomatically, abusively, emphatically, and cathartically.

### a. Descriptive

Descriptive swearing is the use of swear words to convey their literal meaning. Giora (1997: 185) says literal meaning is the meaning of the word or sentence which is computed from the lexical meaning automatically associated with any entries before any extra interferences based on contextual assumptions have been derived. For instance, in the phrase or expression *oh shit*, the word *shit* refers to 'excrement'.

### b. Idiomatic

Idiomatic swearing is the use of swear words as idioms, where idioms refer to expressions in the form of phrases which have a different meaning if they are translated as individual words. Therefore, an idiom cannot be separated or translated word by word, because it will have a different meaning. For instance, in the utterance *I am fucked up*, where *fucked up* means that the speaker is drunk. Nevertheless, the idiom *fucked up* cannot be separated as two words (*fucked* and *up*), because the separation may result in a different meaning from what the speaker intends to convey originally, namely *drunk* or *intoxicated*.

### c. Abusive

People use swear words in order to offend or abuse other people. Mostly, this kind of expression is used to express the speakers' emotion, especially anger. The example of this type of swear word is the use of *fuck you!* by the speaker when talking to the addressee.

### d. Emphatic

The role of this type of expression is to give a stronger emotion from the speaker. For instance, "your idea is *fucking* brilliant!" In this case, the speaker appreciates the idea, not having a negative thought or intention even though the speaker uses a swear word.

#### e. Cathartic

Pinker (2007: 223) argues that swear words are used to spontaneously express the emotional burst of the speaker in response to something that happens to him/her. People tend to swear when they are surprised or shocked. In this case, the speaker does not address their swearing to others. For instance, a person can swear by stating *oh, fuck!* to express a sudden pain or frustration (Pinker, 2007: 226).

### 3. Research method

This study was qualitative research. Onwuegbuzi and Weinbaum (2017: 364) say that qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of human participants in the study. Qualitative research provides detailed, in-depth, and complete information about the object being studied. This research focused on the use of language in a movie or linguistic study of a movie, and it was then categorized as discourse analysis. Stubbs (1983: 1) states that in discourse analysis, researchers investigate the use of language, and it is related with the interrelationship between language and society. The current research used the transcripts of the conversations in *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie as data. The researchers also watched the movie in order to know the expressions of Jordan Belfort when using swear words. The acting and the transcripts helped the researchers to feel the emotion of the actors and actresses, and it can help to analyse the types of swear words in the movie transcripts.

In order to collect the data, the current researchers took several steps. The first one was listing the swear words from the transcripts retrieved from <https://subscene.com/subtitles/the-wolf-of-wall-street/english/1247746>. Then, the researchers checked the utterances which contain swear words to identify their functions and meanings. From the utterances, the researchers classified the swear words based on the context. The researchers used Pinker's (2007) typology, namely descriptive, idiomatic, abusive, emphatic and cathartic in order to classify the swear words used in the movie.

To analyse the collected data, the researchers used Pinker's (2007) typology, which consists of descriptive, idiomatic, abusive, emphatic and cathartic categories. The analysis aimed to identify the categories of swear words uttered by the main character, namely Jordan Belfort. Then, the researchers made a list of swear words based on their categories.

### 4. Findings and discussion

The results showed that there were 322 occurrences of swear words used by Jordan Belfort, as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Types of swear words used by Jordan Belfort

No.	Types of swearing	Occurrence	Percentage (%)
1	Descriptive swearing (D)	12	3.7 %
2	Idiomatic swearing (I)	19	5.9 %
3	Cathartic swearing (C)	26	8.1 %
4	Abusive swearing (A)	29	9 %
5	Emphatic swearing (E)	236	73.3 %
Total		322	100 %

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that the type of swear word that was mostly used by Jordan Belfort, as the main character in *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie, was emphatic swearing (E), namely the use of swear words to convey a stronger emotion, followed by abusive swearing (A). In the third position was cathartic swearing (C). Then, idiomatic (I) and descriptive (D) swearing were used less than 10%. The results showed that Jordan Belfort – when communicating with people around him – used mostly emphatic swearing to express his feelings or stronger emotions.

The main character of *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie likes to use swearing expressions in his daily conversations as can be seen from the frequency of his swearing speeches. The current researchers might not contend that a social status limits the use of swearing expressions in this movie since almost all the characters are of the same social status. Nonetheless, the researchers only focused on the analysis of the main character. Furthermore, swearing expressions can be used by and directed to people from both the same and different social statuses.

Swearing expressions can also be expressed among people from different social statuses in their communication. For instance, people with higher social status can even swear to people from lower social status or vice versa. The following is the discussion on the types of swear words used by Jordan Belfort.

#### a. Descriptive swearing

The first type of swearing found in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is descriptive. Giora (1997) states that descriptive swearing is the use of swear words to convey its literal meaning (as cited in Pinker, 2007, p. 219). The conversation below exemplifies this type of swearing.

- (1) Flight attendant: *May I see your boarding passes, sir?*  
 Jordan: *We have the boarding passes. Jesus Christ, I want to **fuck** her.*  
 (01:38:54 – 01:38:59)

Contextually, the word *fuck* itself has various functions and meanings. For example, when used in a phrase, the word *fuck* can also function to emphasize a point, as in *Ron is annoying as fuck*. Based on that example, the phrase *as fuck* conveys that Ron is enormously annoying since the *as fuck* phrase was inserted in the sentence.

The dialogue from *The Wolf of Wall Street* above shows that Jordan had the desire to make love with the flight attendant since he was under the influence of drugs he had taken

before. Jordan was intoxicated. Subsequently he was unable to think clearly, and as a result, he used those words when talking to the stewardess.

- (2) Donnie: *I hate that fucking dog.*  
Jordan: *Yeah, he is getting old and decrepit. Starting to **shit** in the house again.*  
(02:32:12 – 02:32:17)

The dialogue above happened when Donnie came to Jordan's house. He saw Jordan's pet and tried to play with him. Subsequently, Donnie did not like the dog as he might have his preferences for an animal. The word *shit*, which was used by Jordan, belonged to descriptive swearing as it implied the actual meaning since Jordan wanted to convey that his dog no longer can defecate properly in its cage as it got older.

#### *b. Idiomatic swearing*

The second type of swear words that can be seen in the movie script was idiomatic. Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003) contend that idioms are the expressions with fixed phrases, consisting of more than one word, which cannot be concluded from the meanings of the individual words. Consequently, they cannot be separated word by word since they will have a different meaning. The following dialogue illustrates the exertion of this type of swearing in the movie.

- (3) Naomi: *And you are still acting like an infant!*  
Jordan: ***Goddamn it!***  
(01:13:15 – 01:13:18)

In this dialogue, it can be seen that Jordan used the word *goddamn it* as an expression of his anger since Naomi kept bursting the water into his face while asking him several questions related to Venice, a name which Jordan mentioned during his sleep. Jordan tried to recall his memory of Venice because he went home in the early morning and took several drugs. As a result, he did not remember about Venice and Naomi provoked his reaction and made him become angry and swear. The word *goddamn* itself belongs to idiomatic swearing since it will have a different meaning if it is detached word by word.

- (4) Jordan: *We liked to get as **fucked up** as possible during our business powers in order to stimulate our free-flowing ideas, which is why we were popping these ludes like they were M&M's.*  
(00:51:17 – 00:51:21)

The monologue above took place when Jordan told his team that tried to maintain their good work by consuming alcohol and drugs which would provide them with more ideas. The word *fucked up* in this monologue is classified as idiomatic swearing since it cannot be separated word by word.

#### *c. Cathartic swearing*

Pinker (2007) explains that cathartic swearing is the use of swear words to express the speakers' emotional burst in response to something that happens to him or her (p. 215). It means

that it does not require addressees when the speakers are swearing. This type of swearing can be seen in the following dialogue.

- (5) Robbie: *The brother, you put a skateboard on him, you strap him to a skateboard, you toss him down an alley at some pins.*  
Jordan: *No, **shit**. That is interesting.*  
(00:44:53 – 00:44:59)

Based on the conversation above, it can be seen that Robbie elaborated the plan which they were going to execute towards their competitor. He mentioned that he would tie Stratton to the skateboard. After paying attention to Robbie's explanation, Jordan automatically stated, 'No, shit. That is interesting'. In that sentence, the word *shit* did not have any certain meaning since there was no coherence to the following sentence. It is exemplified in order to express his stunned reaction to Robbie's plan.

- (6) Donnie: *Actually, I got you a little present.*  
Jordan: *You got me a present?*  
Donnie: *I got you something.*  
Jordan: *Oh, **fuck**. You are sweet.*  
(00:26:04 – 00:26:08)

In the dialogue above, Donnie gave a little gift to Jordan because their company ran well. As a response to Donnie, Jordan said *oh, fuck. You are sweet*. In that sentence, the word *fuck* was used in order to illustrate that Jordan was surprised since Donnie gave him a present. The word *fuck* belonged to cathartic swearing because it was used in order to express Jordan's feeling in response to Donnie.

#### *d. Abusive swearing*

Abusive swearing is the use of swearing in order to offend or abuse other people. This type of swearing is used to express the speakers' feeling, and it is directed to the addressees.

- (7) Naomi: *Kiss you?*  
Jordan: *Yeah, give me one... **Fuck** you!*  
(01:14:57 – 01:15:01)

Abusive swearing was employed in the dialogue above. Jordan pronounced the words *fuck you* in order to swear at his wife. In the story, Jordan was angry at Naomi because she threw the water right into his face all over again. Naomi showed her anger since Jordan mentioned a name, Venice during his sleep. Jordan used the swear word to express his anger, and he thought that it might insult his wife since the word chosen was offensive.

- (8) Chester: *Captain who?*  
Jordan: *Captain Ahab. From the fucking... The book, **motherfucker**. From the book.*  
(00:32:34 – 00:32:42)

The dialogue above happened when Jordan tried to highlight the method in order to get clients for their company. He had the insight from *Moby Dick*, a classic American book.

Unfortunately, his colleagues were unfamiliar with the book which in contrary to what Jordan imagined before. He thought that they would understand it since the book was widely known as the American masterpiece. Jordan stated the word *motherfucker* because he was angry since none of his colleagues knew *Moby Dick*. The word *motherfucker* itself belonged to abusive swearing as the chosen word was unpleasant.

*e. Emphatic swearing*

The fifth type of swearing that is portrayed in the *Wolf of Wall Street* is emphatic. This type of swearing is to give a stronger emotion from the speaker. It is employed to emphasise the meaning delivered to the addressee. The following conversation is the example of this type of swearing.

- (9) Donnie: *Your turn.*  
Jordan: *I am not **fucking** doing this. You are out of your **fucking** mind.*  
Donnie: *Smoke this shit, bro.*  
Jordan: *No.*  
(00:26:21 – 00:26:25)

In the dialogue above, Donnie persuaded Jordan to smoke marijuana since he knew that Jordan was stressful. In order to release the stress, Donnie offered Jordan to smoke the weed with him. However, Jordan was trying to refuse the offer as he knew the effect of smoking it. Although weed was legal in several states of America, people who consumed weed still have to hide from the authority. Subsequently, Jordan contemplated that fact and tried to decline the offer by using the word *fucking* in order to emphasise that he did not want to smoke that. The word *fuck* is often associated with a negative meaning. As a result, people often use this word to express their feeling especially when they are not in a good mood.

- (10) Denham: *I'm wearing the suit three days in a row... Yeah, you bet I do. I have thought about it before. Who would not, right?*  
Jordan: *Right, who **fucking** would not?*  
(01:33:00 – 01:33:05)

The conversation above took place when Jordan found out that FBI agent Denham wanted to have a broker's license as he dreamed of having a better life. Consequently, he ended up being a federal agent for the bureau and had not achieved his goal of being a broker in Wall Street. Jordan mentioned the word *fucking* while he gave his response to Denham as he wanted to highlight that no one had ever thought of being a broker in Wall Street.

## 5. Conclusion

Results showed that Jordan Belfort, the main character in *The Wolf of Wall Street* movie, used five types of swearing, namely descriptive swearing, idiomatic swearing, cathartic swearing, abusive swearing, and emphatic swearing. The least frequent swearing was descriptive, occurring 12 times (3.7 per cent) and the most frequent one was emphatic, appearing 236 times (73.3 per cent). In other words, based on the analysis, descriptive swearing, namely using swear words to convey literal meanings, was the least productive, and emphatic swearing, that is



using swear words to express stronger emotions and emphasise the meanings conveyed to addressees, appeared the most productive.

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