

# The Characteristics of Swearing in Mandarin and its Implied Femininity

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## Abstract

The word "damn" and the swearing it represents have become an integral part of the spoken language in everyday life. However, what accounts for the "popularity" of such a sparse vocabulary that it is used by almost everyone? Such a short variety and length of swear words, can there be any regularity in them? As a group of words, the answer is yes. Such a small group of words have the existence of different syntax rules, and even can reflect the social phenomenon and gender differences. This paper, based on mandarin, attempts to conclude the characteristics of swearing especially analyzes the implied femininity they carry. The research of swearing not only can project a nation's culture and trend, but also can reveal the particularity of grammar use, which has a great importance on the linguistic and cultural study.

## Keywords

Swearing; Daily Communication; Implied Femininity; Mandarin.

## 1. Introduction

Swearing certainly has become a part in people's daily communication, but unfortunately, the research of taboo language is apparently less than the those of buzz words and accents. Because swearing is mainly be seen as rudeness and respectfulness, people are not very motivated to study it. There are currently known authoritative books on the study of swear words: *Swearing: A Cross Culture Linguistic Study* written by Magnus Ljung and published on 2011 pointed out 4 characteristics of swearing: 1. Contain the word "shit" and "fuck. 2. Does not indicate or indicate actual action. 3. Generally follow the grammar rules. 4. Strong emotion, has the use of expressing temporary emotion [1]. Also, In Benjamin. K. Bergen's famous book *What the F*, he points out that there are wide differences in the type, usage and frequency of expletives in more than 7,000 languages around the world [2]. Huang Zhan, the writer of *BuWenJi*, describes the everyday swear words used in Hong Kong and Guangdong, and explains some of the ruder Xiehouyu in Mandarin [3]. However, most of the published research is about English swearing while almost none has been done in Chinese. In accordance with what Benjamin once said, "swear words in every language are different", theories and rules in English swear words are applied, as well as interviews with people who use Mandarin in daily life, to explain and analyze the characteristics of swear words in mandarin, and to expose Chinese tradition and popular culture.

## 2. The Characteristics of Swearing in Mandarin

Based on the interviews with 50 people from 80s, 90s, 00s, the main 12 swearing in Mandarin being used are roughly the following:

**Table 1.** The main 12 swearing in mandarin and their literal translation

Mandarin	Wo Cao	Ma De	TaMa De	Wo Cao/Cao/Diao	Cao Ni Ma	Wo Ri/Ri	Ni Ma Si Le	Cao Dan	Ma Dan	Diao Si	Sha Bi
English (Translated literally)	I lean	Mom's	His mom's	Fuck	Fuck your mom	fuck	Your mom dies	Fuck eggs	Mother eggs	Dick silk	Silly pussy

As shown in table1, divide them into four categories: emotional (literally meaningless), abusive, sexual behavior, and body parts, as follows:

**Table 2.** The four categories of most frequently used 12 swearing

	emotional (literally meaningless)	abusive	Sexual behavior	Body parts
Mandarin	1. Wo Cao 2. Ma Dan	1. Ma De 2. Ta Ma De 3. Ni Ma Si Le	1. Wo Cao/Cao 2. Cao Ni Ma 3. Wo Ri/Ri 4. Cao Dan	1. Diao Si 2. Sha Bi
English (Translated literally)	1. I lean 2. Mother eggs	1. Mom's 2. His mom's 3. Your mom dies	1. Fuck 2. Fuck your mom 3. Fuck 4. Fuck eggs	1. Dick silk 2. Silly pussy

According to the table 2, it is apparently that there are not many kinds of normal mandarin s swearing. According to the book *Swearing is good word for you* by Emma Byrne, swearing contain 11 categories: gods, age discrimination, disability discrimination, animals, excreta, sexual behavior, body parts, religion discrimination, sex discrimination, sexual orientation discrimination, and race discrimination [4]. Specifically, there is no discrimination against God or religion in swearing in mandarin, because the Chinese basically have no faith. There is no swearing about age discrimination, not because the Chinese do not discriminate against people whose age is too different from their own, but the degree of discrimination is not to the extent of using dirty words. For example, "Xiao Pi Hai(little fart child)" and "Zao Lao Tou(bad old man)" are words that contain age discrimination, but they are not particularly insulting and their usage is not very high. The reasons for swearing about disability discrimination are the same as above. "Ni Xia Le Ma(Are you blind)" is phrase that is not enough to be counted in swear words. There are several "animals" and "excreta" in mandarin, but these words appear more in ancient film and television works, and people don't use them much now. As for gender discrimination, although it exists in some rural areas of China, it is deeply rooted in older people's hearts and thus loses its insulting nature. Therefore, there is no such swearing. Regarding sexual orientation discrimination and racial discrimination, it can only be said that at present, heterosexuals account for the vast majority in China, and they are all yellow people, so these two kinds of discrimination and relative swear words hardly exist in China. On the contrary, there are two new types of Mandarin that are not mentioned in the above seven categories: emotional (literally meaningless) and abusive. Emotional swear words are meaningless words whether they are separated or combined. Abusive swear words, from the chart, contain information, such as "Ta Ma De(his mom's)". Yet, when people say it out, the indignant tone makes it insult or even cursing, which is considered as swearing.

From the data in the interviews, there are three characteristics about mandarin swear words: do not indicate actual actions; may follow the general grammar; emotional, but also informational.

## 2.1. Do not Indicate Actual Actions

The first characteristic which is “do not indicate actual actions” gained 82% interviewees’ agreement. Classified the above 11 normal mandarin swearing in part-of-speech, the verb swearing hold a big part of 40%. To some extent, aggressive verbs such as sexual verbs strengthen the insult and harmfulness of swear words. Xu Lei, a 38-year-old male math teacher and Tiffany Qiu, a 16-year-old female high school student, expressed the same view in this regard. In Mandarin swearing, many verbs are sexual verbs. “Take the swearing ‘Cao(fuck)’ for example. ‘Cao(fuck)’ is a dominant and aggressive action in sexual behavior, which is consistent with the general negative emotion of swearing to a certain extent. However, people will only use it as a word, not carry out the sexual behavior. The reason people say these words is to express their feelings. The focus is not on the verb itself.” Xu Lei said. On the premise of keeping consistent with Xu Lei’s point of view, Qiu added that “in the process of sexual intercourse, the male side is more dominant because of the structure of reproductive organs, so everyone is used to saying ‘Cao(fuck)’ rather than ‘Bei Cao(be fucked)’. It is precisely because aggression conforms to the emotional characteristics of swearing itself. Therefore, people’s focus is no longer on those sexual intercourse actions, and naturally they will not implement those actions.”

## 2.2. May Follow the General Grammar

As this paper mentioned in the introduction, Magnus Ljung once suggested that one of the characteristics of English swearing is “may follow the grammar”. Same, normal mandarin swearing may follow the general grammar. Here is a chart of the combination of separated mandarin words and their grammatical compliance.

**Table 3.** The grammatical compliance of combination swearing of separated mandarin words

Combination	Wo..... (I...)	Sha..... (Silly...)	.....Ni Ma (...your mom)	Ma..... (Mom...) n	TaMa..... (His mom...) n
Cao(fuck) v	WoCao (I fuck)	No such saying	Cao Ni Ma (Fuck your mom)	No such saying	No such saying
Ri(fuck) v	Wo Ri (I fuck)	No such saying	RiNi Ma (Fuck your mom)	No such saying	No such saying
Bi(pussy) n	No such saying	Sha Bi (Silly pussy)	No such saying	Ma Bi (Mom pussy) (Not commonly used) (Ungrammatical)	Ta Ma Bi (His mom’s pussy) (Not commonly used)
Diao(dick) n/v	No such saying	Sha Diao (Silly dick) (Not commonly used)	Diao Ni Ma (Fuck your mom) (Not commonly used)	No such saying	No such saying
Dan(eggs) n	No such saying	Sha Dan (Silly eggs) (Not commonly used)	No such saying	Ma Dan (Mom eggs) (Ungrammatical)	No such saying
Kao(lean) v	Wo Cao (I lean) (Ungrammatical)	No such saying	No such saying	No such saying	No such saying
Di(‘s)	Not swear words	No swear words	No such saying	Ma De (Mom’s)	Ta Ma De (His mom’s)

As the table shown, there are 11 among of 14 (78.57%) follow the grammar. In mandarin, the grammar of a simple sentence is subject-verb-object, subject-verb, or verb-object. There is also the rule such as adjectives modify nouns, and adverbs modify verbs as well as adjectives. From the chart, those 10 swear words follow the rule of subject-verb, verb-object, and adjective-noun. However, there must be a possessive case "Di" between two nouns which equals to the "'s" in English. From the chart, the phrase "Ma Bi(Mom pussy)", and "Ma Dan(Mom eggs)" are in accordance with the situation of adding a noun directly after a noun, thus they don't follow the grammar. For the last ungrammatical word "Wo Cao(I lean)", though it follow the sequence of subject-verb, the verb "Kao(lean)" should be used transitively. Since there is not any object after this verb, the phrase is ungrammatical.

Although there exists ungrammatical phrase in swearing, the grammatical words account for 78.57%. therefore, the mandarin swearing may follow the grammar.

### 2.3. Emotional, But Also Informational

The third characteristic of mandarin swearing is "emotional, but also informational". From the data of interview, 31 of 50 (62%) agreed that swear words contain information and emotion, 19 of 50 (38%) agreed that swearing only contain emotion. Ling Yun, a 22-year-old female university student, provided a perfect example. If the professor suddenly says that the whole class is going to hand in a 5000-word paper tomorrow, some of the students then say "WoCao(I fuck)". Therefore, when expressing his / her excitement, this "WoCao(I fuck)" also contains the information that he / she doesn't want to write an article or is dissatisfied with the professor. A 14-year-old male junior high school student who was unwilling to disclose his name also provided a similar example. When checking the results of the middle school entrance examination, some students may say "Wo Cao(I lean)" after the scores are displayed on the web page. This sentence not only expresses his excitement, but also conveys to others the information that his / her test results are very good or very bad. Therefore, the mandarin swearing is not only emotional but also informational.

## 3. Mandarin Swearing's Implied Femininity

"You have used such a long time of swearing which has even become an indispensable part of your daily language. Do you realize that most of the objects in dirty words are female?"

"Seems not" "maybe not" "not until now" ...

From the data of 50 interviews, 43 of them (86%) don't realize the feminized object, 2 of them (4%) have realized but didn't pay attention, and 5 of them (10%) have realized but haven't expand yet.

Among the 12 common swearing mentioned above, there are eight swearing words with human appellation, of which five are women, and the "I" of the remaining three are the perpetrators of sexual action in sexual action swearing words, which cannot be called the object in swearing. Therefore, the objects of the 12 common swearing's objects are all female.

### 3.1. Why Implied Femininity

Many male interviewers expressed the same opinion: as a vulnerable group, women have a low status in history and society. In ancient China, women were not allowed to read or study. They could only learn housework, weaving and the "three obediences and four virtues", which, according to Keith Knapp, refers to give obediences to her father, husband, and sons, and give virtues to ethics, speech, visage in the marriage as well as keep her virgin before the marriage, in order to be a perfect wife in the future at home [5]. Women were forced to entangle their feet enough to meet the aesthetics at that time. The deformed foot bones made them unable to hike and thus had to stay at home. The polygamy in ancient China and the fact that women can be sent to their husbands' homes as dowries all determine women's low status. Even in modern

times, female discrimination has not been eliminated. Chinese distrust female taxi drivers much more than male drivers; girls are often not expected to learn computer or mathematics. Compared with men, women are treated unfairly in many aspects, which seems to have become a stereotype and implanted into people's values. Therefore, the main object of swearing is female, which is naturally recognized by people and does not feel contrary.

The answer given by women is basically another: the physiological structure of men's sexual organs determines the object of swearing. Because of their sexual organs, men have always maintained an aggressive and active role in sexual behavior. Therefore, people regard the sexual behavior of "fuck" that only men can do as an invasive and dominant action, which is also in line with the emotional characteristics of swearing: intense and aggressive, so it is very natural and reasonable that the object of sexual swearing is women. After all, only men can really implement this action, which subconsciously increases the directivity of the subject of dirty words. Therefore, the object of swearing (especially in sexual swearing) is female.

There are other words insulting women in China: "Lv Cha (green tea: describing girls' high ability to seduce boys)", "Jian Ren/Biao Zi (bitch)". However, there are few words insulting men. The data in the questionnaire show that the word insulting men is "Niang Pao (woman cannon)", which describes a man who is very girly and not strong, and "Xiao Bai Nian (little white face)", which describes a man who is excessively useless that can only depend on his girlfriend's money to live. However, those words also imply a derogatory attitude towards women: "Niang Pao (woman cannon)" regards girlishness as an insult to men and an abnormal behavior, "Xiao Bai Nian (little white face)" regards women's domination of the family economy as unreasonable. On the contrary, if a girl is evaluated as "boyish", it means that she is lively, cheerful and informal, which is a positive evaluation. As for economic dominance, nowadays people generally believe that men should work to earn money and women should be full-time housewives. Although These have invisibly reduced the status of women.

#### 4. Summary

Although predecessors have made relatively comprehensive research on swearing, there is still very little research on mandarin swearing. Based on the interview data of 50 people of different ages, mandarin swearing has three characteristics: do not indicate actual actions; may follow the general grammar; emotional, but also informational. Overall, it is not difficult to find that the objects in Mandarin swearing are women. For this phenomenon, the answer of male interviewers is generally because women's low social status in history has led them to become the object of swearing. The answer of female interviewers mainly is that the actions of male reproductive organs in sexual behavior are more in line with the characteristics of strong offensive swearing. At the same time, there are more swearing simply insulting women than men. All the above shows that China is still a patriarchal society after thousands of years of history. To sum up, although swearing is an oral expression with few word groups, it is not only the embodiment of a country's culture and history but also can let people study and understand the country's grammar and linguistics. The study of swearing will also become an important part in Linguistics in the future.

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