

The Sociolinguistics Studies on the Taboo Language Uses among Mobile Legends Game Players

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Abstract: The use of taboo language is a distinctive feature of the game Mobile Legends. This study aimed to find out the types of taboo language use among Mobile Legends game players and its role in communication. This research applied Batistella's theory (2005) to identify the types of taboo language. The research used a descriptive qualitative method, and the main object of this study was the language use among Mobile Legends game players. The result showed that there are 4 types of taboo language, namely epithet, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. The most widely used taboo language type is epithet, with 263 pronunciations of 12 words, and the least used taboo language types of obscenity, with 1 word with 9 pronunciations. The taboo language use was found to draw attention to oneself, to show contempt, to be provocative, and to mock authority. Taboo language for society is language that is considered negative, but taboo language among players can be interpreted as something acceptable; even though it is considered normal, it offers almost no educational value for children.

Keywords: Mobile Legends, Sociolinguistics, Taboo Language.

INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language is used by people in social life. This field does not see language merely as a set of grammatical rules or vocabulary, but also as a tool of communication influenced by societal conditions (Holmes, 2013). In other words, people do not always use the same language in every situation because the way they speak changes depending on who they are talking to, where the conversation takes place, the purpose of communication, and the speaker's social background. Taboo language is inseparable from sociolinguistics because it is a phenomenon of language use influenced by norms, culture, and social context. In every society, there are unwritten rules regarding which words are considered appropriate or inappropriate to say (Wardhaugh, 2011). A word may be considered ordinary in one community but taboo in another. This demonstrates that the taboo nature of a word does not stem from the word itself but rather from the social and cultural values attached to it.

Taboo language is often used by people to express emotions such as anger or sadness, as it is considered the most effective way to communicate their feelings, especially through swearing. Taboos refer to behaviours, words, or topics that are considered inappropriate, impolite, or improper in a particular culture or society. These expressions can vary across cultures, with what is considered taboo in one society not considered taboo in another



(Suryani, 2019). Taboo words, which are often associated with bad language, can have a strong impact on others, especially when used to convey negative emotions, sometimes causing shock or surprise. Taboos reflect cultural and social norms that prohibit certain actions or expressions, which are seen as a violation of moral values (Sari, 2020). Although most societies restrict the use of taboo language, certain professions, such as comedy and the arts, sometimes embrace it, with taboo words becoming part of humour or song lyrics, often used to express emotions (Kumala & Marchella, 2023).

However, taboo language today is a symbol of familiarity; the closer or more familiar a person is, the more often the taboo language is used. In the context of the digital age, taboo language has also found its way into various forms of media, including online games like Mobile Legends Bang Bang (Rani, Hasibuan, & Barus, 2018), a popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game developed by Moonton. In MLBB, players use taboo language as a means of communication, which has sparked interest in understanding how such language impacts the gaming community. This has prompted researchers to investigate the types of taboo language used in the game, recognizing that while taboo language can have negative consequences, it also serves as a form of expression in communication.

Pradnyana (2022) examined taboo language as a form of racial discrimination in Spike Lee's *Blackkkklansman*. The study focuses on identifying the types and meanings of taboo language used in the film, specifically in the context of racial discrimination. Through textual analysis, the research identifies four types of taboo language-epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity-used to discriminate against racial groups. In other study, Treanikita, Malini, and Laksmi (2018) analyzed taboo language in the movie *Neighbors 2*. Using observation and documentation, the research identifies five types of taboo words: morality, respect, appropriateness, religion, and fear, with the most common being morality and respect (with euphemism).

Based on Jay's theory (1992), seven types of taboo words were found, including cursing, profanity, and vulgarity. The use of these words was influenced by factors like emotion, confusion, dirty jokes, humiliation, and surprise, often expressing anger, sadness, humor, and insults. Still on arts, Panigoro and Budiawaty (2023) discussed the taboo words in the *Daisy Jones & The Six* novel. The study reveals that the use of taboo words in the novel reflects the social context and values of the time period in which the novel is set, especially during a time when rock music symbolized societal change and movement. The research contributed to our understanding of the interaction between language and culture, showing how taboo words function as linguistic markers that reflect societal norms and values.

Houssaini (2019) studied the sociolinguistic approach to taboo words in Moroccan

society. A survey involving 200 adult respondents from various backgrounds explored their attitudes toward taboo words and euphemisms. The findings reveal that words related to sex, body parts, and excrement are considered taboo, with men using them more frequently than women. Euphemisms are commonly used to replace these words to sound more polite. The study provides valuable insight into the social and cultural dynamics of taboo Language in Morocco, contributing to a broader discussion on language and society.

Meanwhile, Nursyafeizah and Budasi (2024) In their study “Taboo in Buginese Language Spoken in Tanjung Karang Village”, identified 45 taboo words in the Buginese language used in Tanjung Karang village. The words were categorized into 5 words related to harmony with God, 35 with humans, and 5 with the environment. Using a descriptive qualitative method with in-depth interviews and purposive sampling, the study found 22 taboo names and 23 oath-related words, emphasizing the importance of understanding taboo words as part of Buginese cultural identity.

Sutarsih (2024) in a study “Cases of Women’s Hate Speech Due to the Use of Taboo Language on Social Media”, analyzed women’s use of taboo language on social media categorized as hate speech, examines the legal violations and norms involved, and promotes awareness of responsible speech. Using forensic linguistics and Lakoff’s critique of gender stereotypes, the research reviews 108 Supreme Court rulings on women’s hate speech cases from 2018 to 2021. The findings reveal that women’s use of taboo language often falls under hate speech, including insults and defamation based on ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA), highlighting their involvement in hate speech incidents.

Rahmayanti and Moetia (2024) in the study “An Analysis of Taboo Language in Harry Potter Movie by J.K. Rowling” examined the types and frequency of taboo language in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2. Using categorization of taboo language into profanity, sexual language, religions taboo, and societal taboos, the research employs qualitative methods with a descriptive approach. Through repeated viewing, transcription, and thematic analysis, the study identifies nine taboo words and analyses their frequency and context. The findings show that taboo language is used to convey character emotion, such as anger and dissatisfaction, and to enhance character depth and realism in the theory.

The study discussed above focuses on taboo language in various contexts, such as film, literature, and social interaction, with a particular emphasis on racial and gender dynamics. Studies on Mobile Legends gamers shift the focus to the online gaming environment, where taboo language is used primarily as an emotional outlet during gameplay, reflecting frustration, criticism, and team dynamics. Unlike research centred on media or societal contexts, Mobile Legends research examines real-time interaction-driven communication

and the impact of taboo language on in-game relationships. This research highlights how language is used to express emotion, such as anger or disappointment, which affects teamwork and performance. Also, what types of taboo language are studied by Mobile Legends game players, and to what extent the taboo language is used. This research utilises Battistella's (2005) theory to clarify the types of taboo language and Wardhaugh's (2006) theory of the role of taboo language in communication. In light of this issue, the following two questions arise:

- 1) What types of taboo language are used by Mobile Legends game players?
- 2) What is the role of taboo language in communication?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to identify and describe the types of taboo language and their communicative roles among Mobile Legends players. A qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to explore linguistic phenomena within their natural social context and to provide detailed descriptions of participants' language use.

As stated by Creswell & Poth, (2018), qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of an interpretive or theoretical framework to examine social phenomena and understand the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to a particular social or human issue. Therefore, this study focused on describing and interpreting the use of taboo language rather than developing or testing a new theory. The data used in this study consisted of both primary and secondary data. The primary data were obtained directly from the utterances of Mobile Legends players through observations and semi-structured interviews. Meanwhile, the secondary data were collected from relevant books, scholarly journals, previous studies, and other credible academic sources related to sociolinguistics and taboo language.

The research was conducted at Warkop 51, located on Perintis Kemerdekaan KM 13, Tamalanrea District, Makassar City, South Sulawesi. The participants were Mobile Legends players who regularly gathered and played at this location. According to Sugiyono (2016), a population is a generalized area consisting of objects or subjects possessing particular characteristics determined by the researcher for study. The participants were selected using random sampling to ensure equal opportunities for participation. The sample consisted of six participants divided into two age groups: three players aged 15–22 years and three players aged 23–35 years. In qualitative research, the researcher served as the primary research instrument, supported by observation checklists, interview guidelines,

and documentation. Before the data collection process, the researcher obtained permission from all participants. The data were then collected through direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of naturally occurring conversations during gameplay.

The collected data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis process involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To identify the types of taboo language, the study employed Battistella's (2005) classification. Furthermore, the communicative roles of taboo language were interpreted using Wardhaugh's (2006) sociolinguistic perspective, emphasizing how taboo expressions are employed within particular social contexts. Finally, the findings were compared with previous studies to identify similarities, differences, and the broader sociolinguistic implications of taboo language use among Mobile Legends players.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

Types of Taboo Language

This section will show the types of taboo language found in Mobile Legends matches. To get the types of taboo language, researchers conducted checklist observations of five players, with the aim of getting what types of taboo language are contained in the match. From the results of the checklist observation, researchers got 4 types of taboo language, which include;

1. Epithet

Epithets are a form of taboo words used as inflammatory language. Epithets are terms used to stigmatize other individual based on their race, ethnicity, appearance, gender or disability. Epithet can arise because the person who says the word is based on frustration or anger towards something.

Table 1. Epithet words

Taboo language	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	total
Tolol/tolo (stupid)	7	11	8	10	3	39
Dompala (stupid)	6	8				14
Buta/bunrang (blind)	5	10	7	9	10	41
Bodok		5				5
Goblok	2	1	5			8
Dark system	11	5	10	7	8	41
Indomaret	4	4	2	1	3	14
Noob	7	6	8	3	5	29
Jawa			5			5
Bajingan	2	1	3	1	4	11
Bangsar	4	2	3	4	1	14
Sundala	9	11	8	10	5	42
Total						263

Source: Data processing result, 2025

Based on the data collection matches conducted by five players, the types of taboo language categorised as epithet are 12 taboo languages, of which there are 263 instances. Language such as *indomaret* (14 times) describes a jungler who loses quickly in using retribution when taking buffs, turtles, and lords. *Tolo/Tolol* (39 times), *Dompala* (14 times), *Bodok* (5 times), and others, which in Makassar culture is considered something despicable, namely bitch

2. Profanity

Profanity can be classified as words related to religion because it usually involves the misuse of something considered sacred. The speaker's aim is not to denigrate God or any particular spirituality but is based on ignorance or indifference to these things.

Table 2. Profanity words

Taboo language	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	total
Anasundala (illegitimate)	6	7	4	9	5	28
Ana'dajjal		5		2		7
Suntili (illegitimate child)	5	8	3	6	5	17
Total						52

Source: Data processing result, 2025

The types of taboo language that can be categorised as profanity are three taboo languages, namely 52 times. The terms *Ana Sundala* (28 Times) and *Suntili* (17 times) have abusive and insulting meanings, referring to illegitimate children or children out of wedlock, which in Makassar culture are considered something despicable or undesirable. The use of these terms in the game creates a very strong tone of humiliation, attacking the dignity of other players through birth status. Meanwhile, *Ana'dajjal* (7 times) refers to a particular religion that is portrayed as evil, infidel, and the bearer of slander.

3. Vulgarly

Vulgarity refers to words or expressions that contain the sexual and excretory life system function unpleasantly way (Batistella 2005: 72). It is used to humiliate or bring down the individual or group being referred to or explained simply by mentioning a body part that should not be mentioned.

Table 3. Vulgarly words

Taboo language	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	total
Kontrol	10	4	4	7	6	31
Puki		3	6	2		11
Telaso/laso	4	2		9	3	18
Total						60

Source: Data processing result, 2025

Based on the data collection in the match conducted by five players, this types of taboo language is categorised as vulgarity. There are as many as three taboo words, with a total of 60 recorded instances of their use. Words such as *Kontrol* (31 times), *Puki* (11 times), and

Tailaso/Laso (18 times) are words that refer to male and female genitals. Which are considered impolite or taboo in society.

4. Obscenity

According to Battistella (2005), obscene words are defined as words or expressions involving gender discrimination, anatomy or sexual function, and excretion, which are usually spoken harshly. Schüssler (2013) stated that obscenity is within the parameters of sexual repression; as long as sexuality is taboo, it can be understood that any action containing sexual characteristics fits within the parameters of taboo.

Table 3. Obscenity words

Taboo language	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	total
Ngentot	3	4			2	9
Total						9

Source: Data processing result, 2025

Based on observation of five Mobile Legends players, the obscene used found words of *Ngentot*. It was used 9 times by five players. Obscenity or obscene language refers to highly abusive or profane words that are usually associated with sexual activity or things that are considered inappropriate and offensive in a general context.

Perspectives of taboo language uses

In this section, the role of taboo language is based on the views of the players. From interviews with five players, the role of using taboo language in communication is as follows;

1. To draw attention to oneself

Taboo language was employed to attract the attention of listeners and emphasize the speaker's message. As Player 4 said, "I think using profanity is effective because it lets me vent my emotions when my teammates don't play up to my expectations. I usually say 'Hey, *tolo* (you idiots), help me out!' to get my teammates to come help, or I'll say 'Fix your game, *sundala* (you jerks)' when they're playing poorly."

The use of taboo expressions often carries strong emotional connotations that create a sense of immediacy and intensity, making the utterance more noticeable than ordinary language. Consequently, speakers may intentionally use taboo words to capture their audience's attention and ensure that their intended message is recognized and responded to.

2. To Show Contempt

Taboo language also served to express contempt toward another individual. In this context, contempt refers to an attitude of disrespect or the perception that a person is inferior, insignificant, or unworthy of consideration. Speakers employ taboo expressions to insult,

belittle, or demean their interlocutors, thereby conveying negative evaluations and reinforcing social or interpersonal distance, “For me, taboo language is very effective for expressing dissatisfaction with teammates, especially when they make bad decisions—like choosing to fight when we’re behind in *gold*—which ultimately increases the score and leads to a loss” (Player 2). Or, as Player 3 put it, “I often use taboo language, especially when I end up with a *bot* team or a ‘*dark system*.’ I most often use taboo language when we’re losing, and in some situations, I hurl insults at teammates who are playing poorly—like when they die more often than they kill enemies.”

3. To be Provocative

Another communicative role of taboo language is to provoke emotional reactions from others. Speakers may deliberately use taboo expressions to offend, challenge, or anger their interlocutors, particularly in situations involving disagreement, confrontation, or conflict such as describe from Player 1; “To rile up the team, I often use words like ‘tolol (idiot)’ or ‘goblok (moron)’ when my teammates play poorly, in the hope that it will motivate them to step up their game.” Through the use of emotionally charged language, taboo expressions serve as an effective communicative strategy for intensifying interactions and eliciting immediate responses from listeners.

4. To Mock Authority

Taboo language may also be used to criticize, ridicule, or challenge individuals or institutions that hold positions of authority. Speakers often employ taboo expressions to communicate dissatisfaction, frustration, or disapproval when they perceive the actions or decisions of authority figures as unjust, ineffective, or disappointing. Player 5 described this in an interview: “I usually taunt the game’s authorities with phrases like ‘Moonton *tai* (shit)’ or ‘Moonton *laso sundala* (bitch),’ out of frustration at being given a weak team. The consequence is usually just a period of silence to let emotions cool down, rather than a fight. And I find it hard to cut back on using taboo language because it’s a way to vent my emotions and frustration.” In this sense, taboo language functions as a form of symbolic resistance, enabling speakers to express criticism and contest existing power relations through emotionally forceful language.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that taboo language plays a significant communicative role within interactions among Mobile Legends players. Rather than functioning merely as offensive or inappropriate expressions, taboo language serves as a linguistic resource through which players communicate emotional responses and negotiate interpersonal

relationships during gameplay. Based on Battistella's (2005) classification, the data reveal four types of taboo language: Epithets, Profanity, Vulgarity, and Obscenity. Epithets generally target personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, appearance, or individual identity, whereas profanity involves expressions related to religious or culturally sacred concepts. Vulgarity refers to coarse references to sexual anatomy and bodily functions, while obscenity encompasses explicit expressions associated with sexual activities.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the occurrence of taboo language cannot be separated from the social context in which communication takes place. During gameplay, players frequently employ taboo expressions as spontaneous responses to frustration, disappointment, or dissatisfaction resulting from poor team performance, unsuccessful strategies, or unexpected in-game situations. These expressions enable speakers to communicate their emotional states in a direct and immediate manner, particularly within the highly competitive environment of online multiplayer games.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that taboo language performs several communicative roles within player interaction. It is employed to attract the attention of teammates during critical moments, to express contempt toward players perceived as underperforming, to provoke emotional reactions in situations of conflict or disagreement, and to challenge or criticize external authorities, such as the game developer or matchmaking system, when players perceive them as contributing to unfair or unsatisfactory gaming experiences. These communicative roles illustrate that taboo language extends beyond simple verbal aggression and reflects speakers' attempts to negotiate meaning, express evaluation, and respond to particular social circumstances within the gaming environment.

The use of taboo language is also influenced by various sociocultural factors. Many participants reported that the expressions they used were acquired through everyday interactions within their local communities, regional linguistic backgrounds, friendship networks, and gaming communities. Consequently, the selection of taboo expressions reflects not only individual emotions but also shared linguistic norms that have developed within specific social groups. In the context of Makassar, where direct forms of expression are relatively common in informal interaction, the use of taboo language may also represent locally accepted patterns of communication among peers. Similarly, the culture of competitive online gaming encourages rapid, spontaneous, and emotionally charged communication, creating conditions in which taboo language becomes increasingly normalized.

The findings further reveal that taboo language occurs in both spoken and written forms. Spoken taboo expressions, particularly those produced through voice communication, tend to emerge spontaneously and are strongly influenced by immediate emotional reactions. In contrast, written taboo language, such as messages exchanged through the in-game chat feature, provides players with greater opportunities to formulate and reinforce their intended meanings. Depending on the communicative context, taboo language may either intensify interpersonal conflict or reinforce solidarity among players, particularly when it is interpreted as humorous banter among close teammates. These findings suggest that the communicative role of taboo language is dynamic and highly dependent on the relationship between speakers, the interactional context, and the social norms shared by the gaming community.

The findings of this study are consistent with those reported by Nurdiansyah & Darma (2024) in their study *Harsh Words in Mobile Legends Online Game: Influences in Real Life*. Their research demonstrated that the use of taboo language in Mobile Legends extends beyond the gaming environment and influences players' communication practices in everyday social interactions. Similarly, the present study found that taboo expressions are predominantly triggered by emotional experiences, including frustration, anger, disappointment, and competitive pressure during gameplay. Both studies indicate that taboo language functions as an immediate communicative response to emotionally demanding situations while simultaneously reflecting the linguistic practices that have become normalized within gaming communities.

Nevertheless, this study offers a different perspective by emphasizing the sociolinguistic role of taboo language within communicative interaction rather than focusing solely on its behavioral consequences. The findings suggest that taboo language constitutes a socially situated communicative practice whose meanings and interpretations are shaped by cultural background, interpersonal relationships, interactional context, and the norms operating within gaming communities. Therefore, the use of taboo language among Mobile Legends players should be understood not merely as linguistic aggression but as a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon through which speakers express emotions, negotiate social relationships, and construct meaning within competitive digital communication.

CONCLUSION

Taboo language for society is language that is considered negative, but taboo language lives in certain games, especially Mobile Legends games. Taboo language among players can be interpreted as something acceptable; even though it is considered normal, it offers almost no

educational value for children. The use of taboo language in Mobile Legends is a phenomenon that includes various categories such as epithet, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. These types of taboo language are used with different intensities, reflecting players' emotions towards certain situations, such as defeat, bad networks, or team performance that does not meet expectations. Taboo language is acquired from various sources, including regional culture, religion, social environment, and in-game interactions. The use of taboo language is often triggered by negative emotions such as frustration and anger, serving as a means of short emotional expression, drawing attention to the team, applying social pressure for improvement, or even protesting against game developers and systems. Its social shapes include strengthening the identity of the player community, symbolizing membership, and creating a social hierarchy within the team. It can trigger conflict or worsen the atmosphere of the game.

The impact of taboo language extends beyond game dynamics and reflects aggressive communication patterns that can carry over into real life, affecting social civility. While some players find it difficult to reduce their use of taboo language because it serves as an emotional outlet, others propose softening the language to reduce its impact. Thus, taboo language in the Mobile Legends game is not only a means of communication and expression but also a social phenomenon that influences players' behaviour both inside and outside the game.

This study has some limitations and still needs to be developed through other approaches to increase knowledge in other fields. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to investigate taboo language in different digital communities, cultural settings, or social contexts using alternative theoretical perspectives or methodological approaches. Such studies may contribute to a broader understanding of taboo language as a dynamic communicative practice in contemporary society. The researcher hopes that the results of this study can be used as a reference or comparison that will be used by future researchers.

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