

The Used of Taboo Words in Central Cee's Song Lyrics: Pragmatics Analysis

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*Abdi Fauzan, Siti Aisyah, Lailatul Musyarofah 

¹²³Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: abdifauzzan88@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of taboo words in hip-hop lyrics as a means of artistic expression and cultural identity formation, focusing on Central Cee's work as presented in a freestyle. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this study aimed to identify the types, textual locations, and functions of taboo words in song lyrics. Data were collected through documentation and content analysis techniques and then were classified based on pragmatic function. The results showed that the most dominant category was insults and derogatory terms such as "bitches" and "hoes." In addition, taboo language also acted as a linguistic marker through the use of non-standard terms.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Taboo Words, Central Cee, Rap Lyrics*

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role not only as a means of communication but also as a medium of artistic expression. Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, a tool for connection, and a means of communication (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021; G Yule, 2020). At its core, language is a structured system of communication used by humans to share thoughts, feelings, information, and ideas. It is the primary tool we use to connect with one another, build societies, and pass down knowledge through generations (Fromkin et al., 2022; Halliday, 1978). In music, language functions as a creative tool through which emotions, experiences, and social values are conveyed to listeners. Songs generally convey messages and meanings that reflect both linguistic and cultural elements (Yalase, 2022). Songs generally convey messages and meanings that reflect pragmatic and cultural elements. Composers require time to contemplate, carefully select words, revise their writing, and arrange the lyrics, all while considering the potential impact on listeners (Everett, 2009).

Pragmatics, according to Yule (1996), is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms. Essentially, it moves beyond the literal meaning of words to focus on the use of language in social interaction to achieve specific goals. Previous studies have widely explored the use of taboo language in rap music. For instance, (Evadewi & Padang, 2018) analyzed the use of English slang and taboo words in Eminem's songs, noting that the lyrics often reflect real-life human activity and rely on non-standard English. Similarly, (Adillah, 2022; Sandi et al., 2025) have examined the sociolinguistic impacts of taboo utterances in digital and musical spaces.

A clear research gap remains. While extensive research has focused on American hip-hop artists like Eminem, there is a lack of pragmatic analysis focusing on the modern UK rap and drill scene. Central Cee, a top-selling artist in the UK and Europe in 2025, employs a unique blend of regional slang and taboo words that serve specific pragmatic functions. This study bridges that gap by analyzing Central Cee's lyrics to understand how taboo language shifts from mere offensive speech to a sophisticated tool for asserting identity and conveying cultural

commentary (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Dynel, 2012). In George Yule's framework, the relationship between taboo words and pragmatics lies in the shift from what is said to what is done with the language. Taboo words are ideal specimens for pragmatic study because their meaning is almost entirely dependent on context and intention rather than their literal dictionary definitions (Levinson, 1983; G Yule, 2020). Their interpretation relies heavily on speakers' intentions, hearers' inferences, and the situational context in which they are uttered.

Taboo, defined as the prohibition of certain kinds of behavior or objects believed to be harmful for moral, religious, or social reasons, is a universal, omnipresent, and perennial phenomenon. Far from being a relic of the past, taboo is deeply woven into every society today. Even in Western communities, where censorship has progressively relaxed, taboo affects everyday life. As Burridge (2004) insightfully claims, "*what is taboo is revolting, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable, dangerous, disturbing, thrilling – but above all, powerful.*" This powerful force of taboo makes it universal and inseparable from human experience. Theoretically, taboo is defined as the prohibition of certain kinds of behavior or objects believed to be harmful for moral, religious, or social reasons. As Burridge (2004) insightfully claims, "*what is taboo is revolting, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable, dangerous, disturbing, thrilling – but above all, powerful.*" Far from being a relic of the past, this powerful force makes taboo deeply woven into modern society.

In Yule (1996) pragmatic framework, analyzing taboo words requires shifting the focus from what is said (literal dictionary definitions) to what is done with the language (intended contextual meaning). Taboo words are ideal objects of pragmatic study because their meaning depends almost entirely on the speaker's intention, the relationship between interlocutors, and the social context in which they are used (Levinson, 1983; George Yule, 1996). Indeed, nobody is indifferent to taboo. Probably because taboo is still considered something dangerous, untouchable, or unmentionable, it remains tempting and fascinating to many people. This may help explain why, as Horlacher (2010) puts it, "*taboos not only continue to exist, but they can actually be said to be flourishing.*" In short, taboo is here to stay (Horlacher, 2010). For example, one line from Central Cee's lyrics states, "*How can I be homophobic? My bitch is gay.*" In this context, Central Cee uses the phrase "*my bitch is gay*" as a noun phrase that specifically denotes his romantic partner rather than functioning as a literal insult. This usage reflects an aggressive yet in-group linguistic style commonly found in rap music as a means of constructing identity, authenticity, and social positioning (Adams, 2009; Alim, 2006). From a pragmatic perspective, such language demonstrates contextual meaning, where the intended communicative function differs from the literal lexical meaning of the words (Thomas, 1995).

Unlike general English songs, rap music lyrics frequently contain taboo language, slang, and other forms of non-standard English that distinguish them from mainstream popular music. Nevertheless, they also share common themes such as love, personal struggle, social conflict, and everyday experiences. For example, Eminem's songs often portray human relationships, conflict, and social criticism through highly creative linguistic choices. Similarly, Central Cee's songs employ distinctive sentence structures, regional slang, and taboo expressions that not only enhance artistic expression but also reflect contemporary urban life and youth culture. Rap lyrics characteristically employ non-standard English, informal pronunciation, slang, and vulgar expressions to construct authenticity and establish solidarity within particular speech communities (Alim, 2006; Labov, 1972). The writer selected Central Cee's songs because they contain numerous slang and taboo expressions suitable for pragmatic analysis. For instance, in the lyric "*My bitch is gay*," the word "*bitch*" is used to refer to the speaker's girlfriend rather than serving as a literal derogatory insult. Such usage illustrates how taboo words undergo semantic shift depending on context, speaker intention, and interpersonal relationships. More broadly, taboo language fulfills various communicative functions, including expressing emotions, attracting attention, insulting others, reinforcing solidarity, constructing identity, and conveying attitudes or social evaluations (Jay, 2009). This multifunctionality makes taboo language an important area of investigation in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and language education, particularly in rap lyrics where linguistic creativity and cultural identity are closely interconnected.

METHOD**Instruments**

Column	Description	Purpose
Taboo Word	The specific word or phrase identified as taboo.	To isolate the unit of analysis.
Lyric (Context)	The full line of lyrics where the taboo word appears.	To provide the necessary linguistic context for pragmatic analysis.
Textual Location of The Lyrics	Classifying each taboo words	To group data based on its type.
Pragmatic Function/Meaning	The intended meaning or purpose of the taboo word in context (e.g., asserting identity, attracting attention, emotional release).	To analyze meanings that differ from the literal definition.

Sampling and Data Collection Methods

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, which aims to provide a detailed description and interpretation of linguistic phenomena as they naturally occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were collected through documentation and content analysis techniques. Documentation was used to obtain the song lyrics as the primary source of data, while content analysis enabled the systematic identification and interpretation of taboo words within the lyrics (Bowen, 2009; Krippendorff, 2019). The sampling method utilized was purposive sampling, wherein the researcher deliberately selected lines of lyrics containing identifiable taboo words or non-standard slang because they were considered information-rich and directly relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015).

Procedures

The research procedures followed the principles of descriptive qualitative research, which seeks to describe, interpret, and understand phenomena in their natural context without manipulating the data (Sandelowski, 2000). The researcher first collected the lyrics, identified utterances containing taboo expressions, classified them according to the analytical framework, and subsequently interpreted their pragmatic meanings based on the context in which they occurred.

**Data Analysis Stage
Pragmatic Analysis**

The data were analyzed using a qualitative pragmatic approach. Each taboo word was examined in its linguistic and situational context to determine its contextual meaning and pragmatic function. The analysis focused on explaining why the intended meaning frequently diverged from the literal dictionary meaning, as well as identifying the communicative functions performed by taboo expressions in the song lyrics. The analytical process followed the principles of qualitative content analysis by organizing, categorizing, interpreting, and drawing conclusions from the data to address the research objectives, namely identifying the characteristics of taboo words and determining the most frequently occurring types in the selected songs (Schreier, 2012).

Descriptive Qualitative Analysis (Meaning and Function)

The researchers in this study used a descriptive qualitative approach as it allowed them researcher to interpret linguistic data contextually rather than statically, focusing on meaning and function within natural language use. Interpretation of Pragmatic Meaning is analyzing and interpreting the intended (pragmatic) meaning of the taboo words within the lyrical context. The researcher explains how the taboo words function as:

Emotional Release: Words like "shit" are chosen for their taboo and emphatic qualities to amplify the expression of strong emotion.

Assertion of Identity and Social Positioning: Terms like "bitch" or "hoes" used to refer to rivals or express distrust, demonstrating an aggressive tone and asserting identity.

Cultural/Social Commentary: Words like "crack" and "strap" that refer to restricted topics (drugs, weapons) to provide commentary on the artist's societal reality ("hood").

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Central Cee's "La Leakers Freestyle" confirms the presence of various taboo words, categorized by their specific textual locations and pragmatic functions within the song's lyrics. A key finding of this study is that "insults" represent the most dominant category of taboo words employed by the artist. These terms are frequently characterized by a contextual irrelevance in their literal sense, which requires the listener to decipher the artist's unstated intent behind the word choice.

The descriptive qualitative analysis further identified that these taboo words serve several distinct, multifaceted functions:

A key finding of this study is that "insults" represent the most dominant category of taboo words employed by Central Cee. A defining characteristic of these words is their contextual irrelevance in a literal sense, requiring listeners to decipher their pragmatic significance.

Data Example from Lyrics: * "How can I be homophobic? my bitch is gay."

Findings Interpretation (Pragmatic Meaning):

Assertion of Identity and Social Positioning: In the literal dictionary sense, "girlfriend" is a standard noun representing a person. However, Central Cee uses the taboo word "bitch" to refer to his girlfriend or adversaries. From a pragmatic perspective, this usage reflects an aggressive or derogatory tone that is common in rap to establish social positioning and assert the artist's identity against rivals.

Emotional Release and Intensification: Vulgar expressions such as "shit" or "bitch" act as intensifiers. They are chosen specifically for their emphatic qualities, allowing the artist to amplify strong emotions or signal disdain.

In summary, the study confirms that in Central Cee's lyrics, taboo language serves a role that extends far beyond simple offense. Instead, it functions as a sophisticated stylistic and communicative tool used to assert identity, convey intense emotions, and provide rich cultural commentary.

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that insults are the most dominant type of taboo words in Central Cee's lyrics. Their meanings are highly context-dependent, requiring listeners to interpret them pragmatically rather than literally. The analysis identified four major functions of taboo language. First, taboo words are used to construct identity and social positioning, with expressions such as *bitch* and *hoes* reflecting the competitive nature of rap culture. Second, they function as emotional intensifiers, where words like *shit* emphasize strong feelings or contempt. Third, taboo expressions provide cultural commentary, as terms such as *crack* and *strap* reference crime, violence, and aspects of the artist's social environment. Fourth, they serve as pragmatic markers of identity, with slang such as *nyash* highlighting regional and cultural affiliation. Overall, the findings demonstrate that taboo language in Central Cee's

songs is not merely offensive but functions as a meaningful communicative and stylistic resource for expressing emotion, constructing identity, and representing cultural experience. Future studies should further examine address terms and other pragmatic features of taboo language in rap lyrics to deepen understanding of language, identity, and contemporary music culture.

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