Vulgarity and Art: Making Sense of Indecent Words in Iraqi Romantic Folk Songs

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ABSTRACT

Offensive language is frequently encountered in daily life, especially in casual communication, as it is often seen as a more effective way to express emotions and various situations. This study explores the use of vulgar language in the lyrics of Iraqi nightclub songs, applying Wardhaugh's (2006) theory of offensive language to analyze the collected data. The research examines the functions of vulgar words in folk singers' songs '*Lovers Evening*'. The data was sourced from TikTok song lyrics, with the singers' statements serving as the primary material. The findings identify four key functions of vulgar language, with the most common being to attract attention, convey crudeness, and ridicule authority. The paper also offers insights and recommendations for future research on the use of vulgar language.

Keywords: Vulgar words; Functions of offensive Words; Lovers' Evening; Folk singers.

الخلاصة

اللغة المهينة شائعة الاستخدام في الحياة اليومية، وخاصة في التواصل غير الرسمي، حيث يُنظر إليها غالبًا على أنها طريقة أكثر فعالية للتعبير عن المشاعر والمواقف المختلفة. تستكشف هذه الدراسة استخدام اللغة المبتذلة في كلمات أغاني الملاهي الليلية العراقية، وتطبيق نظرية واردهاوغ (2006) للغة المهينة لتحليل البيانات المجمعة. يدرس البحث وظائف الكلمات المبتذلة في أغاني المطربين الشعبيين "ليلي العشاق". تم الحصول على البيانات من كلمات أغاني تيك توك، حيث كانت تصريحات المطربين بمثابة المادة الأساسية. تحدد النتائج أربع وظائف رئيسية للغة المبتذلة، وأكثرها شيوعًا هو جذب الانتباه، ونقل الفظاظة، والسخرية من السلطة. تقدم الورقة أيضًا رؤى وتوصيات لأبحاث مستقبلية حول استخدام اللغة المبتذلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكلمات المبتذلة؛ وظائف الكلمات المسيئة؛ ليالي العشاق؛ المغنون الشعبيون.

INTRODUCTION

As the saying goes, "words are mightier than pens," highlighting how human emotions are deeply shaped by linguistic interactions and the exchange of expressions. Language, as a structured system of sounds, plays a crucial role in human life, allowing individuals to convey ideas, share messages, and express intentions and opinions (Rosyidah, 2025). Every word we use carries symbolic meanings that reflect a wide range of emotions, including love, pride, sadness, joy, and even artistic expression like singing elements that are integral to daily life. At the cognitive level, the impact of words extends beyond the individual, encompassing collective, temporal, and social dimensions. Thus, language is inherently tied to society, as Pooley and Bendle (2025) explain that sociolinguistics is grounded in the diversity of discourse across different social contexts. From this perspective, it becomes clear that words lacking sincerity and politeness quickly lose their influence and may even mislead, shaping perceptions in either a positive or negative way (Bhagtani et al., 2022). As such, Language can both reveal and conceal an individual's identity and social background, often without their conscious awareness. People have the freedom to select a language variety that best reflects their identity. In certain situations, they may opt for a more expressive language when experiencing emotions like sadness or anger (Ansah, 2011). Consequently, language plays a vital role in representing social groups and conveying personal thoughts and emotions for various purposes. Sociology, in this context, examines how individuals interact; influence one another, and how language shapes social

relationships (Ali, 2023). This field explores language usage patterns, dialectal variations, and linguistic choices across different cultural settings.

Sociology, in a broader sense, examines human societies including families, clans, tribes, and nations and analyses their mutual influence (Hoff, 2006; Raza, 2024). Among the linguistic phenomena studied are the spread of news, social interactions, and rumours. For instance, while inappropriate language is socially unacceptable, it can serve as a powerful expression of emotions. Some individuals use offensive words to convey displeasure, believing it to be an effective way to express their true feelings. Research has highlighted the impact of this phenomenon on social relationships (Cavazza & Guidetti, 2014; Horan, 2013). In Arab societies, studies on this topic are on-going, with preliminary research already conducted (Abdel-Jawad, 2000; Alakrot, Murray & Nikolov, 2018; Mousa et al., 2024), though it remains underexplored (if any) in Iraqi society. This subject is considered an emerging cultural aspect that requires further study to understand the effects of inappropriate language on social life and interpersonal relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Vulgarity as a denotative Interpretation

The term vulgar was first introduced by Captain Cook in the late 18th century during his voyage to Tahiti. Allan and Burridge (2006) explained that the word 'vulgar' originates from the Tongan language and refers to a person, object, or action perceived as dangerous and best avoided. Consequently, vulgar language reflects strict social prohibitions against certain words, actions, or associations deemed inappropriate within a particular culture or society. According to Ullman (1970), such terms fall into categories including the strange, the dangerous, the forbidden, and the unclean (Hasnah, Kharisma & Fibay, 2022). More recently, Woodward (2025) suggests that indecent language encompasses words unsuitable for use among friends or in specific social settings. Furthermore, an individual's social status influences their speech, as communication styles adapt to different contexts for example; speaking to a child differs from addressing a professor (Jay, 2009).

In every culture, vulgarity refers to behaviours that should be avoided, while indecent words denote expressions considered inappropriate. These two aspects are interconnected, as some taboos have corresponding linguistic expressions, while others lack direct verbal equivalents (Fairman, 2009). A recent study by Behera et al. (2025) argues that certain vulgar acts are reinforced by specific words, particularly those related to sexuality, further solidifying their taboo nature. Similarly, discussing sex is often considered taboo, even though the act itself is acceptable in appropriate contexts, such as medical or gynaecological fields (Baszak-Radomańska, Wańczyk-Baszak, & Paszkowski, 2024). In such cases, words associated with offensive acts automatically acquire the status of social taboos (Allan & Burridge, 2006).

Accordingly, the term 'vulgar' is commonly associated with meanings such as indecent, abusive, crude, shameless, sassy, pornographic, and illicit. Clichéd words contribute to a linguistic style that conveys various promotional cues, often influenced by socially vulgar behavior or exposure to cultures that allow linguistic deviation (Rahmatdildaevna Kurmanbekova et al., 2023). Recently, composers have often used vulgar expressions in some music to arouse heightened emotions especially in themes related to intimate relationships whether between spouses, a third party in a love affair, or depictions of love (Ramadhani & Kasiyan, 2024). Lyrics often reference specific body parts and romantic or sexual interactions (Abdelrafe, 2025). This phenomenon reflects a deliberate strategy to attract listeners, especially teenagers, by using vivid language in songs to enhance engagement and appeal.

Scandalous Lyrics and Teen Appeal

Songs are an essential cultural element that reflects a nation's identity. Each song conveys unique messages through its music and lyrics, with historical evidence suggesting that the Egyptians were the first to compose romantic songs during the pharaonic era (Belk, 2022). People encounter various music genres daily such as jazz, blues, romantic, country, musical, reggae, and rap often memorizing lyrics with ease. It is intriguing to examine how composers skillfully manipulate language to convey messages, making lyric analysis particularly valuable in understanding what captivates audiences, especially teenagers (Yuliana et al., 2024). However, indecent or vulgar language is often considered

a cultural taboo, restricting the use of words deemed offensive or inappropriate, particularly those related to sex, the body, or race (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Allan, 2018; Gao, 2013; Hughes, 2015). Such language is generally viewed as an unsuitable form of communication, as it disregards norms of politeness and ethical behavior. Consequently, vulgar or indecent language should be avoided in society, as it can cause discomfort, embarrassment, or shame.

Attitudes toward the purpose of vulgar lyrics have shifted over time. Anggita (2015) suggested that this change occurred as legal sanctions against indecent discourse became more relaxed. As a result, vulgar language often emerges as a means of expressing emotions and feelings. It frequently occurs in moments of heightened emotion, when words are spoken impulsively, or in casual conversations between close friends as a way to reinforce their bond. However, beyond simply reflecting personal emotions, song lyrics serve as a medium for singers to convey the songwriter's deepest feelings (Windari & Santoso, 2018). In this sense, song lyrics function as expressive texts shaped by either creative imagination or raw emotion. Through music and melody, composers guide listeners into an immersive experience that evokes deep emotions. Songs explore themes of sadness, happiness, love, anger, and social critique (Desjarlais, 1991; Parrott & Park, 2024). For example, a love song can create a blissful sense of longing, as if the listener is drifting on waves of desire, while a sad song can stir emotions, altering the listener's mood or even bringing them to tears. The choice of words and phrasing plays a crucial role in shaping the song's tone, ensuring it resonates with the listener and enhances its emotional impact.

Indecent language appears across various forms of media, including movies, songs, and television programs. Its frequent use is often attributed to its perceived effectiveness in conveying strong emotions, particularly in swearing. However, such words are not only used to express anger or frustration; they also function as markers of identity within certain communities. Pizarro Pedraza, Suñer, and De Cock (2024) pointed out the common assumption that taboo language is primarily used by individuals with lower educational backgrounds, based on the belief that education influences speech style. However, Tymkova and Manzhos (2025) challenged this notion, arguing that even well-educated individuals may use obscene language in conversation. This suggests that the use of taboo words is not solely linked to education but may serve other purposes, such as attracting attention or expressing defiance. Swearing is widespread, yet unlike standard language acquisition, it is typically learned informally through peers, family, or media exposure. In recent years, obscene language has become increasingly common in club songs and on social media platforms, exposing young audiences to inappropriate content. This linguistic trend, combined with musical intonation, presents a potential risk by influencing teenagers' speech and thought patterns (Jian, 2024). Given the findings of previous studies, it would be valuable to explore how language influences the speech and mind-set of Iraqi teenagers, particularly in the context of youth-oriented music, a topic that remains under investigation.

Prohibited and Lexis

Hutami (2022) defined prohibited words as offensive language categorized into four types: epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity. Taboo concepts generally refer to actions or topics that are socially avoided in interactions. The term "prohibited" originates from the Tongan language (Turner & Maryanski, 2015). According to Fitzgerald (2007), offensive language is both improper and bold, often functioning as a status marker in everyday speech across all languages. The researcher notes that such words are frequently linked to sex and genitalia, making their definition inherently sensitive. This paper examines prohibited and taboo words, as their use has become increasingly common among young people. Despite their persistent negative perception, these words continue to be integrated into everyday conversations.

Categories of Prohibited Expressions

Prohibited words generally fall into several categories based on their nature and impact on communication. These include:

No.	Category	Interpretation
1.	**Epithets**	Derogatory terms aimed at individuals or groups, often based on race, gender, or other personal attributes (for example, with the epithet midget, gimp, and retard).
2.	**Profanity**	Words that are considered blasphemous or offensive in religious or sacred contexts (for example, hell, damn, damnation, and goddamn it).
3.	**Vulgarity**	Crude or coarse language, often related to bodily functions or sexuality that is deemed inappropriate in formal settings. The words that belong to this type are *back-*, chest and so on. The vulgar terms for female genitalia and it also used as a term of disparagement for a woman.
4.	**Obscenity**	Highly offensive or explicit language, particularly related to sexual content, which is often restricted by law or social norms. The example is fuck, filth and shit. Usually, obscene words replace the position of other words in a sentence, 'I need to finish this filth as soon as possible' in which the word shit refers to 'assignment'

These categories define how language can be perceived as offensive or inappropriate in different cultural and social contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative method to explore and understand the phenomenon of taboo word usage, treating it as the primary research focus while also examining its current status. This approach is chosen because the data consist of words and utterances extracted from nightclub songs. The researcher analyses and interprets the naturally occurring presence of indecent language within these songs, using a descriptive qualitative method to examine vulgar expressions in folk music. Primary data are directly sourced from club songs, with the study focusing on lyrics containing indecent words from various albums. In total, seven songs are selected as the data source for this research.

DATA COLLECTION

To collect data, the researcher first selected lyrics from various albums through internet and YouTube that contained indecent words, excluding those without vulgar language since only offensive expressions were the focus of the study. Following an in-depth review of both lyrics and music videos, vulgar expressions were systematically categorized according to their linguistic types and communicative functions. Data collection employed an observational method, consisting of multiple stages: (1) repeated auditory exposure to the songs, (2) semantic and syntactic analysis of the lyrics, and (3) annotation and classification of taboo words based on their pragmatic functions. The data were then examined using a descriptive qualitative approach to uncover patterns in linguistic usage.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis in this paper follows a qualitative approach, involving the collection, organization, and categorization of song lyrics into manageable units to identify patterns and meanings. First, the researcher analyses nightclub song lyrics using qualitative methods. The data are then collected, organized, and classified based on the occurrence of indecent words. Using theory of vulgar word functions from Wardhaugh (2006), the researcher categorizes these words according to their types. Next, the identified vulgar words in songs popular among young audiences are described and examined. Finally, the researcher presents findings, discusses interpretations, and draws conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The vulgar expressions identified in song lyrics were classified according to their functions, as outlined by Wardhaugh (2006). Wardhaugh asserted that indecent language is often avoided in certain contexts due to its various communicative functions, including: (1) attracting attention, (2) expressing vulgarity, and (3) mocking authority.

a. Drawing Attention to Oneself

One of the main reasons for using taboo words in song lyrics is to attract attention through strong, emotional, and powerful language. These words can provoke reactions from the audience and emphasize the speaker's emotions.

Data 1:

> *"Goddamn, I miss you, my love (i.e., she)"*
> *"I love you, you are my hope"*

Data 2:

> *"I'm still a baby, I miss your hugs!"*
> *"The world is dark without you"*

Analysis

The examples above illustrate how taboo words can function as a means of drawing attention. Song lyrics employ various linguistic and stylistic techniques such as striking words, repetition, and catchy rhymes to captivate listeners and encourage engagement. This is often achieved through the use of bold or provocative language that draws attention and sparks controversy. Additionally, emotions like love, passion, loss, or sadness are expressed in a dramatic and impactful manner. In **Data 1**, the words "*miss you*", "*love*", and "*hope*" contribute to the emotional intensity of the lyrics, reinforcing the singer's longing. In **Data 2**, the phrase "*I'm still a baby*", "*hugs*", and "*darkness*" is used to emphasize vulnerability and a desire for affection. The offensive words in this context (as heated by the public people) do necessarily serve to offend and highlight the speaker's emotions. However, these phrases use emotionally charged language to create a lasting impression and deepen the listener's connection to the song.

b. To express vulgarity

In song lyrics, offensive words are often used to express vulgarity and sexuality, emphasizing raw emotions, desire, or rebellion. These words can intensify the song's impact, making it more provocative and attention-grabbing.

Data 3:

> *"I got addicted to your lips."*
> *"Hold me in your hot arms … chest."*
> *"They taught me about alcohol."*
> *"Sit in my lap."*
> *"Damn, your body's driving me insane."*

Data 4:

> *"Touch me like you mean it, no holding back."*
> *"I want you … all night long."*
> *"You are still young, what brought you to dance"*
> *"The world is a glass of wine and a cigar"*

Analysis

This section refers to the use of words or phrases that include inappropriate connotations or an explicit style that may be considered offensive to public taste. This is done through several linguistic and artistic methods. It's often feature obscene or vulgar language, direct or indirect sexual references, and crude expressions that challenge social norms. This use of impolite or coarse colloquial language can serve various purposes, such as expressing raw emotion, provoking controversy, or mocking societal values. In **Data 3**, the words "*addicted, "lips*", "*chest*", "*body's*" "*insane*" "*alcohol*", and "*lap*". In **Data 4**, the words of "*Touch*", "*no holding back*", "*still young and dance, and "world is …* wine … cigar*". Consequently, the use of sensitive charms of woman's body like "*chest*" and "*hugs*" adds intensity and captures the listener's attention, making the message unmentionable and outlawed in our (Arab) culture. However, these phrases employ emotionally charged language to leave a lasting impression and enhance the listener's connection to the imagery conveyed by the song.

c. To mock authority

People often use taboo words to express dissatisfaction with governments and institutions. By incorporating verbal obscenities into their speech or song lyrics, they ridicule authority, convey frustration, and challenge societal rules. This use of language serves as a form of protest, expressing defiance and resistance.

Data 5:

"Welcome to government... hell welcomes you."
"The Sheikh is not in the nightclub, the Sheikh is honour and dignity."

Analysis

According to the Oxford Online Dictionary (2020), the word 'hell' is defined as a spiritual realm of evil and suffering in various religions. It is commonly depicted as a place of eternal fire beneath the earth where the wicked are punished after death. Linguistically, 'hell' falls under the category of profanity, as it involves religiously offensive language or the irreverent use of sacred terms. In the lyrics of **Data 5**, the vulgar term 'hell' is used to express anger and contempt toward a person, reinforcing strong emotions and intensifying the message. Meanwhile, the word 'Sheikh' is employed metaphorically to suggest an inappropriate place. The singer uses these words to express disdain toward a specific institution or figure. By referencing 'hell', 'officer', and 'Sheikh', the lyrics aim to criticize and undermine the perceived authority of a respected social or tribal figure. This phrase conveys frustration or disapproval toward a government entity or tribal leader, emphasizing the contrast between genuine respect and societal misconceptions about authority. Consequently, the use of verbal obscenities serves as a means to ridicule the government, express defiance against societal norms, and demonstrate a lack of respect for authority.

CONCLUSION

The analysis reveals that taboo words are frequently incorporated into song lyrics, serving four main functions: (1) attracting attention, (2) expressing vulgarity, (3) provoking reactions, and (4) mocking authority. Among these, the most prevalent functions are drawing attention and using offensive language. Singers often employ vulgar terms to capture listeners' interest, using words like (Goddamn, hugs, love, lips, chest, alcohol, cigar, dance, and darkness). Additionally, they may use disrespectful language toward others, potentially making someone feel devalued, with terms such as (shit, filth and fucker).

The function of mocking authority appears less frequently. The data suggests that this function is typically used when the speaker expresses dissatisfaction with the government or institutions. In such cases, verbal obscenities serve to ridicule authority, communicate discontent with societal rules, and display defiance. In the analysed lyrics, this function is represented by words like (hell, officers, and Sheikh). Additionally, vulgar language is generally considered inappropriate and can lead to offense or misinterpretation, especially when used in the wrong context. From both a linguistic and musical perspective, such expressions can reflect social discord and emotional intensity.

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