

Use of taboo language by commercial sex workers in Bujumbura, Burundi to negotiate power and identity

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Abstract

Despite growing recognition of sex work complexities, there's a significant gap in understanding linguistic practices of commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Burundi. This study addresses this gap by: examining patterns and functions of taboo language use, investigating its use to negotiate power and identity, and assessing broader socio-cultural and psychological implications of taboo language. Employing a qualitative research design, the study used in-depth interviews and non-participant observation to collect data from 15 CSWs in Bujumbura. The findings reveal that CSWs employ various forms of taboo language, including vulgarities, euphemisms, and coded speech, serving complex social and emotional functions. Additionally, CSWs use taboo language to set boundaries, build solidarity, and resist social control, enabling them to negotiate power and identity. The use of taboo language has broader implications, including both empowerment and marginalization. The study concludes that CSWs in Bujumbura employ taboo language in complex and strategic ways to negotiate power and identity, showcasing agency and resilience in the face of stigma. Based on the findings, the study recommends incorporating insights into advocacy initiatives, developing

respectful communication strategies, reducing stigma, and informing public health initiatives with a deeper understanding of CSWs' linguistic practices to improve service delivery and support.

Keywords: *Taboo language, commercial sex work, power negotiation, identity construction, euphemism, politeness strategies, critical discourse analysis, Burundi, urban poverty*

Introduction

Language functions as a medium of communication and a powerful tool for identity formation, social organization, and power negotiation (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak, 2015). Within marginalized contexts (Mugambi, 2015), language becomes a critical strategy for navigating structural constraints, asserting agency, and building community. This study focused on commercial sex workers in Bujumbura, Burundi, examining how they use taboo and vulgar language to assert identity, resist marginalization, and negotiate power hierarchies.

Bujumbura, particularly areas like Kamenge, reflects socio-economic struggles common in African urban centers. Rapid urbanization, economic instability, and a refugee population from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have intensified poverty and unemployment (Nkurunziza, 2016). Inflation in Burundi reached 27.1% in 2023 (African Development Bank Group, 2024), while over 100,000 displaced persons crossed into the country (UNHCR, 2024; IOM, 2016). These pressures have driven many women into informal livelihoods such as sex work.

This phenomenon is tied to Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG 1), which seeks to eradicate poverty. In Burundi and cities across sub-Saharan Africa, poverty and gender inequality are key factors pushing women into transactional sex (Ajayi, 2020;

Tamale, 2001). In Bujumbura, UNAIDS estimates that approximately 51,000 individuals engage in prostitution, many turning to sex work due to poverty and limited opportunities. While public health and legal perspectives on sex work in Burundi exist (Munyaneza, 2004), little attention has been given to the linguistic practices of CSWs.

Across African contexts, sex workers use strategic language to navigate stigma, assert agency, and maintain discretion. In Sonagachi, India, CSWs employ coded Bengali speech to negotiate services while avoiding surveillance (Devnani, 2006). In West Africa, particularly Nigeria, CSWs in Lagos and Abuja use Pidgin English, Yoruba, and Hausa, with euphemisms like *ashawo* (prostitute), *donatus* (cash provider), *brokos* (penis), and *toto* (vagina) to communicate discreetly and foster group identity (Ajayi, 2020; Odeunmi, 2007).

In Southern Africa, linguistic practices reflect adaptation and resistance. In South Africa, CSWs in Hillbrow and Green Point code-switch among Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, and English, using metaphors and slang to assert control and solidarity (Scorgie, 2012; Wasserman, 2016). In Harare, Zimbabwe, slang and multilingual expressions help sex workers navigate marginalization and reclaim agency (Scorgie et al., 2013; Ncube, 2018).

In East Africa, sex workers draw on hybrid and coded language to manage risks. In Nairobi, CSWs use ShEng - a Swahili-English slang - to interact discreetly with clients and authorities, with phrases like “boss kuna offer” and “boss, come nikuchangamkie” signaling intent while preserving discretion (Tukai, 2018; Njoroge & Wambua, 2017). In Uganda, especially in Kampala’s red-light districts, CSWs use euphemisms, curses, and terms like *senga* (paternal aunt who teaches sexual norms), *kabo* (loose woman), and *yawomerera* (“she/he is sweet” - vulgar

implication of being sexually inviting) as part of a gendered repertoire reflecting cultural norms and resistance to criminalization (Tamale, 2001; Schulkind et al., 2013).

Although such strategies exist in Burundi, the linguistic dimension of sex work remains understudied. This research addressed that gap by exploring how CSWs in Bujumbura use taboo language in interaction.

The study was guided by four objectives: (1) to identify patterns of taboo language; (2) to examine its use in different contexts; (3) to explore its function in negotiating power and identity; and (4) to assess broader socio-cultural and psychological implications. The research drew on Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak, 2015) and Politeness Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). These frameworks uncovered how language serves as a tool for resilience, resistance, and self-definition.

The Sociolinguistics of taboo

Taboo language refers to expressions considered offensive or socially inappropriate, often avoided or censored in formal discourse. Rooted in the Polynesian term *tapu*, meaning "forbidden," such language encompasses profanity, obscenity, slurs, and euphemisms- each reflecting cultural sensitivities and social power structures (Allan & Burrige, 2006). While traditionally stigmatized, taboo expressions serve crucial communicative functions: they convey emotion, signal group identity, resist norms, or add rhetorical force (Jay, 2009).

Usage of taboo language varies widely depending on context, gender, class, and setting. As Cameron (2019) notes, changing gender dynamics have blurred linguistic boundaries, with women increasingly participating in speech forms once associated with male domains, such as swearing. Ultimately, taboo language both

reflects and shapes sociocultural values, making it a vital lens for analyzing language in society.

Language, gender, and identity in sex work

The term *sex worker* refers to adults (female, male, or transgender) over 18 who engage in consensual sexual services for money or goods, whether regularly or occasionally. It is often preferred over *prostitute*, which is seen as offensive (White, 1990, as cited in Tukai, 2018). Globally, research on language in sex work shows that taboo, euphemistic, and coded expressions are more than linguistic tools - they help sex workers construct identity, resist marginalization, and navigate stigma (Allan & Burrige, 2006).

Studies from North America and Southeast Asia highlight how women in the trade often use bold, masculinized, or emotionally charged language to assert autonomy and counter gendered power dynamics (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). However, this work remains largely Anglocentric, with limited engagement with multilingual and African contexts.

Regionally, in sub-Saharan Africa, language has been examined as a survival strategy in informal economies. In South Africa, for instance, sex workers use Zulu-English slang to build solidarity and obscure their intentions in public (Wasserman, (2016); Scorgie et al., 2012). Yet, these studies often treat language as purely instrumental, overlooking its symbolic role in expressing identity and coping with stigma.

In East Africa, growing research explores how sex workers use language creatively to manage risk, assert professionalism, and maintain emotional resilience. In Kenya, Sheng—a mix of Kiswahili, English, and indigenous languages -serves as both a linguistic shield and an in-group identity marker. Terms like “pingis” (sex worker) or “uko na deal?” (“do you have a deal?”)

enable discreet negotiation and solidarity (Simiyu, 2023). In Uganda, Luganda phrases such as “mazongoto” (double bed) and “nekolera byange” (“I work for myself”) are used to euphemize sex work while asserting agency (Tamale, 2001). In Tanzania, common Swahili metaphors such as “kazi ya usiku” (“night work”) and “kuendesha gari” (“driving a car”) frame sex work as a skilled profession, offering dignity while maintaining discretion (Kamazima and Kazaura, 2016).

Burundi is largely absent from scholarly discourse on sex work, despite its visibility in informal areas like Buyenzi and Kamenge. While sex workers in Bujumbura reportedly mix Kirundi, Kiswahili, and French to mask transactional intent and protect their image- using phrases like “*ndiko kurondera akazi k'ijoro*” (“I’m looking for night work”)- these linguistic strategies remain undocumented in academic literature. This study tackled that gap by examining the sociolinguistic practices of Burundian sex workers.

Language, power, and survival in criminalized work

In criminalized and stigmatized settings like sex work, language acts as covert capital - a vital tool for managing risk, asserting power, and building solidarity (Scorgie, 2012). In Kampala and Nairobi, euphemisms and slang help sex workers deflect legal and social threats. Guided by Politeness Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), indirect speech such as “*Ssebo, simanyi ky’oyogeddeko*” (“Sir, I don’t know what you’re talking about”) preserves dignity under police scrutiny. Sheng in Nairobi and coded Luganda in Kampala (e.g., “*omusajja w’abantu*”, “*mpako*”) foster in-group identity while ensuring discretion (Tamale, 2001; Simiyu, 2023).

While Kenya and Uganda have received scholarly attention, Burundi remains overlooked. Ethnographic observations from

Bujumbura reveal similar patterns, with terms like “*cangodo*” (prostitute) and “*umubébi*” (young sex worker) reflecting local linguistic capital. Yet, their emotional and gendered dimensions remain undocumented - a key gap this study sought to fill.

Taboo language as an emotional buffer and tool of psychological resistance

Beyond communication and concealment, language serves as an emotional buffer and form of psychological resistance. Global research shows that metaphor, humor, and euphemism help sex workers reframe their experiences and manage stigma (Swendeman et al., 2009). In Latin America, terms like *trabajo alegre* (“happy work”) normalize the profession, while in South Africa, titles like “queen” or “boss lady” reinforce pride and self-worth (Scorgie et al., 2012).

Similar strategies appear in East Africa. Ugandan sex workers use *omuzira* (“the brave one”) for empowerment, while in Kenya, ShEng phrases such as “*yeye alikuwa na nyege, na mimi nilikuwa na njaa ya doh*” (He was hungry for sex and I was hungry for money) inject humor and underscore the mutual pragmatism of transactional sex (Sehloko & Banda, 2021; Mugambi, 2015).

In Burundi, emerging metaphors like *sambousa* (desirability), *gukora umuco* (“to work the culture”), and *grand patron* (“big boss”) blend humor, dignity, and discretion. Yet their emotional and communal meanings remain underexplored. This study filled that gap by analyzing the affective power of such expressions and their role in shaping identity. It also highlights how Burundian sex workers use Kirundi, French, and Kiswahili to assert agency and reframe their roles within marginal urban spaces.

Theoretical underpinnings

The study was guided by two theoretical frameworks: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Politeness Theory, both of which offered complementary lenses through which to examine the linguistic practices of commercial sex workers in Bujumbura.

Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis, as developed by Fairclough (2015) and Wodak (2015) views discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes societal power relations. It is particularly concerned with how language is implicated in social inequality, dominance, and control. Fairclough's three-dimensional model-comprising textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice- served as a core analytical framework. At the textual level, this study examined the strategic use of euphemism, code-switching, and indirectness among sex workers as ways to manage risk and identity.

At the discourse practice level, the focus was on how these linguistic forms were circulated and interpreted within the community. Here, multilingualism functioned as both a protective tool and a marker of solidarity (Wodak, 2015). Finally, the sociocultural dimension situated these discursive practices within broader structures of criminalization, poverty, and social exclusion.

As Wodak and Meyer (2009) note, CDA enables researchers to reveal how language both reflects and mediates systemic inequality in postcolonial contexts making it especially applicable to marginalized groups like those studied here.

Politeness theory

Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2008) complemented CDA by offering a micro-level lens through which to understand the real-time, interpersonal functions of language. The theory is grounded in the concept of face, which includes both the desire to be liked (positive face) and the desire to act freely (negative face). Politeness strategies such as hedging, euphemism, and indirect speech were employed by sex workers to manage face-threatening situations, particularly when interacting with police or unsympathetic members of the public.

For instance, participants used expressions such as “Moi, je suis pas prostituée, je cherche nourriture” (I’m not a prostitute, I’m looking for food) to defuse suspicion and appeal to moral sympathy. Such utterances functioned as survival strategies, allowing the speaker to reframe their identity in a less threatening or more socially acceptable light. Strategic code-switching between Kirundi, French, and Kiswahili often helped portray the speaker as confused or non-threatening—an effective tactic for reducing the risk of confrontation or arrest.

While the theory has faced critique for its individualistic and sometimes universalist assumptions (Locher & Watts, 2005), it remains valuable when applied alongside CDA. Whereas CDA elucidates the broader power structures and ideologies shaping discourse, Politeness Theory sheds light on how individuals tactically engage with these structures in everyday interaction. Taken together, the two frameworks reinforce the central claim of this study: that language operates not merely as a communicative tool but as a vital mechanism for navigating power, asserting agency, and surviving in legally and socially hostile environments.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Kamenge, a site within Bujumbura, use language in their everyday practices. The research was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants lived experiences. Kamenge was purposively selected due to its visibility of sex work and relevance to the study objectives. Snowball sampling was used to recruit 15 CSWs, given the hidden nature of the population.

Done between July 2024 and January 2025, the study involved in-depth interviews with CSWs, 12 non-participant observation sessions, and key informant interviews with four local stakeholders- a gender officer, a police officer, a health officer, and a bar owner-providing multiple perspectives on the socio-linguistic and structural context of sex work in the area.

Forms and contexts of taboo language used by CSWs

Commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Bujumbura strategically deploy taboo language to navigate stigma, assert agency, and protect themselves in high-risk environments. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Politeness Theory, the data revealed that CSWs alternate between vulgar, euphemistic, and coded expressions depending on the social context, audience, and power dynamics.

Euphemisms were common when referring to sex, body parts, reproductive health, or the profession itself. These indirect expressions preserve dignity and minimize judgment. For example, *guswera* (to have sex) is softened to *tugende gato* ("let's go a bit"), while *imboro* (penis) becomes *ubugabo* ("manhood") or

inzanabibondo ("bringer of children"). Such substitutions maintain politeness, particularly in public or mixed company.

Table 1: Taboo and euphemistic language use

Taboo/Vulgar	Euphemism	English	Linguistic Implication
Guswera / Kurongora	Tugende gato / Umpe service	Have sex / Give service	Softens language, reduces shame
Imboro	Ubugabo / Inzanabibondo	Penis / Manhood	Reframes genitalia positively
Igituba / Igisundi	Igisabo	Vagina / Sacred vessel	Adds dignity, avoids vulgarity
Capote	Agakingirizo / Raincoat	Condom	Promotes protection, avoids direct mention
Umalaya / Maraya	Kazi ya usiku / Kuva mw'ibarabara	Prostitute / Night worker	Reduces stigma, avoids legal consequences
Ugukuramwo inda	Kuja ku saluni / Kwitaho	Abortion / Visit salon / Self-care	Conceals intent, avoids moral judgment

Taboo language in power and identity negotiation

Taboo expressions were also used to assert boundaries and confront disrespect. From a CDA perspective, CSWs employ

direct and often confrontational language to reposition themselves within power hierarchies. For example:

- "*Hii ni kazi yangu*" ("This is my work") – legitimizes sex work as labor.
- "*Fata ibyawe ujane*" ("Take your things and go") – signals refusal and self-respect.
- "*Ntakutukana mpaka unilipe*" ("I'll insult you until you pay") – uses swearing as economic enforcement.
- "*Useka nk'imbwa*" ("You laugh like a dog") – an animal insult to diminish male dominance.

These expressions reflect verbal resistance, emotional strength, and boundary maintenance in hostile encounters.

Discursive patterns and strategic language use

Common discourse strategies included repetition (e.g., *Toka! Toka!* – "Get out!"), metaphor (*masogisi* – "socks" for condoms), and code-switching between Kirundi, Kiswahili, and French to obscure meanings and establish solidarity. Gendered metaphors (*umuswa* – "termite") and ridicule further reinforced social positioning.

Emergent themes

Thematic analysis revealed four key ways CSWs engage taboo language:

Table 2: Emergent themes and examples

Theme	Example Expression	Translation
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Gender Role Reversal	"ATM irapfuye"	"The ATM is broken" (woman refusal to give men money)
Substance Use & Intoxication	"Sijanywa pombe, ni maziwa"	"It's milk, not beer" (sarcastic denial)
Ambiguous Solidarity via Slang	"Abazungu bari hafi"	"The whites are near" (police presence)
Language as Emotional Release	"Kuvuga nabi ni nk'akaruru ko kuguma uri muzima"	"Speaking rudely is like a scream for life"

These findings show CSWs use language to navigate power and resistance. The phrase "ATM irapfuye" ("The ATM is broken") is used by male sex workers targeting wealthy women, signaling a role reversal where men expect financial support. Sarcastic denials like "Sijanywa pombe, ni maziwa" ("It's milk, not beer") and warnings such as "Abazungu bari hafi" ("The whites are near") help conceal drunkenness and avoid police detection. Language also acts as emotional release, exemplified by "Kuvuga nabi ni nk'akaruru ko kuguma uri muzima" ("Speaking rudely is like a scream for life").

Core linguistic features in CSWs' taboo discourse

CSWs exhibited a multifunctional use of taboo language that combines emotional, pragmatic, and strategic goals. CDA highlights how swearing, threats, and insults assert power and resistance. Politeness Theory explains the use of euphemism, role-

shifting, and softened refusals in protecting face and mitigating conflict.

Table 3: Summary of core linguistic features

Linguistic Features	Function	Example
a. Swear words, threats, repetition	Resistance & Defense	"Mbwa wewe!" ("You dog!")
b. Euphemism, code-switching, implicature	Concealment & Solidarity	"Masogisi" ("socks" for condoms)
c. Gender inversion, slur reclamation	Identity & Empowerment	"Sisi malaya wa ukweli!" ("We are real whores!")
d. Figurative language (irony, hyperbole)	Emotional Coping & Social Commentary	"Maisha ya kishetani" ("Satanic life")
e. Politeness, role-shift, moral framing	Conflict Navigation & Social Framing	"Samahani mzee..." ("Sorry, sir...")
f. Speech acts (threat, promise, warning)	Persuasion & Transactional Enforcement	"Nitakupasua uso" ("I'll slash your face")

The linguistic features employed by CSWs in Kamenge reflect a strategic negotiation of power, identity, and survival within socially marginal contexts. Through swear words, threats, and repetition, speakers assert resistance and defend personal boundaries—practices that align with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which views language as a tool for challenging oppressive

structures (Fairclough, 2015; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Euphemisms, code-switching, and implicature function as covert strategies of concealment and solidarity, allowing CSWs to manage social risk while maintaining group cohesion, consistent with Gee's (2014) view of language as identity work within discourse communities.

Simultaneously, politeness strategies, role-shifting, and moral appeals illustrate how CSWs tactically preserve face and reframe interactions—key tenets in Politeness Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Locher & Watts, 2005). Figurative language such as irony and hyperbole enable emotional coping and subtle social critique, while gender role inversion and slur reclamation represent acts of identity redefinition and empowerment. Speech acts like threats and promises serve transactional and persuasive functions, reinforcing the idea that taboo expressions are not random but deeply functional, context-sensitive responses to social vulnerability and asymmetrical power relations.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complex, strategic role taboo language plays in the communicative practices of female commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Kamenge, Bujumbura. Vulgar insults, euphemisms, supernatural curses, and animal metaphors constitute a dynamic linguistic repertoire that enables CSWs to shape identity, negotiate power, and foster solidarity within a stigmatized and surveilled environment. These findings resonate with Allan and Burrige's (2006) assertion that taboo language is intricately linked to power, identity, and social control. For CSWs, such expressions are not mere emotional outbursts but serve as deliberate communicative strategies to assert autonomy, manage interpersonal risk, and maintain community cohesion.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, these linguistic practices reflect what Fairclough (2015) refers to as the "order of discourse"—structured patterns of language use shaped by systemic inequality. Vulgar insults, particularly those targeting male clients or authority figures, function as discursive acts of resistance against dominant patriarchal ideologies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Lazar, 2005). Simultaneously, Politeness Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Locher & Watts, 2005) reveals how these same CSWs tactically navigate face-threatening acts by employing honorifics, euphemisms, and indirectness, especially when addressing elders, police, or potential informants. The tension between directness and deference highlights the fluid nature of politeness in contexts marked by vulnerability and power asymmetry.

Multilingual code-switching between Kirundi, Kiswahili, and French further illustrates how CSWs manipulate linguistic resources to create in-group solidarity while excluding outsiders. The gendered nature of many insults—where CSWs adopt masculinized speech to perform strength—supports feminist CDA claims that gender is not merely reflected in discourse but actively constructed and contested through it (Lazar, 2005). Themes such as Gender Role Reversal and Masculinized Sex Work (GRRMS) reflect this strategic performance of gender, as women adopt linguistic traits culturally coded as male to assert dominance and reject subservience (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Similarly, men engage in sex work targeting rich white women or tourists, reversing traditional gender and economic roles by positioning themselves as the financially desired party.

Overall, taboo discourse among CSWs in Kamenge demonstrates that language serves both expressive and instrumental functions. Whether employed as therapeutic release

(Sehloko & Banda, 2021) or as political resistance, the calculated use of swearing, metaphor, irony, and indirect speech supports the view that taboo language is not deviant but functionally rich. Through the lens of CDA and Politeness Theory, it becomes clear that these linguistic acts are deeply embedded in social struggle, identity negotiation, and everyday survival strategies.

Conclusion

This study shows that commercial sex workers in Bujumbura use taboo language systematically as a multifunctional tool to navigate stigma. Vulgar terms, euphemisms, and metaphors help assert autonomy, maintain discretion, resist domination, and express emotion. Importantly, reversed gender roles also emerge, with men engaging wealthy women, challenging traditional power dynamics in sex work.

The findings contribute to the existing literature by offering context-specific insights from an under-researched region in sub-Saharan Africa. This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how language reflects power dynamics and social stigma in sex work within Bujumbura's multilingual urban spaces. It also uses Politeness Theory to explore how sex workers employ humor, euphemism, and indirectness as strategies to manage face and navigate emotional challenges. Together, these theories reveal how language functions both as a tool of resilience and as a means to assert agency in marginalized contexts.

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