



Swear Words as a Cultural Construct: How the F-Word is Not an F-Word

Thalia Qaulan Tsaqila^(✉) and Kamaludin Yusra

Magister English Education Study Program, University of Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia
thaliaqaulan@gmail.com

Abstract. The relationship between language and culture has long been an interesting object of study in the field of sociolinguistics. On one hand, culture is said to be shaped by language. On the other hand, language is stated to be constructed by culture. According to Sapir (1921), as a capability that man acquires by being a member of society, one might say that language is actually a part of culture. By this definition, hence, the nature of relationship between culture and other elements of language is self-explanatory; the elements—just like the overall language—are supposedly also interrelated to culture. Considering Sapir-Whorf's Hypothesis of linguistic relativity—this paper aims to explore the nature of relationship between culture and an element of language, namely, swear words. The analysis of data obtained through questionnaire and observation discovers different reactions to swear words of various languages from people of different cultural backgrounds. The findings eventually lead to the conclusion that culture is mainly responsible for the construction of profanities in different languages. In light of the findings, the Sapir-Whorf's Hypothesis is re-evaluated.

Keywords: Language · Culture · Swear Words · Cultural Construct

1 Introduction

Constituting a small part of every single language ever existed, swear words—also known as oath, cuss, profanities or curse words—are not uncommon to be encountered in today's world. As the 'growth' rate of the use of swear words keeps on increasing and increasing each year, swear words have started to draw some attention from researchers from many different fields of study attempting to study the taboo words from different perspectives. One of the many researches on swear words is the work of Sulpizio et al. [1] which attempts to discover how neurocognitive correlates of the language processing of taboo and non-taboo words are similar to one another, and how the processing of taboo words differ for the first and second language. Similarly, previous researchers, Christianson et al. [2] have also attempted to study the language processing of taboo words—though the work was less oriented on the cognitive neuroscience, unlike that of Sulpizio et al.'s [1]. Next, Dewaele [3] also conducted a study on swear words. Aiming at analyzing the different perception towards the emotional force of a swearword among multilinguals, he discovers that the perception is determined by variables such as the individual's linguistic and learning history as well as sociodemographic variable.

© The Author(s) 2023

A. Amrullah et al. (Eds.): ACCESS 2021, ASSEHR 686, pp. 222–231, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-21-3_25

Apart from the ones mentioned above, there are still plenty other researches on swear words; Andang & Bram's [4] work, for instance, attempts to explore how frequent swear words are used and what implication this has on English language teaching and learning. Vingerhoets, et al.'s work [5], on the other hand, decides to focus on viewing swearing from biopsychosocial perspective. Furthermore, there is also another study by Nicolau & Endriati [6], which aims at exploring different gender's attitudes towards profanities in school. Lastly, still related to the use of swear words among learners is the work of Amrullah's [7] which focuses on discovering the types of profanities commonly used by Indonesian learners in anger-stimulating situations.

This topic has been addressed in several studies [8–12]. However, despite there having been an abundance of studies on swear words and profanities and the fact that the range of topics on them varies broadly, a gap can still be spotted in the distribution of the topics. Specifically, there is a shortage in the number of researches dedicated to discuss swear words in its relation to culture.

Here, as reflected in the brief mention of the previous studies, studies on swear words commonly encompass a psycholinguistic account on swearword processing on human's brain [1, 2], an analysis on the translation of swear words in various settings [13, 14], a discussion on swear words in relation to pedagogy [4, 15], and many others. However, as observed, none of the topics presented seems to involve cultural analysis. The lack of studies focusing on the cultural analysis of swear words hence suggests that the relation between language and culture has been overlooked for this subject.

Humans, language and culture are inseparable from one another for they will always influence and complete each other [16]. There is no question as to why this is the case for human. After all, there wouldn't be any language, nor culture, if human didn't exist. The reasoning behind the relationship between language and culture, however, needs a little more elaboration. Questions such as 'what is the nature of the relationship' and 'to what extent does one influence another' are some of the most fundamental concepts sought to be answered in the study of the relationship of language and culture.

Due to its complexity, then, the relationship between the two has long been discussed in the field of linguistics and even anthropology. Among the very first scholars to ever propose a theory about this relationship is Sapir [17], which regards language as a part of culture due to its acquisition coming from being a member of society. Another theory on this subject comes from Whorf [18], who concludes that the grammar of a language spoken by a tribe bears some sort of relation to the culture of said tribe. Next, there is also another infamous concept on language and culture, which is, language as culture. In this concept, language is, at one point, viewed as '*a culturally organized and culturally organizing domain*' (Duranti, 2003, p. 329).

Despite proposed more than half a century ago, the theory of Sapir's [17] remains commonly accepted (Jiang, 2000), and hence is still referred to up to this day. In fact, his theory, along with Whorf's are combined to form one extremely popular theory on language and culture, namely, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This hypothesis, in short, claims that the language we use actually influence the way we see the world [19]. Conversely, the way we see the world is also influencing the language we use.

Now, circling back to the discussion surrounding swear words, as stated before, a quick look at the list of previous studies conducted on this subject indicates that

very few—might be none, even—studies have attempted to view swear words from the perspectives of theories of language and culture. Indeed, some researchers have conducted a sociolinguistic study on the taboo [20–22]. However, it seems that none of them have actually attempted to do an analysis on swear words on the basis of the one famous theory: the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

As recalled, the major idea of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is that language influences the way someone thinks, and on a major scale, culture. However, does the same principle also apply for swear words? On the ground that swear words are a small part of the lexicon that made up our language, this should be the case. Here, in the hope of gaining some insights on this, this study is hence conducted, aiming at answering the following questions: 1) Is there any correlation between the view of swear words and culture? 2) Should it be proven that there indeed exists such connection, what is the nature of this relation? Is culture influenced by the swear words or vice versa? 3) What implication do the findings have on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?

2 Review of Related Literature

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Linguistic Relativity

In short, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that *human thought is shaped by language, leading speakers of different languages to think differently*' [23].

Obtaining its main concept and theory from the work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis consist of two different tenets, namely, linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism [24]. The first tenet—linguistic relativity—circles around the idea that the differences in the structure of two different language are generally parallel with the differences in the native speakers of said languages' non-linguistic cognitive ability. In other words, it suggests that all native speakers of any language perceive and view the world differently from one another [19]. Meanwhile, the second tenet, linguistic determinism, argues that our language determines our thinking. That is, the structure of our language—language systems, to put it in Hussein's [25] word—can strongly—put an emphasis on strongly—influence and determine the way we perceive and view the world.

However, though many examples had been proposed by both Sapir and Whorf in the support of both linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity, the two so-called associated principles of Sapir-Whorf's Hypothesis above remains generally rejected by the linguistic community. Often regarded as 'the extreme version of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, this version is slowly put aside by a 'weaker', 'more moderate' version of this hypothesis, that is, one that regards language is merely 'influencing' our perception of the world. This version is different from the extreme version in regards to [19]:

1. the way it emphasizes that language merely 'influences' thinking, and not 'determines'—that is, definitely decides on—it;
2. the nature of the relationship between our language and thoughts. In this weaker version of Sapir-Whorf's Hypothesis, the relationship between the two is two-ways. Hence, instead of language having the prerogative 'right' to determine our thinking, both language and our thinking influence one another;

3. which ‘domain’ is subject to influence. Here, the weaker version of Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis focuses not on the difference across languages, but rather, within a language;
4. the way it put emphasis on social context and not on linguistic considerations.

3 Methods

This study is a descriptive qualitative study aiming at unearthing the nature of relationship between the view of swear words and culture. The data were collected using two different methods, namely, (online) questionnaire and participant observation. Participant observation was conducted to discover the actual use of swear words in various social settings involving people of different cultural backgrounds. The data gathered from the questionnaire would be used to determine if there exists any connection between the view of swear words and culture. For online questionnaire, the study used snowball sampling also known as chain-referral sampling. The questionnaire encompassed questions such as ‘*What is your first language?*’, ‘*What culture were you raised in?*’ as well as instructions such as ‘*List the languages you have come to understand on the basis of how offensive you view the swear words are*’.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

In one month, the online questionnaire was filled by 135 people. Upon further inspection on the answers, however, 21 were found ineligible for study, leaving only 114 for consideration. This was mainly caused by the subjects’ accidentally leaving some crucial questions unanswered, and therefore their data couldn’t be analyzed. In addition, some subjects had also failed to provide the correct answer for the questions, and hence their answers cannot be used to draw any conclusion (e.g., three subjects mistakenly perceived the question of ‘*What is your first language*’—translated into ‘*Apa bahasa ibu anda?*’ in Indonesia—as inquiring for the language their mother speaks).

As for the subjects’ background—since the only personal information gathered is that regarding the cultural and lingual background of the subjects, the study hence merely focuses on these aspects. In regards to cultural backgrounds, some subjects were raised in multicultural environment, while some weren’t. This is the same for lingual background; though mostly multilinguals, some are simultaneous multilinguals, while some have just started acquiring a new language as second/foreign language. In short, the subjects’ cultural and lingual background can be seen in Tables 1 and 2. When looking at the numbers, however, it should be noted that: 1) since the questionnaire imposed no precise boundaries on how fluent someone must be to be regarded as ‘speaking said language’, the data was set solely on the subject’s subjective judgement; 2) though most subjects were raised in only one culture, by the time of the study, all subjects are already exposed to more than one cultures.

Table 1. Subject’s Lingual Background

Monolingual	Multilingual
3	111

Table 2. Subject’s Cultural Background

Raised in only one culture	Raised in a multicultural family
91	23

4.1.1 Swear Words and Culture

The data for swear words were collected in the form of list. The subjects were asked to make a list by ordering the languages whose swear words they are familiar with. The languages were ordered on the basis on how offensive the subjects think the swear words for said language are (for them respectively). The subjects’ lists were then checked for correlation with the subjects’ culture. Here, the lists were separated into five different categories based on how they relate with the subjects’ culture. The first category is ‘*own’s culture*’. If a list is in this category, it means that the most offensive swear words for the subjects correspond with the language used in the culture they were raised in (e.g., Sasaknese was born and raised in Sasak culture, and he finds Sasak swear words to be the most offensive). The second category is ‘*family’s culture*’. If a list is in this category, then, the most offensive swear words for the subjects are those of the language spoken in their family’s culture (e.g., the Sasak people was born and raised in the Sasak culture. However, parts of his family are from the Bima community who practice the Bima culture. He then finds swear words from the Bima language to be the most offensive). Next is ‘*environment’s culture*’. This is mainly applied for the subjects who were living alone, away from their family. If the list is in this category, it means that they consider the swear words of the language spoken in the culture of their surrounding environment to be the most offensive (e.g., Javanese born and raised in Java culture moved and lived in the Sasak culture, and he in turns finds swear words of the Sasak language as the most offensive ones). The fourth category is ‘*friends’ culture*’. If a list is in this category, the subject hence thinks that the most offensive swear words are those spoken in their close friends’ culture (e.g., a Balinese born and raised in Bali culture has a friend born and raised in the Sasak culture. The Balinese then thinks swear words in the Sasak language are the most offensive). Lastly, there is also the category of ‘*unexplainable*’. In this case, the swear words the subjects find to be the most offensive don’t correspond to neither his own, his family’s or his environment’s culture. Hence, the list seems to be ‘groundless’ and therefore needs further analysis and explanation (e.g., the Sasak person who were born and raised in the Sasak culture, with family and surrounding environment also practicing the Sasak culture, is finding Indonesian swear words to be the most offensive). Figure 1 indicates the distribution for the lists.

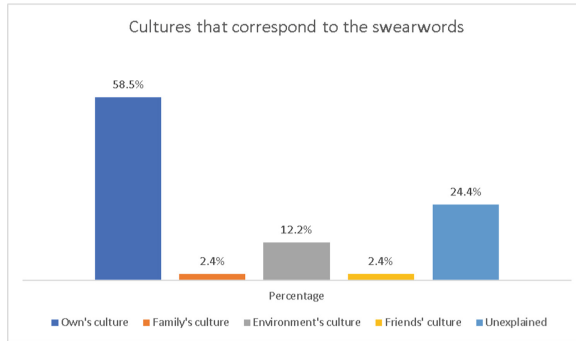


Fig. 1. The Distribution of Cultures that Corresponds to The Swear words

As seen from above, most of the subjects think that the swear words in their own culture (or rather, the language used in said culture) are the most offensive (51.6%). This is weirdly followed by what seem to be ‘unexplained’ case at 26.8%. Nevertheless, in truth, none of the unexplained cases can’t actually be explained.

Indeed, the swear words don’t correspond to any of the culture. However, they do correspond to the subjects’ first and second languages. Here, most of the cases from the unexplainable are concerned with the subjects who think that the most offensive swear words are those of Indonesian. This is despite the cultures they were born and raised in, the cultures of their family and friends, as well as the culture in their surrounding environment. There seems to be no ‘Indonesian culture’ whatsoever on the list, nor does it actually exist in real life. However, a quick look at the subjects’ list of first and second language solve the mystery; it appears that the subjects are all simultaneous multilinguals who acquired both Indonesian and the language spoken in their culture at the same time. Moreover, they all claimed that they use Indonesian on a daily basis: to communicate with their family, surrounding environment, or friends. Hence, here, Indonesian is the language they mostly use to communicate. In some of the cases, the subjects were raised in, say, Culture A, before they moved to Culture B. Here, in communicating with the people of Culture B, they opt to using Indonesian.

As recalled, the study used two different methods of data collection—namely, online questionnaire and participant observation. As for the later, the findings from participant observation turn out to be mainly in line with those from the online questionnaire. That is, it was discovered that the connection that swear words and cultures share such as those above extends to not only verbal swear words, but also swearing gestures. For instance, it was observed that people, when shown two different hand gestures—both showing the same profanities (i.e., the equivalent of the F-word in English)—always regard the *middle finger* one as the less offensive one. Meanwhile, the Indonesian gesture was always regarded as the more offensive one, even drawing in the reaction of gasping, bulging eyes, and a shocked face.

Moreover, in regards to data collection using participant observation, some interesting discoveries came in the form of subtle behaviors from the subjects of observation when presented with swear words. The notables for this would be discussed down below:

4.1.2 The Case of Cultural Differences

One interesting case came from when two people of different cultural background were presented with the same swear words. Here, out of the two people, one was of Sasak origin, born and raised in Sasak Culture, and is fluent in Sasaknese (Person A). The other was born into a family who adopted Bali and Java culture and was of mixed origin (Person B). The later, despite born in Lombok, had never gotten in a really close contact with Sasak culture, and was not fluent in Sasak.

On one occasion where Person A and Person B were sitting together, they were suddenly presented by a string of swear words by Person C. At that point, Person A and B both reacted to the same words differently. In response to the swear words, Person A dropped her jaw, and immediately scolded Person C for uttering such words. On the contrary, at the moment of presentation, that is, when the swear words were uttered, Person B, instead, began smiling. This was then followed by a confused expression when she saw Person A scold Person C.

In this situation, it should be noted that, even though Person B was not fluent in Sasaknese, the swear words uttered were not novel for her. She had, in fact, encountered the swear words before and had understood the meaning they conveyed.

On another occasion, Person C of Sasak origin was teaching Person A how to say the word ‘dog’ in Balinese. Upon learning a new vocabulary in a new language, Person A kept on repeating the word playfully. Hearing this, Person B of Bali origin looked rather concerned, and asked Person A to stop or to at least lower her voice. Person A diminished the request and kept on repeating the word on several occasions throughout the day, in public.

4.1.3 The Case of Bobo

Another interesting case worth noting came from an interaction between a mother and her 7-year-old son (of Sasak origin). When going out, they both encountered a dog. The son, upon seeing a familiar animal, called out the dog using its name in Sasak language. The mother gently told her son not to use the word. She said that it was rude to call out the Sasak word for dog, even though there indeed was present, a dog in the context. She asked him to call the dog using another word—sort of a nickname—that is, *bobo*. This occurred throughout childhood, and years later, when the son who is now an adult encountered another dog and wanted to call it, he did not use the Sasak word to call for dog—but instead, the grown man used the word *bobo*.

4.1.4 A Case of F-word in EFL World

The last occasion worth noting is that involving a classroom setting in a prestigious Senior High School in Mataram City. Coming from the same academic background of a (well) educated school, all of the students had been learning English for some times, and were generally aware of some vocabularies in English, including swear words. Both in casual occasion and during school break, some students were exchanging the gesture *middle finger* with each other. It didn’t occur all the time, but at the moment of its exchange, there were no comments coming from any of the other students. In addition, the students were also inclined to using verbal swear words of English—two of which are the widely

known *F-word* and the vocab *shit*. This occurred within groups of students and even in the large setting of classroom, both in front of or behind the honor and the religious students. When presented with such language, the honor student stays quiet, but didn't look offended. When interviewed, the students uttering the swear words light-heartedly said they had never regarded the swear words and cussing gesture as an actual act of cussing, despite knowing full well what the words represent. Both light-hearted reaction and swear words utterance are only acceptable for the F-word of English language.

4.2 Discussion

The discussion will be presented in the light of the previous three research questions. The first and second questions mainly concern about the correlation between the view of swear words and culture as well as the nature of this relation. In regards to this, the answer for the first questions is hence a positive affirmation: yes, there is a correlation between the view of swear words and culture. The answer can be seen from the data presented in Fig. 1, in which there seems to be a continuous trend where the culture of a speaker is corresponding with how he perceives the level of offensiveness of a swearword. Here, certainly, a conclusion can't just be drawn from any data obtained. However, as the whole data are showing a similar draw on language towards culture, it is hence safe to assume that such assumption is true.

The second research question concerns about the nature on the relationship between language and culture should such relationship exists. Here, we would like to analyze this in the light of two different views, namely that language influences culture and culture influences language. That is, which direction is true?

In order to answer this question, we would hence need to draw some generalization from the data presented. As stated previously on the *findings* section, the order of the languages inside the list were based on the how offensive the swear words of said language is perceived by the subjects. In most of the cases, the language is perceived as being more offensive when the culture in which the language is spoken is the subjects' own culture. Moreover, swear words will also be considered more offensive if it is in the language commonly used by the subjects to communicate. Lastly, they are also considered as more offensive when they are in the languages spoken in the culture of the subjects' surrounding environment. Here, it seems that the way the swear words were viewed was based on the subjects' culture. From these conclusions, we are now able to see the direction of influence in the relationship between culture and swear words. That is, the culture seems to be the one influencing how the swear words are viewed.

The third research question is concerned about the implication the findings have on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. As recalled, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argues that *human thought is shaped by language, leading speakers of different languages to think differently*' [23]. Hence, taking this into account, it seems that this hypothesis is rejected in the light of recent findings. This is because, in regards to the current data, it seems that culture or at least our process of thoughts are actually influencing our language. However, if one is to take into account Chandler's [19] points on the way the weaker version of the hypothesis poses a two-way road between language and culture, it might be possible that this study is actually providing new evidence on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

References

1. Sulpizio, S., et al. (2019). Are you really cursing? Neural processing of taboo words in native and foreign language. *Brain and Language*, 194, 84–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandl.2019.05.003>
2. Christianson, K., Zhou, P., Palmer, C., & Raizen, A. (2017). Effects of context and individual differences on the processing of taboo words. *Acta Pathologica, Microbiologica, et Immunologica Scandinavica*, 178, 73–86. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2017.05.012>
3. Dewaele, J. M. (2004). The emotional force of swear words and taboo words in the speech of multilinguals. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(2–3), 204–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630408666529>
4. Andang, K., & Bram, B. (2018). Swear words and their implications for English language learning-teaching. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 21(1), 43–49.
5. Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M., Bylsma, L. M., & de Vlam, C. (2013). Swearing: A biopsychosocial perspective. *Psihologijiske Teme*, 22(2), 287–304.
6. Nicolau, M. F. S., Sukanto, K. E. (2014). Male and female attitudes towards swear words: A case study at Binus International School. *k@ta*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.9744/kata.16.2.71-76>
7. Amrullah, L. (2016). English swear words by Indonesian learners. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*, 1(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.21462/jeltl.v1i1.2>
8. Kristiano, J. T., & Ardi, P. (2018). Swear words in Bad Boys II: A semantic analysis. *LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 21(2), 191–198. <https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.2018.210208>
9. Bednarek, M. (2019). ‘Don’t say crap. Don’t use swear words.’—Negotiating the use of swear/taboo words in the narrative mass media. *Discourse, Context Media*, 29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.02.002>
10. Feng, R. (2020). A social perspective to the use of swear words. 理論語言學及應用語言學中的語料庫研究英文版, p. 120.
11. Huijberts, C. (2021). Damn, that’s appealing! A study on the effectiveness of Dutch and English swear words in advertisements targeted at young, Dutch audiences.
12. Wintari, D. P. A., Ramendra, D. P., Juniarta, P. A. K. (2021). *The analysis of swear words used by the children in Bungkulan village especially in Banjar Dinas Satria*. Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha.
13. Islakhiyah, I. (2019). *The linguistic and cultural variations of Arabic swearword subtitle translation on American movies*. Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim.
14. Gedik, T. A. (2020). Translation of Turkish swear words in subtitling: GORA. *International Journal of English Language and Translation Studies*, 8, 19–26.
15. Damayanti, M., Kemal, E., & Rahmat, W. (2021). Category, type and motive of swear words in Pasa Lauak, Sungai Baramah, Lubuk Begalung District in Covid pandemic as language learning. *Curricula: Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 6(1), 25–32.
16. Hardiyanti, D. (2011). Hipotesis Sapir-Whorf dan Tata Pergaulan Generasi Muda. *Lensa Kajian Kebahasaan, Kesusastraan, dan Budaya*, 1(1), 57–65.
17. Kay, P., & Kempton, W. (1984). What Is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis? *American Anthropologist*, 86(1), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1984.86.1.02a00050>
18. Werner, O. (1994). Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 7, 3656–3662.
19. Chandler, D. (1994). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.
20. Goddard, C. (2015). ‘Swear words’ and ‘curse words’ in Australian (and American) English. At the crossroads of pragmatics, semantics and sociolinguistics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 12(2), 189–218. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2015-0010>

21. Lestari, P. S., Asridayani, A., & Magria, V. (2019). A sociolinguistic analysis of Taboo and Swear word in *Deadpool: A movie by Tim Miller*. *Krinok Jurnal Linguistik Budaya*, 4(1).
22. Sajarwa, S. (2021). Swear words in French: Analysis of social class and gender. *Humanus*, 20(2), 139–152.
23. Regier, T., & Xu, Y. (2017). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and inference under uncertainty. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science*, 8(6). <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1440>
24. Au, T. K. F. (1983). Chinese and English counterfactuals: The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis revisited. *Cognition*, 15(1–3), 155–187. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277\(83\)90038-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277(83)90038-0)
25. Hussein, B. A. S. (2012). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis today. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(3), 642–646. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.3.642-646>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

