



SEMANTIC STUDY OF CULTURAL MEANINGS IN TRADITIONAL BATAK EXPRESSIONS IN TRADITIONAL DEATH EVENTS

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Abstract

This research examines the traditional words and phrases used by the Batak people during death ceremonies. These ceremonies play a significant role in Batak culture and are filled with unique expressions that reflect the Batak people's perspectives on life, death, and the afterlife. The aim of this study is to explore the meaning behind these expressions. Adopting a semantic approach, the study focuses on the meaning of the words and how they reflect Batak beliefs and values. Examples of traditional expressions used during funerals are collected and analysed to reveal their connection to Batak culture. Some of these expressions refer to the journey of the soul, the role of ancestors, and the importance of family and respect. These phrases often use metaphors or symbolic language, making them rich in meaning. For instance, death is occasionally depicted as a voyage or a homecoming to a sacred place. The findings demonstrate that Batak expressions used in death rituals are not just words, they carry profound cultural significance and play a vital role in preserving traditions. This research helps to preserve Batak heritage, demonstrating the important role that language plays in cultural identity.

Keywords: *Semantic analysis, Batak culture, Traditional expression, Death ritual, and Cultural meaning*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kata-kata dan ungkapan tradisional yang digunakan oleh masyarakat Batak selama upacara kematian. Upacara-upacara ini memegang peranan penting dalam budaya Batak dan dipenuhi dengan ungkapan-ungkapan unik yang mencerminkan pandangan masyarakat Batak tentang kehidupan, kematian, dan kehidupan setelah kematian. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi makna di balik ungkapan-ungkapan tersebut. Dengan pendekatan semantik, penelitian ini berfokus pada makna kata-kata dan bagaimana mereka mencerminkan keyakinan dan nilai-nilai Batak. Contoh ungkapan tradisional yang digunakan selama pemakaman dikumpulkan dan dianalisis untuk mengungkapkan hubungannya dengan budaya Batak. Beberapa ungkapan ini merujuk pada perjalanan jiwa, peran leluhur, dan pentingnya keluarga serta penghormatan. Ungkapan-ungkapan ini sering menggunakan metafora atau bahasa simbolis, sehingga kaya akan makna. Misalnya, kematian kadang-kadang digambarkan sebagai perjalanan atau kepulangan ke tempat suci. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ungkapan-ungkapan Batak yang digunakan dalam upacara kematian bukan sekadar kata-kata, melainkan mengandung makna budaya yang mendalam dan berperan penting dalam melestarikan tradisi. Penelitian ini membantu melestarikan warisan Batak, menunjukkan peran penting bahasa dalam identitas budaya.

Kata Kunci: *Analisis semantik, Budaya Batak, Ekspresi tradisional, Ritual kematian, dan Makna budaya*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Batak people are an ethnic group from North Sumatra in Indonesia. They have a rich culture that includes traditional ceremonies, languages and beliefs. One of the most important of these is the death ritual. This ceremony is a time not only to say goodbye, but also to show respect to the deceased and their ancestors. During these traditional death ceremonies, the Batak people use many special expressions. These are not ordinary words. They have deep meanings and are often full of symbols, metaphors, and cultural values. For instance, death is sometimes described as a journey to the afterlife or a return to the world of the ancestors. Such expressions help us to understand the Batak perspective on life and death.

However, many young people today do not fully understand the meanings of these traditional expressions. As time goes on, some of these words and phrases may be forgotten. This is why this research is important. By studying the language used in Batak death rituals, we can help preserve Batak culture and ensure that the values and beliefs of our ancestors are not forgotten.

This research focuses on the semantic meaning of traditional Batak expressions used at funerals. Semantics is the study of what words mean, both directly and indirectly. By examining the meanings behind these expressions, we can gain insight into the Batak worldview, their respect for ancestors, and their perception of life and death.

According to Geertz (1973) cited in Khairani & Wiradnyana (2023), culture is a system of symbols and meanings. In Batak death rituals, the traditional expressions used form part of this symbolic system. These expressions are not just ways of speaking; they convey profound meanings about life, death, family and the afterlife.

Anna Wierzbicka (1992), a linguistic anthropologist, explains that every culture has what she calls 'cultural scripts'. These are common ways of thinking and speaking that are unique to a certain group of people. In Batak rituals, expressions such as prayers, blessings and farewell words reflect the thoughts of the Batak people about death and their connection to their ancestors. These words reflect shared beliefs and emotions that have been passed down through generations.

According to Simanjuntak (2002) cited in Tobing (2025), a Batak cultural researcher, death rituals such as Mangokal Holi and Patang Puluhan use language to

demonstrate respect and fulfil spiritual obligations. The use of kinship terms (such as 'amang', 'inang' and 'ompung') and ritual phrases shows how deeply language is connected to family structure and spiritual beliefs in Batak culture.

Other researchers, such as Siahaan (2005), also note that Batak expressions used in death ceremonies are full of metaphors. For instance, death is often described as a 'journey' (mangalului) or a 'return' (pulang tu asal) to the origin. These metaphors demonstrate that the Batak people view death not as an end, but as a transition to another realm.

These expert insights highlight the importance of studying traditional Batak expressions. Language is not only a means of communication; it also plays a crucial role in preserving culture, showcasing identity, and connecting with ancestors. However, as modernisation continues, fewer young Batak people understand these traditional expressions, and many are at risk of being forgotten.

Research Problem

In Batak death ceremonies, people use special traditional expressions full of meaning. These words are used to honour the deceased, comfort the family and send messages to the ancestors. They demonstrate the Batak people's beliefs regarding death, the afterlife and their respect for their ancestors.

However, many young Batak people today do not understand these expressions. Some words are no longer used in everyday life and their meanings are not clearly explained. Consequently, important aspects of Batak culture are gradually being forgotten.

Furthermore, few studies explain the meanings of these traditional expressions in detail. Most research focuses on rituals rather than language. This makes it difficult to understand what the expressions really mean and why they are important.

Many traditional Batak expressions used in death rituals are not well understood, and their meanings are being forgotten. There is a need to study these expressions to help preserve Batak culture and language?

Research Objective

The main purpose of this research is to understand the meaning of traditional Batak expressions used during death rituals. The study will focus on the special words and phrases spoken during these important ceremonies in order to help preserve Batak culture.

This research will identify the traditional expressions commonly used when someone passes away in Batak culture. It will then explain the deeper cultural and emotional meanings of these expressions, as well as their direct translations. The study will also examine how these expressions reflect Batak beliefs regarding death, ancestor worship, and the afterlife.

Through this analysis, the study intends to demonstrate the significance of traditional expressions in maintaining Batak cultural values. The study will also support efforts to preserve the Batak language, particularly among the younger generation who may not fully understand or use these expressions today.

II. PREVIOUS WORKS

According to Geertz (1973), culture is a system of symbols, with language being one of the most important tools for expressing them. In Batak death rituals, traditional expressions carry deep cultural significance. However, many researchers have only discussed the ceremonies themselves, rather than the language used in them.

And according to Wierzbicka (1992), language reflects how people from different cultures think and feel. By studying the meanings of Batak expressions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the Batak people's unique perspective on death and the afterlife.

This research is also important because, as Siahaan (2005) explained, many young Batak people today neither use nor understand traditional expressions. If these expressions are not studied and recorded, they may disappear in the future. This study can help safeguard this knowledge for future generations.

Furthermore, this research contributes something new to academic studies. While many researchers, such as Simanjuntak (2002), have focused on the rituals themselves, this study focuses on the meanings of the words used in those rituals. This could be useful for researchers in the fields of language, culture and anthropology.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative approach, focusing on understanding meanings rather than numbers. The study examines traditional Batak expressions used during death ceremonies, explaining their significance in the cultural and spiritual life of the Batak people. This qualitative method enables the researcher to explore the language, beliefs and values shown through these expressions. The research uses a descriptive method. This means the researcher will describe and explain the expressions in detail. The aim is to understand the meaning of the expressions, how they are used and their significance within the Batak community.

To collect data, the researcher will interview people knowledgeable about Batak traditions, such as elders, cultural leaders and family members who have participated in traditional death rituals. These interviews will help the researcher to understand the meanings of the expressions and how they are used in real situations. If permission is given, the researcher will also observe traditional ceremonies to hear the expressions spoken during the rituals. Additionally, the researcher will study written materials such as books, articles and recorded texts that feature traditional Batak expressions.

Once all the information has been gathered, the researcher will study the meanings of the expressions. This will include both the basic meaning of the words and the deeper cultural meaning. The expressions will then be analysed to demonstrate how they reflect Batak beliefs concerning death, ancestors and the journey of the soul. This research design aims to provide a clear explanation of the traditional language used in Batak death rituals and demonstrate its importance in preserving Batak culture.

Research Subject

The subject of this research is the traditional expressions used by the Batak people during death rituals. This research focuses on the traditional expressions used by the Batak people during death rituals. These expressions form part of the cultural heritage passed down through generations, and are typically recited by elders, traditional leaders or family members during funeral ceremonies. This study focuses on the language used in these situations, particularly how words reflect the Batak people's beliefs about death, the afterlife and respect for ancestors.

Those involved in the research will be Batak community members who still practise traditional death rituals. These include older individuals with extensive knowledge of Batak customs and culture, as well as traditional speakers or ritual leaders who frequently participate in funeral ceremonies. These individuals have been selected because they can provide accurate explanations of the meaning and usage of traditional expressions.

By focusing on these subjects, the research aims to understand the words themselves and the cultural values behind them. This will help to preserve the language and enable younger generations and researchers to learn about Batak traditions in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Research Object

This research focuses on the traditional expressions used in Batak death rituals. These expressions play an important role in the ceremonies and convey profound meanings related to Batak culture, beliefs and values. The research examines the language spoken during the rituals, particularly the specific words, phrases and sentences used to honour the deceased, console the family and pay respect to the ancestors.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS, RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis in this study was conducted to understand the meaning of traditional Batak expressions used in death ceremonies. After collecting data through interviews, observations and literature studies, the researcher will categorise the expressions found based on their use in the ritual. Each expression will be analysed for both its literal and cultural meanings. The literal meaning is what the word means directly, while the cultural meaning is what it symbolises or represents in Batak culture. The study employs a semantic approach to determine the meaning of words and how they reflect the Batak people's values, beliefs, and worldview regarding death, ancestral spirits, and the afterlife. Expressions containing metaphors or symbols will be examined in more depth to reveal their hidden meaning. To ensure the analysis's results are precise, the researcher will compare the meanings found with explanations from traditional leaders, as well as references from books and previous research. The results

of this analysis are expected to provide a clear understanding of the important role of traditional language in Batak death ceremonies, demonstrating how it forms part of the identity and cultural heritage that must be preserved.

1. Batak Culture in the Context of Death Rituals

Batak culture is one of the ethnic cultures rich in traditions and strong customary values, especially in the practice of death rituals. In Batak society, death is not the end of everything, but the beginning of a spiritual journey to the ancestral realm. Therefore, death rituals are a very sacred and meaningful moment for families and communities. According to Simanjuntak (2018), in his research on the Batak Toba death ceremony, death rituals such as saur matua function as a form of the highest respect given to the deceased, especially for those who have met customary requirements such as having complete descendants and living according to cultural values. This ritual not only involves religious and spiritual aspects, but also social aspects that strengthen the bonds between family members and the wider community.

This is in line with the opinion of Nasution (2016), who explains that death rituals in Batak culture not only function as a procession of releasing the body, but also as a means of social and cultural unification. The ceremony involves various elements such as traditional gondang music, tortor dance, and the use of indigenous language rich in symbolism, all of which play an important role in conveying cultural values and maintaining the continuity of tradition. Furthermore, death rites in Batak society also reflect cosmology and beliefs about the supernatural. As stated by Sitorus (2019), the Batak people believe that the soul of the deceased will travel to the ancestral realm, where it will join its ancestors. This belief strengthens the meaning of death rituals as a form of respect as well as a guide for the soul on its spiritual journey.

In this context, traditional language and expressions play a central role in death rituals. The expressions uttered during the ceremony not only function as verbal communication, but also as expressions of deep cultural and spiritual values. For example, the expression saur matua contains the meaning of honor and success in a person's life in the Batak customary view, indicating that the person has achieved social and family perfection. This cultural approach to death rituals shows that the Batak people view death not only as a loss, but as a meaningful transformation and

strengthening of cultural identity. As explained by Hutagalung (2017), death ceremonies serve as a social vehicle to strengthen family and community solidarity and maintain the continuity of customary values that are the basis of life together.

Thus, death rituals in Batak culture are not just hereditary traditions, but rather a complex system that combines religious, social, and cultural aspects into one complete whole. This ritual is a reflection of how the Batak people understand the meaning of life and death, and maintain harmony between the human world and the ancestral world.

2. Semantic Study of Traditional Batak Expressions

Traditional expressions in Batak culture are an important part of communication that contain broader meanings than just the literal meaning of words. In the context of death rituals, the Batak traditional language is filled with expressions that are full of symbolic and cultural meanings. Therefore, a semantic approach is very relevant to explore the meanings contained in the language. According to Tarigan (2015), semantics is the study of meaning in language, including the meaning of words, sentences, and expressions in social and cultural contexts. In Batak culture, many traditional expressions contain metaphorical, symbolic, and cultural meanings that can only be fully understood when viewed in the context of the customs and beliefs of the community.

For example, an expression such as **molo dohot ompung** in a death ceremony not only means "already with the ancestors", but also implies a belief in the journey of the soul returning to its origin and being accepted into the ancestral community. This expression holds spiritual and symbolic values that strengthen the relationship between the living and the deceased. This is emphasized by Sitompul (2017) who emphasized the importance of semantic understanding to reveal layers of meaning in the Batak traditional language contained in ritual expressions.

Furthermore, Djafar (2019) revealed that in Batak culture, traditional language not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a medium for preserving cultural values. Traditional expressions used in death rituals contain moral messages, social norms, and cosmological views that are implicitly implied. Therefore, semantic studies are an important tool for documenting and analyzing how these meanings are constructed and accepted socially.

The semantic approach in this study does not only focus on lexical meaning, but also contextual meanings that are influenced by social and cultural situations. This is in line with Nida's opinion (1964) which states that the meaning of an expression is highly dependent on the context of use and cultural interpretation. Therefore, to understand the expressions in the Batak death ritual as a whole, it is necessary to conduct a semantic analysis that takes into account the context of customs and beliefs of the Batak people. Thus, the semantic study of traditional Batak expressions opens up opportunities to understand how Batak people interpret life, death, and relationships with ancestors through language. This is also a form of preserving a very valuable oral culture, especially in the modern era which is starting to shift the use of traditional languages.

3. The Relationship between Traditional Expressions, Death Rituals, and Cultural Meaning

Traditional expressions in the death rituals of the Batak people are not just words or sentences that are spoken routinely, but also an important means of conveying deep cultural and spiritual meanings. The language in the ritual becomes a medium that connects the real world and the spiritual world, while strengthening the social and cultural identity of the Batak community. According to Bruner (1990), language has an important function as a tool for constructing social and cultural meanings. In the context of the Batak death ritual, traditional expressions not only inform the condition of a person who has died, but also convey values that are upheld by the community, such as respect for ancestors, family solidarity, and belief in the survival of the soul. In line with this, Geertz (1973) emphasized the importance of symbols and rituals as a means of understanding culture in depth. Traditional expressions used during death rituals contain symbolism that communicates the Batak people's view of life and death as a continuous cycle, as well as the relationship between humans and the supernatural. Research by Hutagalung (2017) shows that Batak death rituals with their traditional expressions are able to strengthen social ties in society, as well as being a means of cultural education for the younger generation. These expressions contain moral values and social norms that are important to be passed on so that cultural identity is not lost over time.

Furthermore, Tarigan (2015) stated that the meaning in traditional expressions cannot be separated from the cultural context in which the expressions appear. In death rituals, these expressions become part of the communication process that strengthens a

sense of togetherness and respect for Batak traditional values. Thus, traditional expressions in death rituals are a manifestation of language that functions as a conveyor of cultural and spiritual meaning as well as a tool for social unification. Through semantic studies, these meanings can be revealed in more depth so as to provide a more complete understanding of how the Batak people interpret death and maintain the continuity of their traditions.

4. Traditional Terms and Sentences in Batak Death Rituals

To understand the cultural and spiritual significance of Batak death rituals, it is important to recognise the traditional terms and phrases used during the procession. These expressions serve not only as a means of ordinary communication, but also contain symbolic values that reinforce the meaning of the ritual. Through this rich, meaningful language, the Batak community pays respect to the deceased while strengthening social and spiritual bonds between community members. Some terms and phrases often used in Batak death rituals, along with their meanings, are listed below.

'Saur Matua' refers to a person who has lived a full life and had many children. This expression shows special respect for someone who has been considered to have lived a life according to custom.

'Molo Dohot Ompung' means *'to have been with the ancestors'*. It symbolises the belief that the soul of the deceased returns and reunites with their ancestors in the ancestral realm.

'Mangalusi Roha' means *'soothing the heart'* and is used to comfort grieving families and help them accept the reality of death.

'Tubu ni Roha' or *'regret of the heart'* describes the deep feelings of grief and loss experienced by the family and community during the funeral procession.

Each of these expressions, when studied semantically, reveals layers of meaning that go beyond their literal translations. They embody Batak values such as respect for elders, the importance of kinship, belief in an afterlife, and communal solidarity. Through these expressions, the Batak people maintain a strong connection with their heritage, using language as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms.

V. CONCLUSION

This research reveals that traditional Batak expressions used in death rituals are rich in cultural and symbolic meaning. These expressions do not merely serve communicative purposes but function as vessels for transmitting Batak values, cosmology, and social norms across generations. Through semantic analysis, it is evident that expressions such as *saur matua*, *molo dohot ompung*, and others represent the Batak people's deep respect for ancestry, community cohesion, and the cyclical understanding of life and death.

The study also highlights the role of language in ritual contexts as a form of cultural preservation. Despite modernization and the decreasing usage of these expressions among the younger generation, these phrases still hold immense cultural and emotional significance. Their use in rituals helps to sustain the identity and continuity of Batak traditions, and serves as a reminder of the importance of honoring one's heritage.

To preserve the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Batak people, it is essential to take comprehensive steps that focus on documentation, education, and intergenerational transmission. Traditional expressions used in death rituals should be carefully documented through both written records and audio-visual materials, ensuring that these valuable cultural assets are not lost to time. Such documentation can serve as educational tools, especially in local schools and cultural institutions, allowing the younger generation to learn and appreciate their heritage in a structured way.

Furthermore, it is important to encourage communication between generations. Elders and cultural leaders, who possess deep knowledge of Batak customs and expressions, should be actively involved in sharing their insights with the youth through community gatherings, storytelling sessions, or cultural workshops. These interactions not only strengthen cultural continuity but also build a sense of identity and pride among younger Batak people.

Academic institutions and researchers should also take part by integrating traditional Batak language and expressions into their linguistic, anthropological, or cultural studies curricula. This will promote scholarly interest and help expand understanding of the significance of these expressions. Additionally, media platforms—such as radio, television, and social media—should be utilized to promote the use of

traditional Batak language, especially in cultural programming and ceremonial broadcasts, to foster greater exposure and appreciation among wider audiences.

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