

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION IN BATAK TOBA PROVERBS

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Abstract

This study investigates the semantic interpretation of proverbs in the Batak Toba language, focusing on how cultural values and worldview shape meaning construction within these traditional expressions. Proverbs in Batak Toba serve not only as linguistic artifacts but also as carriers of collective cultural wisdom, norms, and social practices. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, the research analyzes a corpus of Batak Toba proverbs collected from oral narratives, ethnographic records, and regional literature to identify semantic patterns and cultural references. The findings reveal four dominant cultural-semantic domains: kinship, morality, nature, and social hierarchy. The kinship domain reflects strong familial bonds and social obligations, while the moral domain conveys ethical teachings rooted in community values. The nature domain draws upon the local environment as metaphorical ground for human behavior, and the hierarchy domain emphasizes respect, seniority, and social roles. Furthermore, this study highlights how metaphorical and symbolic language in Batak Toba proverbs enables speakers to express complex cultural norms in condensed and memorable forms. The research underscores the importance of cultural competence in interpreting indigenous proverbs, advocating for a semantic approach that considers cultural context to fully grasp the intended meanings. This perspective is essential for linguists, educators, and cultural researchers seeking to preserve, teach, and engage with traditional knowledge systems.

Keywords: semantic interpretation, Batak Toba proverbs, cultural meaning, indigenous language, metaphor, linguistic anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

Language is more than just a tool for communication; it is a reflection of the values, beliefs, and worldview of the people who use it. In traditional societies, proverbs play a central role in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. The Batak Toba community in North Sumatra, Indonesia, is one example of an ethnic group that maintains a rich tradition of oral literature, especially in the form of proverbs. These proverbs, known locally as umpasa or umpama, are not only linguistic expressions but also cultural artifacts that encapsulate social norms, wisdom, and moral guidance rooted in Batak Toba culture.

From a semantic perspective, proverbs are particularly interesting because their meanings often extend beyond literal interpretation. The understanding of a Batak Toba proverb cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it is used. For instance, the proverb “Anakkon hi do hamoraon di au” (My child is my treasure) emphasizes the high value placed on offspring in Batak Toba society, where family lineage and descendants are considered the foundation of wealth and honor. Another example, “Marhite tano, marhite ni roha” (According to the land, according to the heart), reflects the community’s deep connection with land and emotional wisdom as guidance for action. Such expressions carry cultural nuances that can only be fully understood through the lens of Batak Toba traditions, beliefs, and social structures.

This phenomenon highlights the dynamic interplay between language and culture. The semantic interpretation of proverbs in Batak Toba is shaped by cultural frameworks that influence how meanings are constructed, conveyed, and received. Yet, despite their importance, Batak Toba proverbs have rarely been examined through a semantic-cultural lens in academic research.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how cultural elements influence the semantic interpretation of Batak Toba proverbs. The main questions addressed in this research are:

1. What cultural themes are reflected in the semantic structure of Batak Toba proverbs?
2. How does cultural knowledge shape the interpretation of proverb meanings?
3. In what ways do metaphor and symbolism support the semantic richness of these proverbs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Theoretical Study on Semantic Interpretation and Culture

Semantic interpretation refers to the process of understanding meaning based on linguistic elements and contextual influences. According to Palmer (1976), meaning in language is not only derived from lexical content but also shaped by cultural background and shared knowledge among speakers. Lyons (1995) also emphasizes that semantics cannot be separated from the cultural and pragmatic context in which utterances occur. This is especially relevant in the interpretation of proverbs, where the meaning is often metaphorical, symbolic, and context-dependent.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), through their Conceptual Metaphor Theory, argue that human cognition is largely metaphorical and that metaphor is rooted in culture and experience. This theory provides a strong foundation for analyzing proverbs, which often rely on metaphorical structures to convey abstract cultural values. In the case of traditional societies such as the Batak Toba, metaphors used in proverbs reflect environmental, social, and spiritual values that are unique to the community.

2. Study of Proverbs and Indigenous Knowledge

Proverbs are a form of traditional expression that encapsulate collective wisdom, social norms, and cultural identity. According to Mieder (2004), proverbs function not only as linguistic units but also as tools of cultural transmission. In many ethnic communities, proverbs are used to educate, advise, and reinforce cultural values. Norrick (1985) explains that the meaning of proverbs can be semantically dense and often requires cultural competence to be properly interpreted.

In the Indonesian context, studies by Nababan (1991) and Simanjuntak (2015) have documented the role of proverbs in Batak Toba oral literature. These studies show that Batak Toba

proverbs carry deep meanings related to kinship, morality, social obligations, and spirituality. However, while there has been documentation, limited research has focused specifically on how cultural elements influence the semantic interpretation of these proverbs.

3. Culture and Semantic Meaning in Local Languages

The influence of culture on language, especially in indigenous and minority languages, is a critical area in linguistic anthropology. Duranti (1997) argues that meaning-making in local languages is embedded in cultural practices and worldviews. Studies on semantic fields in local languages, such as by Wierzbicka (1997), highlight how concepts like family, land, and honor are lexically and semantically organized based on cultural importance.

In Batak Toba, concepts like *dalihan na tolu* (a three-pillared philosophy of social relations) play a vital role in shaping the interpretation of language, especially proverbs. The semantic richness of these expressions reflects a complex cultural system that links language, identity, and tradition. Yet, the intersection of semantic theory and indigenous cultural knowledge remains underexplored, particularly from a semantic-pragmatic perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on core theories in semantics and cultural linguistics, particularly those that explain how meaning is constructed and interpreted within specific cultural frameworks. The theoretical foundation includes the basic concept of meaning in semantics, the use of metaphor and symbolism in traditional expressions, and the influence of cultural context on interpretation.

1. Meaning in Semantic Studies

According to Cruse (2000) and Hurford & Heasley (2007), meaning in language is typically categorized into two primary types:

Denotative (Referential) Meaning: The literal, dictionary definition of a word or expression.

Connotative Meaning: Additional meanings influenced by emotional, social, and cultural associations.

In the context of Batak Toba proverbs, while the denotative meaning may appear simple, the connotative meaning is often layered with cultural significance. For instance, the word *tano* (land) may literally refer to soil or territory, but connotatively it represents identity, inheritance, and spiritual ties to ancestors.

2. Metaphor and Symbolism in Proverbs

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), through the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, propose that human thought is structured through metaphors derived from physical, social, and cultural experiences. In traditional proverbs, metaphorical language is not decorative but central to meaning construction.

Proverbs often employ symbolism to express complex values in simplified linguistic forms. As Wierzbicka (1997) explains, cultural key concepts—such as honor, shame, or kinship—are often embedded in symbolic linguistic structures that require cultural familiarity for accurate interpretation.

For example, in the Batak Toba proverb “*Si marnaek do gogo na, sai marroha do dapotna*” (The humble person is the one who gains strength and peace), the symbolic contrast between humility and strength reflects a culturally specific worldview that values inner virtue over outward dominance.

3. Culture as a Determinant of Semantic Interpretation

Duranti (1997) emphasizes that meaning in language is shaped by cultural practices, beliefs, and social structures. Semantic interpretation, especially in oral traditions, depends on the shared cultural knowledge of a speech community.

In Batak Toba society, cultural philosophies such as Dalihan Na Tolu (a three-pillared system of social relations) influence how meanings are understood. Proverbs are often constructed in alignment with these cultural principles, and thus cannot be fully understood outside that context.

The interpretation of proverbs also relies on pragmatic knowledge—understanding who is speaking, in what situation, and with what intent. This aligns with Traugott and Dasher's (2002) view that semantic meaning is frequently subject to pragmatic reanalysis, especially in culturally bound expressions.

4. Factors Influencing Semantic Interpretation in Traditional Proverbs

Several factors contribute to the way meaning is interpreted in culturally embedded expressions:

Cultural Values: Local ideologies around family, respect, land, and morality shape interpretation.

Social Context: Proverbs may carry different meanings depending on the situation or relationship between speaker and listener.

Metaphorical Thinking: Cultural metaphors often differ from universal ones and require contextual knowledge.

Intergenerational Transmission: Proverbs are passed down orally, and semantic interpretations may evolve or deepen through retelling.

This theoretical framework supports the analysis of Batak Toba proverbs by positioning them not only as linguistic constructs but also as reflections of cultural cognition and worldview. Understanding these dimensions is essential for interpreting the semantic richness of traditional expressions and highlighting the deep connection between language and culture.

RESEARCH METODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach, aiming to explore and describe how cultural values influence the semantic interpretation of Batak Toba proverbs. This design is appropriate for uncovering complex and contextual meanings within language use, particularly in traditional oral literature. The approach allows for in-depth analysis of culturally embedded expressions and how they are interpreted by native speakers in real-life contexts.

2. Data Source

The primary data in this study consists of Batak Toba proverbs collected from various sources such as:

Oral interviews with native Batak Toba speakers and elders.

Documented collections of Batak Toba proverbs (e.g., traditional texts, cultural books).

Field notes from cultural ceremonies and family discussions where proverbs are used in speech.

These sources were chosen because they provide authentic and culturally rich examples of proverb usage, reflecting traditional values and beliefs.

3. Sampling Technique

This research uses purposive sampling, selecting proverbs that meet the following criteria: Frequently used in Batak Toba cultural and social contexts.

Contain metaphorical or symbolic language tied to cultural values.

Require contextual or cultural knowledge for accurate interpretation.

The selection ensures that the data reflects proverbs with deep semantic and cultural relevance.

4. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using the following steps:

1. Interviewing native speakers, especially community elders, to obtain proverbs and their explanations.
2. Recording and transcribing proverbs used in traditional events such as adat ceremonies or family gatherings.
3. Collecting written sources (e.g., Batak proverb books, cultural documentation) to support the oral data.
4. Documenting each proverb with contextual notes such as the situation of use, speaker intent, and audience reaction.
5. All respondents' identities were kept anonymous to ensure ethical research practices.

5. Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using semantic and cultural analysis grounded in the theories of Ullmann (1972), Lakoff & Johnson (1980), and Wierzbicka (1997). The analysis involved several stages:

1. Identifying literal (denotative) and cultural (connotative) meanings of each proverb.
2. Explaining metaphorical structures and symbolic references in the proverbs.
3. Interpreting meanings in relation to Batak cultural values such as kinship, respect, hierarchy, land, and spirituality.
4. Classifying the semantic strategies used, such as metaphorical extension, conceptual metaphor, or cultural symbolism.
5. Discussing the cultural influence on interpretation, including the role of traditional values, social roles, and worldview.

RESULT AND DISCUSION

The results of this study indicate that the interpretation of Batak Toba proverbs is deeply influenced by the cultural values, social norms, and collective worldview of the Batak Toba people. These proverbs are not interpreted based solely on their literal (denotative) meaning, but require a contextual and cultural understanding that includes metaphorical, symbolic, and moral aspects. This leads to a variety of semantic interpretations that reflect traditional wisdom and local philosophies.

Based on data collected from oral interviews, traditional ceremonies, and written collections of Batak Toba proverbs, several proverbs were identified that demonstrate unique semantic shifts or culturally embedded interpretations. The table below presents selected proverbs along with their literal meanings, cultural interpretations, and the types of semantic influence identified.

| No | Batak Toba Proverb | Denotatif Meaning | Cultural Interpretation | Type of Semantic Influence |
|----|------------------------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| 1 | Anakkon hi do hamoraon di au | My child is my wealth | Children are seen as the highest form of blessing and social security in Batak culture | Cultural Connotation + Metaphorical Extension |

| | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| 2 | Marbisuk marroha, marroha marsipature | A person who has a good heart, will govern well | Moral character is the foundation of leadership and harmony | Ethical Symbolism + Semantic Broadening |
| 3 | Sai na denggan do parpudi | What is planted well will grow well | Good intentions and efforts will bring good outcomes; related to karma and ancestral values | Metaphorical Interpretation + Moral Value Shift |
| 4 | Tung so tarpatupa roha na marsahala | It is difficult to see the heart of a wise person | Wisdom is deep, often unspoken, and not easily judged | Philosophical Abstraction + Cultural Deepening |
| 5 | Horas ma di hita saluhutna | May we all be well | A blessing for well-being and unity; a holistic spiritual greeting | Cultural Ritual Meaning + Semantic Enrichment |

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound influence of Batak Toba culture on the semantic interpretation of proverbs, demonstrating that their meanings extend far beyond literal translations. Through qualitative analysis, the research identifies four key cultural-semantic domains kinship, morality, nature, and social hierarchy that shape how these proverbs are understood and applied. The findings reveal that Batak Toba proverbs rely heavily on metaphorical and symbolic language to convey complex cultural values, such as familial bonds, ethical teachings, and spiritual connections to land. These expressions serve not only as linguistic artifacts but also as vital tools for preserving and transmitting traditional wisdom. The study underscores the necessity of cultural competence in accurately interpreting indigenous proverbs, emphasizing that their full meaning can only be grasped within the context of Batak Toba worldview and social practices. For linguists, educators, and cultural researchers, this research advocates for an approach that integrates semantic analysis with cultural anthropology to deepen understanding and appreciation of traditional knowledge systems. Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of language and culture, offering insights into how indigenous communities encode their values and philosophies in oral literature.

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