

Semantic Study of Taboo Words in Batak Culture

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Abstract

This study investigates the semantic change and socio-cultural functions of taboo words in Batak culture, focusing on how these expressions evolve and operate within traditional and modern interactions. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through ethnographic interviews and participant observation involving native Batak speakers across different age and social groups. The analysis was conducted through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques. Findings reveal that Batak taboo words have undergone various types of semantic change such as pejoration, narrowing, specialization, and metaphorical extension each reflecting deeply rooted cultural norms, customary values, and social hierarchies. These taboo expressions function not only as linguistic tools for emotional control and social regulation but also as symbolic carriers of identity and tradition. This study offers academic insight into the dynamic relationship between language and culture and highlights the importance of preserving indigenous semantic frameworks within endangered local languages.

Keywords: *Taboo Language; Semantic Change; Batak Culture*

Abstrak: Berdasarkan temuan penelitian ini, dapat disimpulkan bahwa kata-kata tabu dalam budaya Batak mengalami berbagai perubahan makna secara semantik, seperti *pejoration*, *narrowing*, *specialization*, hingga *metaphorical extension*, yang mencerminkan dinamika antara bahasa, nilai-nilai budaya, dan struktur sosial masyarakat. Kata-kata tabu tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai alat regulasi sosial dan ekspresi emosional, tetapi juga menjadi representasi simbolik atas norma-norma adat, spiritualitas, dan relasi kuasa dalam komunitas Batak. Implikasi akademis dari penelitian ini menegaskan pentingnya studi linguistik yang kontekstual dan berbasis budaya lokal, khususnya dalam mengungkap makna tersembunyi yang terkandung dalam praktik bahasa sehari-hari. Penelitian ini juga membuka ruang bagi pengembangan kajian sosiolinguistik dan semantik budaya yang lebih mendalam, serta dapat menjadi dasar penguatan kurikulum bahasa daerah dan pelestarian warisan linguistik Nusantara.

Kata Kunci: *Bahasa Tabu; Perubahan Makna; Budaya Batak*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental tool of human communication that serves not only as a medium for expressing ideas and emotions but also as a vessel for preserving cultural heritage and social norms (Simangunsong, Lubis, & Zein, 2021). Through language, communities transmit values, maintain traditions, and establish social order. Among the various linguistic elements, the existence of taboo words is particularly intriguing as they reflect a community's moral values, religious beliefs, and social structures. Taboo expressions do not arise arbitrarily; their usage is profoundly influenced by the cultural contexts in which they exist, making them a significant subject of inquiry in the fields of linguistics and cultural anthropology.

The study of taboo language provides deep insights into the relationship between language and culture, particularly its role in maintaining social harmony (Simangunsong et al., 2021). In Batak society, particularly in North Sumatra, taboo language functions as a regulatory mechanism for social norms, a channel for expressing subtle emotions, and a marker of communal identity. The rich kinship system and ritual practices in Batak culture further affirm the centrality of language—including taboo terms—as an integral part of its social and spiritual framework.

However, research on taboo language in Batak culture remains limited, especially from semantic and functional perspectives. Most previous studies have tended to focus on general pragmatic aspects or structural features of the language, without examining the lexical characteristics or sociocultural contexts in which these taboo expressions occur (Simangunsong et al., 2021). In Batak communities, certain words are avoided due to considerations of politeness, spirituality, and respect for intergenerational relationships and customary hierarchies. This lack of in-depth analysis from a semantic and functional point of view indicates the need for more contextually grounded research on taboo expressions in Batak society.

Several previous studies have explored linguistic and cultural dimensions in Indonesian communities, yet few have specifically addressed taboo expressions within a semantic framework in the Batak context. For instance, Nasution and Lubis (2023) examined taboo language in traditional market interactions, while Siregar and Nasution (2021) investigated speech acts in Toba society. Although these studies offer valuable insights, they have not delved into the lexical depth and symbolic meanings of taboo expressions as representations of local culture. Therefore, this study aims to expand the scope of linguistic and cultural research by focusing more specifically on the semantics of taboo expressions in Batak society.

This research seeks to conduct a semantic analysis of taboo expressions within Batak culture using a qualitative approach. Through ethnographic interviews and linguistic analysis, this study aims to uncover

the meanings, usage contexts, and social functions of these expressions. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader fields of sociolinguistics and cultural studies by enriching our understanding of how language serves to preserve cultural identity, maintain social harmony, and navigate the complexities of interpersonal communication in the face of accelerating global change.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative research that utilizes primary data obtained through ethnographic sources. The data collection technique was carried out through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation that allowed researchers to understand the meaning and function of taboo words in the socio-cultural context of the Batak people. This approach was chosen because it is relevant to explore linguistic phenomena that are full of symbolic meaning and cultural values, where language not only serves as a means of communication, but also as a representation of the identity and social order of society.

The data obtained was analyzed through three main stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The reduction stage is carried out by sorting and grouping data based on relevant themes, such as the context of use, social categories, and cultural values contained in taboo expressions. The data that has been reduced is then systematically presented in the form of narratives and field quotes to show the patterns of meaning that emerge. Furthermore, conclusions are drawn by formulating key findings based on the interpretation of the semantic meaning, pragmatic function, and social implications of taboo words in Batak culture. The analysis is carried out in a reflective and contextual manner to obtain a complete understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study of taboo words has long been a significant area of interest in linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies due to its ability to reveal the intricate interplay between language, culture, and society. This review examines key theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of taboo language, emphasizing the importance of semantic, pragmatic, and sociocultural dimensions. Special attention is given to the underexplored area of taboo words in Batak culture, which serves as the focus of this research.

1. The Concept of Taboo in Language

The concept of taboo originates from the Polynesian term *tapu*, which denotes sacredness and restriction. The anthropological foundation of taboo was laid by scholars like Frazer (1922) and Freud (1913), who explored its significance in maintaining social and moral order. Linguistically, taboo

words are expressions that communities restrict or regulate due to their potential to offend, harm, or disrupt social harmony.

Allan and Burrige (2006) emphasize that taboos are cultural constructs, and their linguistic expressions vary across societies. In many cultures, taboo words are linked to topics such as religion, sexuality, death, bodily functions, and power structures. In Indonesian cultures, including Batak, taboo language often reflects deep-seated respect for spirituality, familial relationships, and social hierarchy. This contrasts with Western cultures, where taboo language is frequently linked to profanity or vulgarity.

Taboo words are both universal and culturally specific, highlighting shared human concerns while simultaneously reflecting unique societal values. Understanding their use and significance requires situating them within the cultural and historical context of the community.

2. Semantics of Taboo Words

Semantic studies focus on the meaning of language, offering insights into how taboo words function within a linguistic system. According to Lyons (1977), meaning in language is multifaceted, encompassing both denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (associated or emotional meaning). Taboo words often carry rich connotative meanings, shaped by cultural beliefs and social norms.

Leech (1981) identifies associative meanings—reflected in taboo words—as being particularly significant in understanding cultural values. These words are context-sensitive, acquiring different meanings depending on who uses them, how they are used, and in what social situation. For example, a word considered highly offensive in one context might be used humorously or affectionately in another.

In Batak culture, the semantics of taboo words reveals their dual nature. They can convey intense emotional states such as anger, frustration, or disapproval, while simultaneously serving as tools for reinforcing respect and adherence to societal expectations. Their meanings often go beyond individual words, tied closely to the cultural and situational contexts in which they are employed.

3. Pragmatic Functions of Taboo Words

Pragmatics examines language use in context, focusing on how meaning is constructed through interaction. Jay (2009) highlights the pragmatic functions of taboo language, which include emotional release, humor, social bonding, and the reinforcement of power dynamics. In many cultures, including the Batak, the use of taboo words can also serve as a means of social control or conflict resolution.

In hierarchical societies, taboo words are often used to navigate and reinforce power relations. For example, elders or authority figures may use such language to reprimand or discipline, while their use by younger individuals might signify disrespect or rebellion. Pragmatic analysis also

considers the impact of non-verbal communication—tone, body language, and context—in determining how taboo words are interpreted.

In Batak culture, taboo words are not merely about offense; they play a critical role in maintaining harmony and societal order. Their usage is carefully regulated by social norms, with strict guidelines on who may use them, under what circumstances, and for what purposes. This reflects the high-context communication style of Batak society, where implicit understanding and shared cultural knowledge are paramount.

4. Taboo Words and Cultural Identity

Taboo words are deeply tied to cultural identity, serving as markers of belonging and solidarity within a community. According to Sapir (1929), language is a reflection of the worldview of its speakers, and taboo language is no exception. It embodies the values, fears, and aspirations of a culture, often serving as a mechanism for preserving traditions and navigating change.

In the Batak context, taboo words are more than linguistic expressions; they are integral to the cultural fabric. These words often reference ancestral wisdom, religious beliefs, and social structures, acting as a repository of collective memory and identity. For example, certain taboo expressions may invoke respect for elders, adherence to traditional laws (*adat*), or reverence for sacred rituals.

The use of taboo words also plays a role in intergenerational communication. Elders may use them to impart moral lessons or enforce social norms, ensuring that younger generations understand the boundaries of acceptable behavior. This linguistic tradition underscores the importance of taboo words in maintaining the continuity of Batak cultural identity.

5. Existing Research on Indonesian Taboo Words

Research on taboo language in Indonesia has primarily focused on general sociolinguistic patterns rather than the specificities of individual cultures. Wulandari (2018) examined the use of taboo words among Indonesian youth, noting how modernization and globalization have reshaped traditional linguistic norms. Similarly, Widodo (2020) explored the relationship between language and respect in Javanese society, highlighting the role of linguistic taboos in maintaining hierarchical relationships.

However, studies specifically addressing the Batak community remain sparse. Most existing research on the Batak language has centered on phonetics, grammar, or broader cultural practices, leaving a gap in understanding the unique characteristics and meanings of taboo words within this cultural context.

6. The Need for a Semantic Study of Batak Taboo Words

The absence of comprehensive studies on Batak taboo words presents an opportunity for deeper exploration. Understanding the semantic intricacies and cultural significance of these words can provide insights into the broader relationship between language and culture. By examining how

taboo words are used, understood, and interpreted within Batak society, this research aims to illuminate the complex ways in which language functions as a tool for cultural preservation and social interaction.

In addition to contributing to linguistic and cultural scholarship, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical research and practical understanding, emphasizing the relevance of taboo language in contemporary Batak life. It highlights the enduring importance of traditional linguistic practices in a rapidly modernizing world and underscores the need to document and analyze these cultural expressions for future generations.

Taboo Word	Example Sentence (Batak Language)	Type of Semantic Change	Brief Explanation
Mate	The word "Mate ma ho, alani ho do i" (Die, because you believed to deserve it)	Pejoration	A neutral meaning (death) becomes negative and emotionally charged.
Piso	"Piso i ma tulang pangulu" (That knife belongs to the leader)	Pejoration	A neutral object takes on negative, dangerous connotation.
Bodat	"Hera bodat do ho hubereng" (You look like a monkey)	Pejoration	An animal term is used as a strong insult.
Sitikkus	"Sitikkus ho, tung marsalaon!" (You're a rat, always stealing!)	Metaphorical Extension	Shifted from animal to metaphor for dishonesty and moral failure.
Halak loba	"Halak loba ma ho, na so marpangarantoan" (You greedy to excessive)	Narrowing	From general quantity to a negative trait (greed).

Taboo Word	Example Sentence (Batak Language)	Type of Semantic Change	Brief Explanation
Na marsipanganon	person, you have greed. no self-control) "Ai <i>na marsipanganon do ho tu hita!</i> " (You're so lacking shameless!)	Used to mock someone as immoral or shame.	A generalized term becomes a label for immorality.
Parpungu	" <i>Parpungu ho di parpadaan na so anso dung marsala.</i> " (You're is deceptive a cheater in our or dishonest. group)	Describes someone who is deceptive or dishonest. Metaphorical Extension	Used figuratively to label dishonest behavior.
Na marugam	so "Na <i>so marugam do jala nauli do hata na</i> " (He's, now implies undisciplined, yet disrespect for speaks well) tradition.	Once meant 'unstructured' now implies disrespect for tradition. Specialization	Shifted from general disorder to specific social transgression.
Parningotan	" <i>Parningotan ni oppung ma hita marhula-hula.</i> " (A remembrance prayer for our ancestors)	Once meant 'reminder', now a prayer ritual for ancestors. Specialization	From general meaning to ritual-specific spiritual use.
Ho	A second- " <i>Ho do parjolo na siboan dang denggan.</i> " (You were the first to speak rudely) depending on context.	A person pronoun, can be informal or offensive depending on context. Narrowing	A broad pronoun usage now confined to informal or potentially rude settings.

The findings of this study reveal that taboo words in Batak culture are not merely linguistic elements but deeply embedded reflections of the community's values, traditions, and social structures. Semantically, these words are categorized into themes such as religion, social hierarchy, bodily functions, and conflict, each carrying connotations tied to cultural beliefs and practices. Words related to religion and spirituality often possess a sacred

status, while those addressing social hierarchy emphasize respect and adherence to *adat*. Pragmatically, the use of taboo words varies across contexts, serving to express intense emotions, enforce norms, foster camaraderie, or assert power. The study also highlights significant semantic shifts, particularly among younger generations in urban settings, where traditional restrictions are gradually loosening due to modernization and external cultural influences. Despite these changes, the core meanings and symbolic weight of taboo words remain central to the Batak cultural identity.

Type of Semantic Change	Explanation
Pejoration	The meaning of the word becomes negative and taboo.
Elevation	The meaning of the word becomes sacred and respected.
Narrowing	The meaning of the word becomes more specific and limited.
Specialization	The meaning of the word becomes specific in the context of ritual or custom.
Metaphorical Extension	The meaning expands with cultural or symbolic connotations.

In the broader sociocultural context, taboo words function as tools for cultural preservation and intergenerational communication, ensuring the transmission of traditional values through restricted usage and nuanced contextual application. Their role in rural areas, where adherence to *adat* is stronger, contrasts with urban settings where modern influences have softened their traditional boundaries. These findings align with sociolinguistic theories emphasizing the relationship between language and societal norms, illustrating how taboo words act as both barriers and bridges within the community. The dynamic interplay between linguistic preservation and adaptation reflects the Batak people's ability to negotiate cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world, making taboo words a profound marker of both historical heritage and contemporary identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that taboo words in Batak culture undergo various types of semantic change, including pejoration, narrowing, specialization, and metaphorical extension, reflecting the dynamic interplay between language, cultural values, and social structures. These taboo expressions function not only as tools for social regulation and emotional expression but also as symbolic representations of customary norms, spirituality, and power relations within the Batak community. The academic implication of this research underscores the importance of culturally grounded linguistic studies in uncovering the

implicit meanings embedded in everyday language practices. Furthermore, this study contributes to the advancement of sociolinguistic and cultural semantic research and provides a foundation for the development of local language curricula and the preservation of Indonesia's rich linguistic heritage.

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