



The Use of Figurative Language in the Saur Matua Ceremony: A Linguistic and Cultural Analysis of Batak Toba Oral Traditions?

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ABSTRACT

Language and culture are interrelated and form a unity that reflects the values of a society. In the context of the Saur Matua traditional ceremony of the Batak Toba tribe, the use of figurative language is an important element that conveys cultural values such as kinship, religiosity, descent, wealth, and honor. This study aims to analyze the forms and meanings of figurative language (umpasa) used by Hulahula, Dongan Tubu, and Parboru in the Saur Matua ceremony. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through direct observation, audio-video documentation, and informal interviews with 12 key informants consisting of community leaders, traditional elders, and participants of the ceremony. The data were analyzed through transcription, classification of types of figurative language, and interpretation of cultural meanings based on literary linguistic theory. The results reveal that umpasa is predominantly used to deliver prayers and hopes, moral advice, and motivation to the bereaved family. Similes and symbols are the most frequently used figures of speech. The use of figurative language in this ceremony not only enhances the aesthetic aspect of communication but also plays a vital role in preserving the noble values of Batak Toba culture. Academically, this study contributes to the enrichment of cultural linguistic research and supports the preservation and documentation of Indonesian oral literature, particularly among indigenous communities.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Sagatova (2022), Language and culture are interconnected so that they complement each other. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties (Ahtif & Gandhi, 2022). Different ideas stem from different uses of language within one's culture, and these relationships begin at birth (Kim, 2020). Language plays a vital role in developing, elaborating, and transmitting culture, as well as in storing meanings and experiences to facilitate communication (Fenuku, 2024).

Each culture has its own peculiarities and exerts unique influences on language systems (Chen, 2020). Language is a key component of culture. Without language, culture would not be possible (Lut & Starenkova, 2022). On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture, it reflects culture. Cultural differences are a major source of misunderstanding, discomfort, and even conflict in cross-cultural communication (Singh, 2020). As Mahadi & Jafari, (2012) argue, language is closely associated with social structure and cultural value systems. They also states that language, as a social phenomenon, is intricately tied to the social structure and value system. Through language, culture can exist. One's culture can often be identified through their language and manner of speaking.

In the *Saur Matua* ceremony so many words that they use to say something and the words has each meaning from the words (Tampubolon et al., 2018). This encourages the writer to explore more deeply the meanings of the utterances used in the *Saur Matua* ceremony. In line with this phenomenon, we can see example in this below:

Balok ma balok ni hauma

'border in the field'

Balokan ni balok ni huta

'as border in the village'

Batapasahatma natua-tuan on tu ruma Na

'this time we enter this parents to her/his house'

Baholan imana Na punasa

'to the God as create him/her'

From these examples, we can see that the term "house" in the sentence does not refer to a physical house, but symbolically to "Paradise," the dwelling place of God (Tampubolon et al., 2018). By understanding the language used by the Batak people in the *Saur Matua* ceremony, we can identify a rich use of figurative language, particularly in the form of *umpasa* or traditional poetic expressions (Tampubolon et al., 2024). The examples above illustrate the use of similes. The Toba Batak people tend not to speak in direct statements; instead, they employ figurative expressions with deep cultural meaning (Siagian & Mulyadi, 2023). *Umpasa* tends to convey cultural meanings by comparing human characteristics and behaviors to those of vegetation or objects in the surrounding environment (N. Sitorus & Lubis, 2023).

Saur Matua refers to an individual who passes away having achieved completeness in family life—meaning they have sons, daughters, and grandchildren. The term "Saur" implies completeness or perfection, and someone who dies under these circumstances is considered to have fulfilled the kinship ideal (Simangunsong & Priyoto, 2025). As such, a person deemed complete in family ties is honored with a traditional funeral ceremony that is conducted in full, known as *Saur Matua* (Astuty, 2020).

When someone dies with a complete kinship status according to Batak customs, the funeral ceremony must also be performed in a complete and elaborate manner, referred to as *ulaon na gok* (a fully traditional ceremony). This event typically takes place in the front yard of the family home (*maralaman*), and traditional foods such as buffalo meat (*sigagat duhut*) are served. Family members and relatives gather to honor the deceased and accompany them to their final resting place with unity and respect (Eva Junita, 2016).

A significant aspect of Batak traditional ceremonies is the concept of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, which consists of three interrelated social components. These components play a crucial role in organizing cultural rituals, including the *Saur Matua* funeral, where extended discussions and negotiations are customary throughout the event (Siregar, 2022).

The ability to conduct a *Saur Matua* ceremony is often determined by the family's economic condition. Families with higher social and financial status are generally able to afford the elaborate customs associated with the ceremony (Tampubolon et al., 2018). In contrast, families with limited financial means tend to hold simpler ceremonies due to budget constraints. This economic disparity

presents challenges for less affluent families in fulfilling the full requirements of a traditional Saur Matua ritual.

Related to this topic, Tampubolon et al. (2018) analyzed figures of speech in Toba Batak wedding ceremonies and found five types of figurative language used in *umpasa*, with similes being the most dominant. Based on this, the writer is interested in analyzing the use of figurative language during the *Saur Matua* ceremony, particularly as spoken by *Hula-hula*, *Dongan Tubu*, and *Parboru*. This study aims to deepen the understanding of Batak Toba cultural expressions and contribute to the preservation and appreciation of traditional values.

Based on this background, the research question in this study is: what are the forms and meanings of figurative language (*umpasa*) used by *Hula-hula*, *Dongan Tubu*, and *Parboru* in the *Saur Matua* traditional ceremony of the Batak Toba tribe? The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the forms of figurative language and interpret the cultural meanings contained therein. This research is expected to contribute academically to the field of cultural linguistics, particularly in understanding the role of language as a means of transmitting local cultural values. Additionally, the results of this research also aim to support the preservation of Batak Toba oral literature as part of Indonesia's cultural heritage that needs to be documented and passed on to future generations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring language phenomena in their natural context. According to Tisdell et al. (2025), qualitative research focuses on understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, using the natural setting as the primary source of data. (Busetto et al. (2020) also supports the use of qualitative methods to describe specific conditions or situations in depth.

The qualitative approach was selected to explore and describe the use of figurative language in the Toba Batak *Saur Matua* ceremony, focusing on the meanings behind the traditional expressions (*umpasa*) used by *Hula-hula*, *Dongan Tubu*, and *Parboru*. This approach allows the researchers to gain deeper insights into the cultural and social significance embedded in these utterances.

Data Sources

The data for this study consisted of verbal utterances gathered from *umpasa* delivered during three *Saur Matua* ceremonies held in Rantau Prapat and Tarutung, North Sumatra. These utterances were collected directly from the speakers using audio and video recordings to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain rich and relevant data, the following techniques were used:

- a. Observation: The researchers observed the ceremonies and noted the context in which the figurative language was used.
- b. Audio and Video Recording: The ceremonies were recorded to preserve the authenticity of the spoken *umpasa*.
- c. Interview: Informal interviews with community elders and ceremony participants were conducted to validate interpretations of the expressions used.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis followed a descriptive-analytical approach, involving the following steps:

- a. Transcription of the recorded utterances into written form.
- b. Identification of figurative language expressions, based on categories such as simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, irony, symbol, and allegory.
- c. Classification of the utterances according to the types of figurative language, using theoretical frameworks from literary linguistics.
- d. Interpretation of the cultural meanings, purposes, and functions behind each figure of speech, particularly in the context of Batak Toba values.

- e. Validation of the findings through triangulation with interview data and literature.

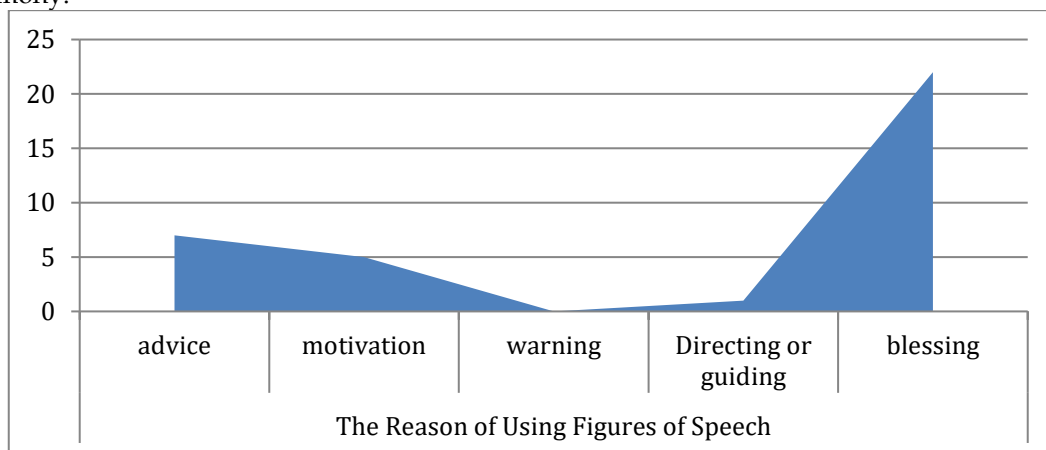
Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation (Muzari et al., 2022). The researchers in this study were actively engaged in observing, recording, transcribing, interpreting, and cross-validating the data to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. To strengthen the analytical depth of this study, the interpretation of umpasa findings was carried out systematically by thematically categorizing the cultural meanings into key domains such as kinship, religiosity, social hierarchy, morality, and honor. These themes were then analyzed using theoretical perspectives from linguistic anthropology and cultural semiotics to uncover the sociocultural logic embedded within each expression. Furthermore, selected umpasa were presented along with direct quotes from informants, especially traditional elders, to provide ethnolinguistic insights and validate the contextual interpretations. Narrative descriptions were also added to accompany figures and tables, highlighting patterns of usage and symbolic references that reflect Batak Toba worldview. This approach ensures that the presentation of data is not only descriptive but also analytically grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The observation was done by writers with identifying why the figures of speech is used in Toba Batak Saur Matua ceremony.

In this below we can see the chart about the reason using figures of speech in *saur matua* ceremony.



Figures 1. The Reason of Using Figures of Speech

Figure above was shown us if blessing was the higher than another. Because when Batak people held the events like *saur matua* ceremony they more used utterances of blessing. Batak Toba people highly appreciated the cultural values which they have (Firmando, 2024). One of the values that still survived was *umpasa*. In traditional ceremony in Toba Batak, *umpasa* was one thing that should not be forgotten in custom events (Pangaribuan et al., 2024; E. Y. C. Sitorus et al., 2024).

Umpasa was a series of figures of speech which means to give an advice, motivation, warning, directing or guiding someone or asking a blessing. Like example in this Data turtu ina anduhur, tio-tio ina lotte hata akka poda na dilehon keluarga akka hula-hula muna sian ginjang sahat tu toru unang ma mose. By this *umpasa* we can see as the advice and guiding someone always remember the advice from hula-hula. In here we must remember all the advice from hula-hula we must remember and never be forgotten. Sahat ma solu sahat ma tu bincar ni mataniari, sai lelung ma

hita mangolu, sai di iring-iring Tuhan ma hita ganup ari. From the umpasa we can show if the umpasa as the blessing. Duhut ni Simalungun, par-asaran ni roba-roba, salpu ma hatop sian hamu akka nalungun, laos ro ma tu hamu akka si las ni roha.

From umpasa we can see the umpasa as the motivation, advice and blessing. The umpasa said go far away the sadness and soon come the happiness. In saur matua ceremony umpasa was a part of the beauty of Batak language used in a variety event. It was used during traditional ceremonies such as death, birth, marriage ceremony and others.

The findings of this study reveal that the use of umpasa in the Saur Matua ceremony reflects various thematic cultural meanings, which can be grouped into four dominant categories: blessing, advice and moral guidance, motivation and encouragement, and expression of grief and hope. These themes emerged consistently across the three ceremonies observed in Rantau Prapat and Tarutung. The use of umpasa as a form of blessing is most dominant, as shown in Figure 1, reflecting the Batak Toba people's emphasis on spirituality and communal well-being. For example, one utterance states: "Sahat ma solu sahat ma tu bincar ni mataniari, sai lelung ma hita mangolu, sai di iring-iring Tuhan ma hita ganup ari" (May our journey be smooth toward the brightness of the sun, may our life be joyful, may God accompany us every day). This expression encapsulates not only a blessing but also reflects the Batak cosmological view that connects life's journey with divine guidance, aligning with Mahadi and Jafari's (2012) view that language encodes social value systems. The second thematic group, advice and moral guidance, often takes the form of metaphor and symbolism. A frequently cited umpasa is: "Turtu ina anduhur, tio-tio ina lotte hata akka poda na dilehon keluarga akka hula-hula muna sian ginjang sahat tu toru unang ma mose", which was explained by an informant (Pdt. M.L., 72 years old) as a reminder for younger generations to uphold ancestral values and never forget the moral teachings delivered by hula-hula (maternal uncles). This reflects the hierarchical kinship structure embedded in Dalihan Na Tolu, emphasizing respect and obedience.

In the motivation and encouragement category, umpasa are used to uplift the bereaved. One example is: "Duhut ni Simalungun, par-asaran ni roba-roba, salpu ma hatop sian hamu akka nalungun, laos ro ma tu hamu akka si las ni roha", which roughly translates to "Like the Simalungun grass through the bushes, let the sadness be left behind, and may joy approach you." This symbolic comparison between natural elements and emotional transition aligns with linguistic anthropological theories (Duranti, 1997), where nature-based metaphors are used to conceptualize human emotion and social healing. Lastly, in the theme of expression of grief and hope, umpasa were used to articulate collective mourning while simultaneously offering hope for spiritual peace. As observed in the delivery of the following utterance during one ceremony: "Batapasahatma natua-tuan on tu ruma Na, baholan imana Na punasa" (We now return this elder to his home, to the God who created him), the metaphor of "home" as heaven represents a cultural construction of the afterlife, reinforcing the Batak Toba's spiritual worldview. These findings support the idea that umpasa serves not only as an artistic linguistic form but also as a cultural device for reinforcing shared values, identity, and social harmony. The interpretive process was strengthened by triangulating ceremonial observations with informant testimonies, ensuring the cultural and linguistic authenticity of each expression. Thus, this study contributes to cultural linguistics by demonstrating how traditional figurative language functions as a vehicle for cultural transmission and emotional expression in ritual contexts, while also preserving the oral literary heritage of the Batak Toba community.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the use of figurative language in the Saur Matua ceremony of the Toba Batak community. The findings revealed that figures of speech reflect essential cultural values of the Batak people, including kinship, religion, hagabeon (descendants), hamoraon (wealth), and hasangapon (honor or pride). Kinship represents the solidarity and unity within clans, which is a central pillar of Batak social structure. Religion illustrates the community's strong spiritual orientation and

dependence on divine guidance in every aspect of life. Hagabeon is a symbol of prosperity and legacy through offspring, hamoraon signifies material wealth as a source of social dignity, while hasangapon reflects personal honor achieved through fulfilling social and familial responsibilities. Among these, kinship and religion emerged as the most dominant themes, indicating their foundational role in the Batak worldview. The figurative expressions delivered by ceremonial speakers such as Hula-hula, Boru, and Dongan Tubu serve not only aesthetic functions but also pragmatic and cultural purposes—such as offering prayers, giving moral guidance, motivating the bereaved, and transmitting ancestral wisdom. These findings underscore the role of figurative language as a living medium through which Batak cultural identity is preserved, affirmed, and passed down across generations. Linguistically, this study contributes to the field of cultural linguistics and anthropological linguistics by demonstrating how metaphor, simile, and symbolism function within a ceremonial context to encode and perpetuate collective cultural values. In terms of cultural preservation, documenting and analyzing umpasa as a form of oral literature is vital to safeguarding intangible heritage in the face of modernization and shifting social values. Figurative language in Batak ceremonies does not merely decorate speech but also acts as a cultural archive that preserves indigenous knowledge and reinforces social cohesion. Future research is recommended to explore the use of figurative language in other Batak traditional rituals such as weddings (ulaon unjuk) or birth ceremonies, or to conduct comparative studies with other Indonesian or Austronesian ethnic groups to understand broader patterns of cultural expression through language. Such studies would enrich both cross-cultural understanding and the theoretical development of linguistic anthropology..

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