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An Empirical Research

## The Representation of Taboos in Proverbs: An Anthropological and Functional Perspective

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 Bangkanese;  
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### ABSTRACT

Until now, taboo in culture to some extents has represented inherited moral values that can be applied to the modern context. Nevertheless, among existing studies that have investigated this phenomenon, none has applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the framework and none has made use of Bangkanese proverb as the data. Thus, the purpose of this study is to reveal the representation of taboos in Bangkanese Malay proverbs based on the anthropological perspective and based on SFL framework. To obtain the purpose, this study applied qualitative approach with questionnaire as well as interview as the data collection techniques and transitivity system as the analysis framework. Seventy responses via qualitative questionnaires were successfully gathered and five informants were interviewed to collect the taboo expressions. The obtained taboo expressions were analyzed with Hallidayan transitivity system. The findings reveal that taboos in Bangkanese proverbs cover action alone as well as both action and expression. Further, most experiences in the taboo proverbs are represented in material processes followed with one relational and one verbal process. The major occurrences of material processes are believed to achieve the embedded values brought by the taboo proverbs since the processes of actions represent concrete meanings.

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## INTRODUCTION

To the present time, taboo in culture has been one of foci in anthropolinguistic studies. Studies on taboo can be used for the sake of current context, namely as a lesson and inspiration of an ideal civilized society. For a country with a rich cultural diversity like Indonesia, studies on taboos are effort in maintaining and developing the existence of local culture amidst national and global cultural onslaught.

The term of taboo is historically derived from the Polynesian Tongan language, which means prohibition or boundary (Freud, 2001). Taboo is also perceived as certain

unusual language behaviours affecting daily life such as anxiety and loss (Burridge & Allan, 2006). In Routledge Language and Linguistic Dictionary, taboo is defined as a term that is avoided for religious, political or sexual reasons and is usually replaced by euphemisms, such as the term washing room for toilet (Russmann, 2000). In the context of contemporary culture, Wardhaugh (2000) defines taboo as a prohibition or avoidance of individuals in a group of people from behaviours believed to be detrimental to their members because it will cause anxiety, low self-esteem, and shame. The present study associates taboo with something that must be avoided because its

violation is believed to have a negative impact either personally or communally.

Further, taboo is classified either as forbidden expressions or as actions (Freud, 2001). This categorization has been underpinned by previous studies that have viewed taboo either as forbidden expressions or forbidden actions embedded in expressions. The study of Abi-Esber et al. (2018), Bakhtiar (2011), Gao (2013), Gay & Susanti (2017), Pilotti et al. (2012), Robati & Zand (2018), Suliadi et al. (2019) have studied taboo as expressions to be avoided while others such as Humaeni (2015), Juansah (2019), Mondolalo (2015), Yusuf & Yusuf (2014) have analysed it as expressions containing forbidden actions.

So far, studies of language taboo within a cultural framework have been divided into two complementary shafts, namely the one in the traditional cultural setting and the other in the contemporary cultural setting. The latter generally dismantles the meaning of taboo expressions in cultures that have been heavily influenced by universal cultures such as in the studies of Abi-Esber et al. (2018), Bakhtiar (2011), Chu (2009), Gao (2013), Pilotti et al. (2012), Robati & Zand (2018).

Studies of language taboo on contemporary cultural settings in general use a society at the national level as the object of study. The study carried out by Gao (2013), for example, made use of English culture as a context of study and found that taboo words are related to humans' excretion system, death, illness, sex, privacy, curse words, and discriminatory terms. Because of their more universal scope, studies of language taboos on contemporary cultural settings tend to use methodologies other than ethnography, especially case studies such as in study of Abi-Esber et al. (2018) describing language taboo in the Lebanese community in Australia.

Studies of language taboo on the local or traditional cultural setting, on the other hand, commonly focus on cross-generational expressions that prohibit certain acts on a certain society especially indigenous people as illustrated by the studies of Gay & Susanti (2017), Humaeni (2015), Juansah (2019), Mondolalo (2015), Suliadi et al. (2019), Yusuf & Yusuf (2014). Therefore, most of studies on the language taboo of traditional cultural settings tend to adopt ethnographic methods to depict the representation of values related to taboo. The study of Juansah (2019), to illustrate, adopted an ethnographic method in indigenous Baduy community and reported that the derivation of expressions prohibiting taboo acts is quite complex. In general, the expressions are divided into three, namely related to rules in farming, in carrying out daily activities especially social interactions, and in empowering forest resources. Even in the case of farming alone, the taboo on Baduy indigenous community is divided into three levels,

namely in the beginning of farming, in the mid-farming process, and in harvest time (Juansah, 2019).

In terms of its topic, taboos in traditional or local societies tend to cover general daily issues such as the prohibition on bathing at night, using chemicals for farming, hitting children with brooms, sleeping on their backs for women, and many other as revealed in the study of Humaeni (2015), Juansah, (2019), Mondolalo (2015), and Yusuf & Yusuf (2014). In contemporary cultural settings, the topics are more specific, especially related to privacy issues such as sexuality and excretions matters including related organs as shown by the studies of Bakhtiar (2011), Gao (2013), Robati & Zand (2018). In general, both in traditional and contemporary societies, there have been taboo issues related to daily life and privacy issues. However, in the traditional society, the focus is more on prohibitions concerning communal life while in the modern society, the emphasis is more on personal matters.

To date, studies related to language taboos on local culture overall have tended to only use general framework. The scrutiny of taboo expressions so far has only employed the units of words, phrases and clauses in general as a framework for analysis. Thus, there has been a need for a more measurable linguistic theory to extend the knowledge on taboo expressions, that is, by cogently and holistically delineating the meaning-making of the expressions. A linguistic theory that sees language phenomena as a meaning-making process with measurable and critical views is systemic functional linguistics (SFL) especially the transitivity system.

The system of transitivity is derived from the ideational meaning which sees language as a social meaning-making process to achieve certain goals bound in context. Based on the social functions carried by texts, the Hallidayan transitivity system represents the world or all experience through six choices of process types. As it is defined, "the system of transitivity construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 170). These types of processes can be briefly associated with the transitivity system itself (Eggins, 2004).

The process in SFL represents six experiences, namely the process of doing/happening (material), sensing/thinking/feeling (mental); linking or attributing (relational), saying (verbal), existing (existential), and mental activity resulting in physical reactions (behavioural) (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). The process in Hallidayan SFL framework is realized in the form of clauses comprising involved participants (animate or inanimate things), various attributes, and optional circumstances that provide the setting for the process (Martin et al., 1997). Regarding the types of processes and participants in Hallidayan transitivity system, Martin et al.

(1997, p. 103) provide examples like in the following table 1.

**Table 1.** Process Types and Nuclear Participants

Process Types	Nuclear Participants	Example (participants in underlined fonts)
Material	Actor, Goal	<u>She</u> made <u>the coffee</u> .
Mental	Senser, Phenomenon	<u>She</u> saw <u>the car</u> .
Relational: Attributive	Carrier, Attribute Token, Value	<u>Maggie</u> was <u>strong</u> . <u>Maggie</u> was <u>our leader</u> .
Identifying		
Behavioural	Behaver	<u>She</u> laughed.
Verbal	Sayer	<u>She</u> replied.
Existential	Existent	There was <u>a beautiful princess</u> .

From the perspective of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the manoeuvre of various types and roles of processes, participants, and circumstances in a clause has a direct relationship with a certain social function underlying a text. Under the context of media, to illustrate, the same news can be represented with different transitivity system strategies according to ideologies or goals brought by the media, as revealed by the study of Al Fajri (2018) and Manar (2016). The study conducted by Manar (2016) on online headlines of two media addressing the corruption case of a politician, to illustrate, has reported that political opponents (out-groups) tended to be represented by the contra media as 'weak' participants in a clause structure. Further, on the context of language education, the SFL study of Manar & Purwaningrum (2021) has proved that the transitivity system was successfully employed to disclose millennial paradigm towards the use of local language in classrooms.

The theory of SFL can be applied not only across linguistic fields but also across disciplines. The study of Gou & Zhang (2017) and He (2019) for example reviewed the hybridity between discourse analysis and SFL while Zou (2018) attempts to bring together the fields of philosophy and SFL. SFL to the present time has been found as a hybrid linguistic tool within different linguistic fields and even cross disciplines (Manar, 2022). In the midst of increasingly complex and mutually connected human's problems, the adoption of hybrid theory is expected to provide a depiction of cogent answers.

This current study combines the field of systemic functional linguistics and anthropological linguistics. Anthropolinguistics can be perceived as "the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural

practice" (Duranti, 1997, p. 2). In this current study, anthropolinguistics functions as the perspective to the taboo phenomena in proverbs while SFL transitivity serves as the analysis framework. To the present time, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no studies making use of anthropolinguistic and systemic functional linguistic theory to investigate taboos in a local culture.

Regarding the issues of local culture, until now, it has been known that the preservation of indigenous language cannot be separated from the existence of traditional culture. This linguistic study is one of attempts to preserve local language and culture, in this case, taboos in Bangkanese Malay proverbs. Proverbs can be defined as a culturally and specially context-used figurative saying comprising of shared-acceptance of truth expressed with concise and more-or-less fix forms (Finnegan, 1970). They have been claimed as one of the most powerful and effective instruments for the transmission of culture, social morality, manner and ideas of a people from one generation to another (Akpobara, 2006). The present study aims to dismantle the meaning-making of taboo proverbs in Bangkanese Malay culture by answering the following questions.

1. What types of taboos are found in the proverbs Bangkanese Malay society?
2. How are the meanings in the taboos are represented by the transitivity system?

## METHOD

The present study adopted qualitative approach with questionnaire as well as interview as the data collection techniques and SFL as the analysis framework. A qualitative questionnaire was distributed to collect Bangkanese Malay taboo proverbs. Seventy respondents from four regencies and from one provincial capital in Bangka completed the questionnaires. The 70 respondents lived and were born in Bangka. When the data were collected, their ages ranged from 17 to 49 years with an average age of 20.73 years. For the validity and enrichment of data, interviews were conducted to seven Bangkanese Malay informants who were also born in Bangka. When the data were collected, the ages of the 7 participants ranged from 21 to 30 years old with an average age of 24.5 years.

Further, ten traditional taboo proverbs were successfully collected. Then based on the context of Bangkanese Malay culture, the expressions were analysed in clause units within the framework of SFL transitivity system. The transitivity system analysis focused on the literal meaning which was then linked the contextual meaning. In this study, the clauses of Bangkanese Malay taboo in proverbs were categorized into one of six types of processes

(material, mental, verbal, relational, existential, and behavioural) along with the patterns in each process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Types of Taboo in Bangkanese Malay Proverbs*

The purpose of this anthropolinguistic and functional study is to reveal the types of taboos in Bangkanese Malay proverbs and how their meanings are represented through the transitivity system. The taboo expressions found in Bangkanese Malay culture are exemplified in the following tables.

**Table 2.** Bangkanese Malay Proverbs

No	Expressions	Literal Meaning	Taboo Types
1	<i>Ngajir baye berenang</i>	teach a crocodile how to swim	action
2	<i>Ngantet daging sengkal</i>	hand over sliced meat that is ready to be cooked	action
3	<i>Merik ikan asen kek kucen</i>	give salted fish to the cat	action
4	<i>Kuteng pelek, berik kek asuk</i>	cut your penis and give it to the dog	action & expression
5	<i>Ngeroh aek</i>	make the spring water turbid	action
6	<i>Manjeng tali kelambu</i>	extend the rope / ties of mosquito net	action
7	<i>Ngiret kaleng</i>	drag a can	action & expression
8	<i>Mandik dek baseh</i>	shower by not wetting all parts of the skin	action
9	<i>Dek beperot</i>	does/do not have stomach	action & expression
10	<i>Kepong nyeru</i>	call a relative with two different terms	action

1. **Ngajir baye berenang**  
**Teach crocodile swim**  
(**Teach** a crocodile how to swim)

The expression of *ngajir baye berenang* contains the prohibition of teaching an older person or a person who has more experience. In Bangkanese Malay culture, this act should be avoided.

2. **Ngantet daging sengkal**  
**Hand over meat wooden cutting mat**  
(**Hand over** sliced meat that is ready to be cooked)

The expression of *ngantet daging sengkal* is uttered to describe a situation where someone on his/her own

initiative approaches something dangerous. This expression is especially addressed when someone who is in conflict comes to an opponent who is ready to attack or harm physically. Action like this in Bangkanese Malay culture is taboo or should be avoided because someone who is going brutally mad is like a beast ready to prey.

3. **Merik ikan asen kek kucen**  
**Give fish salted to cat**  
(**Give** salted fish to a cat)

The expression of *merik ikan asen kek kucen* in Bangkanese Malay culture is usually expressed to describe a woman who 'gives' herself to a man without marital consent. In Bangkanese Malay culture, this act is taboo and must be avoided. The expression is usually said before the act happens or it is used to blame a woman for the illegitimate relationship that has already happened.

4. **Kuteng pelek, berik kek asuk**  
**Cut penis give to dog**  
(**Cut** your penis and **give** it to a dog)

The expression of *kuteng pelek, berik kek asuk* is employed to refer to a man who is coward especially against ghosts. This expression is usually directed at a sexually matured man who frankly says he is afraid of ghosts. In Bangkanese Malay culture, a coward soul is taboo for a man and must be avoided. A man is expected to have a brave trait. More important is that the expression itself is considered taboo. The expression is perceived offensive and needs to be avoided.

5. **Ngeroh aek**  
**Make-turbid water**  
(**Make** the spring water turbid)

The expression of *ngeroth aek* is intended for someone who is not seriously in participating in an activity or event. In different context, the expression can also mean making a problem more complicated. In Bangkanese Malay society, carrying out an activity unseriously or making a problem more complicated is considered taboo so this should be avoided. Nevertheless, in the context of humour, the expression of *ngeroth aek* has no taboo meaning anymore. When joking, for example, it is used by someone to describe himself as a 'cheerleader' in an activity.

6. **Manjeng tali kelambu**  
**Lengthen rope mosquito net**  
(**extend** the ropes / ties of mosquito net)

In Bangkanese Malay culture, the expression of *manjeng tali kelambu* is uttered to describe an action that complicates a problem. Even in general culture, a person is expected to be able to solve a problem, not to complicate or add problems. The act of making a

problem more complicated in Bangkanese Malay culture is taboo and must be avoided.

#### 7. *Ngiret kaleng*

**Drag** *can*

(**Drag** a can)

The expression of *ngiret kaleng* in Bangkanese Malay culture is taboo. This is commonly employed to describe someone who really fails, especially in work or career. The action embedded in the expression of *ngiret kaleng* tends to be sensitive so it must be avoided except under certain conditions. In giving advice, for example, if the target is difficult to advise, the taboo expression will be expressed. This is addressed so that other or intended persons do not have to suffer the same fate. Further, the expression of *ngiret kaleng* itself is known as offensive words. Thus, a part from the taboo action forbidden by the expression, the expression itself is considered taboo.

#### 8. *Mandik dek baseh*

**Bath** *not wet*

(**Shower** by not wetting all parts of the skin)

The expression of *mandik dek baseh* in Bangkanese Malay culture is commonly employed to describe someone who does a job incompletely. Doing work imperfectly in Bangkanese Malay culture is taboo and must be avoided. Someone who has started an activity or work should be totally responsible for what has been started especially if the work is vital both for personal and communal needs.

#### 9. *Dek be-perot*

**Does/do not have**-stomach

(**Does/do not have** stomach)

The taboo expression of *dek beperot* targets a reckless act without careful thought. This act should be avoided. Apart from the prohibition on the action, this expression of *dek beperot* itself is rude and tends to be avoided. However, sometimes it has to be used against someone who does an action without mature thought. In Bangkanese Malay culture, the existence of the stomach is associated with being full so that one is always expected to be able to think before taking an action. In everyday Bangkanese Malay culture, the existence of the stomach must be in line with which of the mind. Thus, the consequence of eating is to be able to think.

#### 10. *Kepong nyeru*

**Together** *call*

(Call a relative with two different terms)

The expression of *kepong nyeru* is employed to describe someone marrying a partner who still has a kinship with his/her family/relative so that he/she can call his/her family/relative with two different terms. A simple example is when a woman marries the brother-

in-law of her aunt so that she can call her aunt 'sister'. This phenomenon in Bangkanese Malay culture is considered taboo so it tends to be avoided. In Bangkanese Malay culture, a family/relative member should not have a 'double' kinship in terms of address.

### *The Representation of Taboo in Bangkanese Malay Proverbs*

**Table 3.** Material Processes

No	Actor	Processes	Goal	Beneficiary	Circumstance
1	(human)	ngajir	berenang	baye	
2	(human)	ngantet	daging sengkak	(meat-eating animal)	
3	(human/woman)	merik	ikan asen	kucen	
4	(human/man)	kuteng	pelek		
5	(human/man)	berik	(pelek)	asuk	
6	(human)	ngeroih	aek		
7	(human)	manjeng	tali kelambu		
8	(human)	ngiret	kaleng		
9	(human)	mandik			dek baseh

Of the ten taboo expressions successfully collected from the daily lives of Bangkanese Malay people, most or 8 of the 10 proverbs are represented in the form of action or material processes. All elliptical actors represent human beings. Further, eight of nine material clauses contain goals. The second participants or goals encompass *swimming*, *ready-to-cook meat*, *salted fish*, *penis*, *water*, *mosquito rope*, and *a can*. Further, four of nine clauses in the literal meanings contain beneficiaries, namely *crocodile*, *cat*, *dog*, and *a non-defined meat-eating animal*. In terms of optional elements in the material processes, only one circumstance is found, that is *by not wetting all parts of skin*.

**Table 4.** Relational Process

No	Carrier	Processes	Attribute	Circumstance
1	(human)	dek be-	perot	

Based on the relational clause of *dek beperot* (*does/do not have stomach*) shown in table 4, human is represented as an elliptical carrier who does not have a stomach. Semantically, the stomach refers to a vital part of human

body. In the stomach, there are organs for digestion. The absence of which makes humans unable to live. The clause of *dek beperot* above is used to construct negative meanings to the person represented as the carrier.

**Table 5.** Verbal Process

No	Sayer	Processes	Verbs	Target	Circumstance
1	(human)	nyeru		(a relative)	kepong

In reference to the verbal clause of *kepong nyeru* (call with two different terms) found in the Malay taboo proverbs above, a relative is represented as a target. The target is addressed with different terms of kinship.

As shown in the findings earlier, Bangkanese Malay taboo expressions found by this anthropolinguistic and functional study are represented mostly by material clauses. The frequent material processes can be linked to their function as the representation of concrete experience. As postulated by Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), the material process can bring about concrete changes in an event. It plays a role in making an impact in the form of action. Material processes as processes of action or event can build meaning of powerful experience. Eggins (2004) emphasizes that the material process can bring a real and trustworthy message.

In addition, the dominant use of participant 2 or goal and participant 3 or beneficiary in the material clauses of Bangkanese Malay taboo proverbs pose a more effective literal representation of meaning since the beneficiaries are physically influenced by participant 1/ actors. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) pose that one of the notions of material process is the occurrence of a physical event triggered by an agent to an entity being affected while Eggins (2004, p. 116) claims that one of the meanings behind the material process is “what x does to y”.

The adoption of material processes involving participants 2 and 3 in Bangkanese Malay culture can be claimed as one of language strategies for achieving the contextual meanings brought by the taboo expressions. As shown in the analysis of this study, 3 of material clauses employ meat-eating animals as participant 3 or beneficiary. Related to this, the study of Hendrik (2018) on the proverbs across Indonesia has found that the concept of wild animals in the proverbs can be associated with the meanings of evil people.

The effects construed from the relationship between the types of participants in the material processes of Bangkanese Malay taboo expressions can lead to the intended target, in this case the Malay Bangkanese people. This is for the purpose that they avoid any prohibited actions brought by the taboo expressions. In the clause of

*kuteng pelek, berik kek asuk* (cut the penis by yourself and give it to the dog), for instance, male genital is represented as a goal to be cut and given to a dog as the beneficiary. This representation can affect men supposed to be aware of the meaning behind having male genitals.

Concerning another clause, namely relational process, the relationship between the carrier and its attribute is deliberately built negative. This might be represented to create an impact on the contextual meaning that has been understood by Malay Bangkanese people. In the relational clause of *dek beperot*, literally the carrier is described as someone without stomach even though the stomach is known as human vital organ. Thus, with the literal meaning deliberately made negative by the relational process, the contextual meaning of the taboo expressions is expected to hit the target.

Related to another context, studies of transitivity system have also found that dominant relational clauses were employed to strengthen an image positively or negatively towards the participant being targeted. The studies of Al Fajri (2018), Kondowe (2014), Kosha & Shams (2005), Manar (2016), and Shokouhi & Amin (2010) have proved that relational clauses can pose negative identification and description at targeted participants. Theoretically, relational processes serve to create values. Reath (1998) states that when a meaning is constructed through relational verbs, the opinions and attitudes towards a participant can be influenced.

Finally, the last process found in this study, verbal clause represents the process of addressing a relative. A relative is represented as the ‘target’ being called with two different terms of address. In Bangkanese Malay culture, calling a relative with double terms of address must be avoided. In other words, a Bangkanese Malay man or woman is expected not to marry a family/relative of his/her family/relative because it is considered taboo. Taboo in relation to marriage was also scrutinized by Alhussaini et al. (2016). Their study has found that the transitivity system in the An-Nisa verses 22-23 of Al Qur'an has a relationship with the purpose of the surah to prohibit marriages with relatives of related blood, persons of marital kinship, as well as people related to milk relationship. The study shows that the targeted participants in the transitivity system refer to human beings regardless of ethnicity and religion. The present transitivity study and that of Alhussaini et al. (2016) have proved that transitivity system can be employed as a strategy for maintaining values related to marital issues.

The insight into the representation of taboos in the proverbs of Bangkanese Malay culture is expected to contribute not only to Bangkanese literature but also to the field of language education including English for Indonesian. Under the field of English education for Indonesian, the

representation of taboos in ethnic proverbs of Indonesia can be adapted in the pedagogical materials of English subject.

## CONCLUSION

This anthropolinguistic and SFL study has found two major findings. The first main finding lies in the fact that there are three types of taboo proverbs in Bangkanese Malay culture, namely action alone, expression alone, as well as both. Second, it is reported that the dominant clauses employed to represent the taboo proverbs are material processes followed by one relational process and one verbal process. The major occurrences of material processes are claimed to achieve the embedded values brought by the taboo proverbs since the processes of actions can bring concrete meanings.

Despite its findings, this anthropolinguistic and SFL study only limits its scope to the representation of taboo expressions in Malay Bangkanesian proverbs without making use of real utterances in the authentic situations. Further studies can extend their scope to the real use of Bangkanese Malay taboo proverbs. Subsequent studies can also discuss the concept of taboo by employing other frameworks of SFL such as textual or interpersonal meaning-making.

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