



# Forms and Communicative Functions of Euphemisms in Batu Bara Malay Culture

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**Abstract:** *People need communication in order to survive, and their survival is influenced by how good they are in communication. One of the ways to keep good communication with other people is using euphemisms. Euphemisms allow people to communicate any ideas without feeling afraid of making other people unpleasant. Nevertheless, people have to consider culture as one of the factors that may lead them to the failure in using euphemisms. This study aims to find out the forms and communicative functions of euphemisms used in Batu Bara Malay culture. This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method taking the native speakers of Batu Bara Malay living in Tanjung Tiram, North Sumatra, Indonesia, as the informants that met the predetermined criteria. The data were collected using interviews and were analyzed using an interactive model of data analysis. The findings of this study were: (i) the euphemisms in the Batu Bara Malay culture are formed by phonetic elements, word elements, grammatical elements, and rhetorical elements; (ii) the euphemisms in the Batu Bara Malay culture are intended to show politeness, to avoid taboos, and to hide the truth. It is concluded that the cultural background of people influences the way they form euphemisms and their intentions to use euphemisms.*

**Key Words:** *Batu Bara Malay culture, communicative functions, euphemisms, forms.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

Language is a tool that establishes and maintains social relations among members of a society. In their daily interaction, they do not always agree with the issues being discussed or the expressions delivered by certain members of their society, i.e., some issues or expressions may sound vulgar or unpleasant. This may lead to a disharmonious relation among them. Therefore, they always try to avoid using words and expressions that are unpleasant, inappropriate or embarrassing to them or to whom they speak. Nevertheless, in a certain context of communication, they have to communicate unpleasant or undesirable ideas, e.g., talking about death or vital body organs. On the one hand, the ideas must be delivered, but on the other hand, the ideas may lead to disharmonious relations. To accommodate such a difficult situation, people need to have communicative competence by selecting words or expressions with less offensive or vulgar meanings. Using such expressions is known as euphemisms.

Euphemism is mainly used to avoid taboos; however, in its development, it is used to avoid communicating any unpleasant expressions. Such avoidance is done by replacing taboos or unpleasant ideas with pleasant or less offensive expressions. As a result, euphemisms enable people to communicate unpleasant ideas, while maintaining the good relationship among them. The contribution of euphemism in maintaining social interactions with safe reasons is undeniable (Rosa, 2012). The meaning of “safe reason” implies saving a good relationship among people involved in the interaction. On the other hand, ignoring euphemisms will cause frictions among the people, and the world will be full of enmity or hostility (Enright, 1985).

Euphemism is a socio-cultural term because it is used differently in different societies and cultures. This confirms Hysi (2011) who believes that euphemism is a language phenomenon that is closely related to culture, tradition, and society. In other words, the expressions that need to be euphemized in a certain society or culture may not need to be euphemized in another society or culture (Kusmiatun & Bo, 2021; Liu, 2016; Qi, 2010; Rosa, 2012, 2014). Euphemisms is even regarded as a common place to advertise culture (Dalamu, 2018). The ideas mentioned above show a very close relationship between euphemisms and culture.

Previous studies on euphemisms have been conducted to reveal typical euphemisms in certain cultures, e.g., euphemisms in Japanese (Ivanova & Anashkina, 2015; Zhang, 2019) in Chinese (Qiuxiang, 2015), in English (Deng,



2016; Hua, 2020; Li-na, 2015; Wang, 2013), in Arabic (Al-Khasawneh, 2018; Khanfar, 2012), in Mongolian (Gruntov et al., 2016), in Thai (Kaosa-Ad, 2009), in Minangkabau (Rosa, 2012, 2014; Rosadi et al., 2013), in Javanese (Basuki et al., 2022; Sari, 2000), in Deli Malay (Syahfitri, 2018), and in Torajanese (Tandiliku, 2021). To the best knowledge of the authors, little attention is addressed to the study of euphemisms in Malay culture, especially in North Sumatra Province. Although Syahfitri (2018) conducted a study on euphemisms used in Malay, her focus was addressed to Deli Malay culture. Meanwhile, there some other ethnics of Malay in North Sumatra, one of which is Batu Bara Malay. It is assumed that the euphemisms used in Batu Bara Malay culture have their typical characteristics, which are different from other Malay ethnics. Thus, this present study explores the use of euphemisms in Batu Bara Malay culture.

In North Sumatra Province, there are four ethnics of Malay: Deli Malay, Langkat Malay, Serdang Malay, Batu Bara Malay, Asahan Malay, and Labuhanbatu Malay (Takari et al., 2012). They share similarities and differences in terms of their customs and traditions. Therefore, studying euphemisms in these Malay ethnics is important as it can also contribute to the similarities and differences of euphemisms in those cultures. This present study is particularly intended to find out: (i) the forms of euphemisms used in Batu Bara Malay culture; and (ii) the communicative functions of euphemisms used in Batu Bara Malay culture.

## 2. METHOD :

This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method, taking euphemisms used in the Batu Bara Malay culture as the central phenomenon of the study. The data were euphemistic expressions (i.e., words, phrases, clauses) used by Batu Bara Malay people living in Tanjung Tiram Batu Bara, North Sumatra Province, Indonesia. The informants were selected based on such criteria as: (i) native speakers of Malay Batu Bara, (ii) using Batu Bara Malay in their daily communication, (iii) actively getting involved in the cultural activities held in Tanjung Tiram; (iv) having good knowledge of Malay Batu Bara language and traditions, (v) having enough time to be interviewed; (vi) providing actual information; (vii) spending most of their time in Tanjung Tiram. Those criteria followed the suggestions from Spradley (1980) and Samarin (1988).

The data were collected using interviews in which listening and notetaking techniques (Sudaryanto, 1993) were applied. In this study, the researchers listened to the informants using their language in a natural setting and recorded the expressions that contained euphemisms. A notetaking technique was applied in order to help the researchers in the transcription process. In addition, an elicitation technique was also used to stimulate the informants to give more representative data. In this technique, the researchers asked various kinds of questions related to taboos and how they are replaced by other milder expressions.

Having been obtained, the data were analyzed qualitatively based on the order of the formulated research questions. First, the data were classified based on the forms of euphemisms. Then, the data were classified based on their communicative functions. The technique used in analyzing the data was an interactive model of data analysis proposed by Miles et al. (2014).

## 3. RESULTS :

The results of data analysis revealed that euphemism is a form of expression commonly used by Batu Bara Malay people living in Tanjung Tiram. Euphemism in Batu Bara Malay culture is a refinement of meaning represented by a certain expression used to replace expressions that are considered rude or unpleasant to hear which can hurt the listener.

### *Forms of Euphemisms Used in the Batu Bara Malay Culture*

The results of the data analysis show that the forms of euphemism used in the Batu Bara Malay culture include (i) phonetic elements in the form of shortening or abbreviations and repeating words; (ii) word elements in the form of borrowings, substitutions, and words used in folklore and religion; (iii) grammatical elements in the form of word omissions in a sentence; and (iv) rhetorical elements in the form of periphrases.

The only abbreviation found in the Batu Bara Malay euphemisms is “WC”. The word “WC” is formed through abbreviation of words with an initialism process, namely by taking the initial letters of the abbreviated words. The word “WC” in the Batu Bara Malay culture is a form of refinement of meaning to replace the word “defecation”, which sounds disgusting or unpleasant to hear. By using such an abbreviation, the meaning conveyed sounds normal because we also hear many abbreviations in everyday life.

In the form of repeated words, several euphemisms are found in the Batu Bara Malay culture, such as the words “*rujak-rujak*” and “*anyang-anyang*”. These two words are taken from the names of typical foods found in the Tanjung Tiram Batu Bara area, namely rujak (a typical spicy food in Batu Bara Malay made of several kinds of fruits) and *anyang*



(a typical food in Batu Bara Malay made of several kinds of vegetables mixed with seasoned grated coconut). Both of the words are used to refine the meaning contained in the word “persecuting” or “mistreating” someone. Persecuting or mistreating is obviously a vulgar expression containing violence; it really sounds unpleasant.

Furthermore, word elements are forms of euphemisms that are widely used in the Batu Bara Malay culture. The use of the word “lang sui”, for example, is the euphemism formed by using borrowing words. The word “lang sui” is a word borrowed from Chinese language which consists of two words: “lang” means “person or people” and “sui” means “beautiful”. Thus, the word can be interpreted as “a beautiful person”. The word “lang sui” is used to refine the meaning contained in the word “*kuntilanak*” which, when mentioned, may cause many people to shiver with fear. “*Kuntilanak*” is believed by the local people as a very frightening female ghost with unusual long hair wandering in the middle of the night. Some of the informants said that someone who met that supernatural being might faint or suffer from a terrible illness. According to the Batu Bara Malay culture, the use of the word “lang sui” can euphemize the meaning of the word “*kuntilanak*” and make it conveyable and does not give a negative or frightening impression to those who hear it.

Substitute words are also used as a form of euphemism in the Batu Bara Malay culture. Saying the word “tiger” is considered taboo, so it is substituted by the word “*datuk*” or “*cindaku*”. By using one of these words, the other person will be interested and not feel uncomfortable talking to the speaker. Conversely, using the word “tiger” will make the conversation uncomfortable and reduce the other person's interest in continuing the conversation. Other euphemisms are also used to refine the meaning of certain words, such as the word “*penganten* (literally translated ‘bride’)” to refine the meaning of the word “centipede” and the word “*ula* (literally translated ‘snake’)” to refine the meaning of the word “thief”. Especially in the use of “*datuk*”, “*cindaku*”, and “*penganten*” as euphemisms, Batu Bara Malay people show that euphemisms in their culture are associated with the local myth.

Despite its small frequency, borrowing is also used by the Batu Bara Malay people to form euphemisms. The word “*zakar*” is the example of euphemism formed through borrowing. It is borrowed from Arabic language that refers to the male genitalia. Saying it directly in the local language is obviously taboo, which sounds unpleasant and even disgusting.

Moreover, euphemisms in the Batu Bara Malay culture are also formed by taking the words typically used in folklores and religious stories. The word “crocodile” is euphemized with the phrase “*kayu hanyut* (literally translated ‘drift wood’)”. The use of this phrase is taken from the folklore well known by the local people in Tanjung Tiram Batu Bara entitled “the mouse deer and the crocodile”. In the story it is narrated that the mouse deer showed its ingenuity by replacing its leg with a piece of wood in order to make the crocodile reluctant to eat it. So, the word “wood” which can be “drifted away” is used by the local people as a substitute for the word “crocodile”. Meanwhile, the example of euphemisms taken from a religious story is the word “Ismael”, used as a substitute for the word “dolphin”. In the Batu Bara Malay culture, the word “dolphin” is taboo, and saying it directly is believed to bring bad luck to the local community. The word “Ismael” is the name of the Prophet in the Islam teachings which can be found in Islamic religious stories.

The other euphemisms found in the Batu Bara Malay culture are formed by employing grammatical elements, i.e., by omitting words in a sentence. The euphemism “*Dia kono* (literally translated ‘He/She suffered’)” is a form of omission of word elements in a sentence. This sentence should have read “He suffered from a disease caused by supernatural beings”, which sounds unpleasant. By removing a few words from this sentence, the meaning conveyed will sound milder because the words “from a disease caused by supernatural beings” may cause fear to those who hear them.

The last form of euphemism found in the Batu Bara Malay culture is a rhetorical form. The results of data analysis show that some euphemisms are formed by paraphrasing the meaning contained in the original word. This form is also known as periphrasis since it is a type of conveying words indirectly but without using any comparisons. The sentence “*ke laut lakinya ke laut bininya* (literally translated ‘both the married couple went to the sea’)” is a euphemistic expression that replaces the meaning of the word “prostitute”. The periphery element contained here is that when the husband leaves the house, his wife also goes out to meet another man. The use of the word “sea” is very reasonable considering that the Tanjung Tiram area is a coastal area that is very familiar with “sea”. According to the Batu Bara Malay culture, when the husband goes to work, his wife is waiting for him at home, does the housework, and welcomes her husband home from work. The other euphemism formed by using periphrasis is the phrase “*tamu tak diundang* (literally translated ‘uninvited guest’)” to refine the meaning of “thief”.

### ***Communicative Functions of Euphemisms Used in the Batu Bara Malay Culture***

Basically, euphemisms function to replace an unpleasant word or expression with a pleasant or acceptable word or expression. Nevertheless, they may also have other communicative functions. The results of data analysis found three



communicative functions of euphemisms used by the Batu Bara Malay people living in Tanjung Tiram, North Sumatra, Indonesia, including: (i) to show politeness, (ii) to avoid taboo words, and (iii) to hide the truth.

Based on the results of data analysis, the communicative function of euphemism as a tool to show politeness is found in the use of the expressions “*rujak-rujak*”, “*anyang-anyang*”, “*WC*”, and “*tamu tak diundang*”. All of these expressions are not used to replace taboo words, but they are used to replace words or expressions which sound impolite if said to other people in the Batu Bara Malay culture. Thus, these expressions are solely used to be polite in speaking.

Avoiding taboo words is a very basic euphemistic communicative function in the Batu Bara Malay culture. A number of animal names are considered taboo to convey by the local people who believe that saying those words may bring bad luck to the speakers and those who hear them. The word “tiger” which is euphemized with the word “*datuk*” or “*cindaku*”, “centipede” with “*penganten*”, “dolphin” with “*Ismael*”, and “crocodile” with “*kayu hanyut*” are examples of words that are taboo to say directly. The results of the interviews also confirm that the Batu Bara Malay culture is very strict with the case of taboos. The local people who do not comply with the local taboo-related rule will be given the customary punishment.

In addition to animal names, the communicative function of euphemism in the Batu Bara Malay culture to avoid taboo words also involves mentioning the names of certain spirits, such as the word “*lang sui*” to euphemize the word “*kuntilanak*” and “*sanai*” to euphemize “sea ghost”. By using a form of euphemism for words that are considered taboo, the Batu Bara Malay people living in Tanjung Tiram believe that these creatures actually bring good luck to the speakers.

Furthermore, the communicative function of euphemism in the Batu Bara Malay culture to avoid taboo words also involves mentioning the names of human vital organs and human work that are considered despised. The genitals of both men and women are very taboo to express. As a substitute, the Batu Bara Malay people use words such as “*zakar*”, “*balam*”, and “*pipit*”. The same case also applies in saying the words related to sexual activities. The people who get involved in a prostitution, for example, are said “*ke laut lakinya ke laut bininya*”.

The next communicative function of euphemisms in the Batu Bara Malay culture is to hide the truth. Omitting some words in a sentence is an example of using euphemisms to hide the truth. By saying “*Dia kono*”, for example, the speaker hides what actually happened to the person being talked about. The other example includes the phrase “*tamu tak diundang*” which is used to hide the truth that the person being talked about is a thief.

#### 4. DISCUSSION :

The findings of this study concerning the forms of euphemisms confirm the previous literature on forms of euphemisms (Rosa, 2012). These findings strengthen the theory that euphemisms are formed by four elements, including phonetic elements, word elements, grammatical elements, and rhetorical elements. These findings also confirm the difference between forms and types of euphemisms. Forms of euphemisms are related to how euphemisms are formed through linguistic elements, while type of euphemisms are related to categorization of euphemisms based on certain approaches.

The euphemism most often used in the Batu Bara Malay culture is formed by word elements. This finding is supported by the fact that words are elements of language whose meaning can change depending on the context where, when, or to whom the words are used. The word is also an element of language that is used to replace jobs with a low social status. This supports the previous study confirming that several occupation-related euphemisms should be used in order to decentralize the traditional “low-level occupation” (Hua, 2020). People are often looked down upon for having jobs that are considered to be at a low level. In addition to occupation-related words, names of animals are also often euphemized. Animals which are euphemized in the Batu Bara Malay culture are those which have poisons or are wild. This finding supports the previous study confirming that euphemizing certain animals are intended in order not to attract the wild animals (Gruntov et al., 2016).

Besides, these findings support the results of the research conducted by Kaosa-Ad (2009), who found that words are the elements most frequently used to form euphemisms by native English speakers and native Thai speakers living in Thailand. In particular, he pointed out that borrowing and substitution are the word elements often used to substitute words for taboos in English.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate differences in the types of euphemized words caused by culture. Western culture categorizes words related to divinity as taboo, so the word “God” is often euphemized with “gosh” or “goodness” (Rawson, 1981; Linfoot-Ham, 2005). However, in the Batu Bara Malay culture, saying God or the name of God is not taboo, it is even an encouragement, instead. Thus, in the Batu Bara Malay culture, people often use the words related to God, such as “Allah The Almighty”, “God”, “*Koji/Haji*”, “*Astaghfirullah*”, “*Masha Allah*”, and so forth. This finding confirms the previous literature (Rosa, 2012) that words or objects that need to be euphemized in one culture may not need to be euphemized in another culture.



The other interesting finding in this study is very few euphemisms formed by using phonetic elements. This is motivated by the fact that the Batu Bara Malay culture has a culture with the preference of using figurative language rather than spoofed word sounds, abbreviations, or repetition of words. This finding confirms the closeness of the Batu Bara Malay culture with Minangkabau culture which is very famous for its indirect culture (Rosa, 2012, 2014). In addition, the use of abbreviations sometimes does not make the message to be conveyed understandable to the other person because abbreviations can be interpreted differently by different people or in different cultures.

Moreover, these findings imply that the choice of euphemisms is influenced by the geographical factor. The cultural value embodied in the use of euphemism by the Batu Bara Malay people is that their daily lives are very familiar with various types of animals and everything related to the sea. This is evidenced by the many uses of euphemisms involving animals (such as tigers, snakes, crocodiles, dolphins, centipedes, etc.) and matters related to the sea (such as sea ghosts, drift wood, sea dwellers, to the sea, etc.). These findings confirm the previous literature that many aspects of human life – e.g., livelihood, culture, custom, and way of thinking – are strongly influenced by the available surrounding ecosystem (Tarigan et al., 2022).

The ideology contained in the use of euphemism by the Batu Bara Malay people in Tanjung Tiram is that they still believe in myths that can bring bad luck or bad luck from expressing certain words. They believe that centipedes, for example, will chase, bite, and transfer poison to people who say the word “centipedes”. The same case also occurs when people say the word “*kuntilanak*”, which they believe will bring bad luck, such as suffering from terrible illness and even death to their unborn babies or babies. This is a very interesting finding because there might be a relationship between euphemisms and the local myth.

In terms of communicative functions of euphemisms, the findings of this study confirm the previous literature (Allan & Burrige, 1991, 2007; Bakhtiar, 2012; Neaman & Silver, 1990; Rosa, 2012, 2014) that the use of euphemisms in a certain culture and society is motivated by at least three motifs: to avoid taboos, to hide the truth, and to show politeness. Nevertheless, the tendency of using certain communicative functions of euphemisms is different in different cultures. Batu Bara Malay people, for example, use euphemisms mostly to show politeness. Meanwhile, euphemisms in the Karonese culture are used mostly to avoid taboos (Barus, 2020; Sembiring, 2016).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS :

Euphemisms are cultural in terms of their forms and communicative functions. The cultural background of people influences the way they form euphemisms and their intentions to use euphemisms. The frequent use of substitution and periphrasis in forming euphemisms shows that the Batu Bara Malay culture emphasizes “indirectness” in maintaining their social interaction. Euphemism is very closely related to the local culture. Words that are considered taboo and euphemistic in one culture may be words that are commonly used in another culture, and vice versa. The same case also applies to the ideology that emerges from the use of euphemisms. The ideology contained in one culture, such as in the Batu Bara Malay culture, which still strongly believes in myths, may not apply to other cultures. Euphemisms can reflect a culture, and culture also influences the use of euphemisms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

What has been presented in this paper is just a possible relation between euphemisms and myth. Then, it provides an opportunity for other researchers to do a study on how euphemisms are related to the local myth.

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