

## TABOO EXPRESSIONS IN ASAHAN MALAY: AN ETHNOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

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### Abstract

This research aims to classify taboo language expressions in Asahan Malay. The phenomenon of taboo language is important to study as an effort to maintain local wisdom. This research used a qualitative method with an ethnolinguistic approach. The location of this research is in Tanjungbalai, North Sumatera. The research data comes from the speech of native Asahan Malay speakers, research instruments in the form of interview guides, recordings and field notes. The data collection method is the field observation method. The results of the research show that there are two types of taboo expressions in Asahan Malay. The first one is general taboo, namely words that are lexically classified as taboo because they include words related to sex (15 data), bodily waste (7 data), cursing or cursing (9 data) as well as insults and demeaning (26 data), while the second one is special taboo, namely words that are not literally/lexically taboo but are considered taboo by Asahan Malay speakers because they are interpreted from a cultural perspective, namely consisting of words that are considered to bring harm (10 data) and are considered impolite (1 data).

**Keywords:** *cultural discourse; cultural semantics; ethnolinguistics*

### 1. Introduction

Asahan society, which is dominated by Asahan Malay culture, certainly uses a language that is influenced by the culture that encompasses it. In Asahan Malay, it is known that there are words that are considered taboo and therefore the pronunciation of these words tends to be avoided. Taboo in this language is, of course, greatly influenced by aspects of Asahan Malay culture.

According to Argasetya (2009), language and culture have a very close relationship that cannot be separated. Culture forms people's frame of mind, according to Takele (2020). Language occupies an important place in influencing people's views and concepts about their world. Meanwhile, according to Dan, L. D & Septevany, E. (2020), the way a particular society uses language can reflect their culture, and this culture then reflects the society's ideology. Junaidi (2019) stated that the existence of prohibitions and taboos in speaking is caused by the culture and beliefs they believe in. According to Gao (2013), language is considered to contain special powers that are able to cure disease, ward off evil, bring good to oneself and harm enemies.

We learn taboo words through the socialization of speech practices, which creates oral knowledge regarding etiquette in expressing annoyance. Taboo plays an important role in language (compare Supriyadi, 2013 & El Massri, 2018). Taboo is a term of Polynesian origin which means "sacred" and "forbidden", taboo originally refers to people or things that are prohibited or placed under limits by those in power (compare: klerk, 2021, Mocanu, 2017, Ningjue, 2010, Nordquist, 2018 & Rahman, 2019), the word taboo refers to prohibited behavior because it is behavior that is believed to be dangerous for certain individuals or society as a whole (Allan, K., & Burridge, K. 2006).

According to Affini (2017), Barus (2018), Slamia (2020), Mocanu (2017) & Zho (2013), "taboo words" are words that violate the norms or provisions in a particular society which are usually spoken to express hatred, anger, attack, astonishment, joy, and other states of mind that can encourage the speaker to behave against social norms or damage morals while according to Jay & Harris (2008) taboo words represent a class of references that evoke emotions in connection with body products, body parts, sexual acts, ethnic or racial insults, profanity, vulgarity, slang, and obscenity).

Bednarek (2006) stated that the first option when dealing with the pronunciation of swear/taboo words is to replace them with existing euphemisms. People try to avoid it, not to hurt other people or offend other people's feelings (compare: Arya, 2018, Culpeper (2019), Haryati, 2020, Sari, 2019 & Taufik (2017). Regarding the meaning behind context, in this study it is cultural context, so we will deal with ethnopragmatic studies. Ethnopragmatics is a study related to cross-linguistic semantics because the whole idea is to understand speech practices in the language context connected to the society concerned, namely in relation to customs and values, beliefs and attitudes, social categories, emotions, and so on. For example, there is much that can be understood about the Malay way of speaking, which refers to the Malay concepts of shame, modesty and maruah 'personal dignity'. Likewise, with the Japanese concepts of wa 'harmony' and omoiyari 'empathy', the Yankunytjatjara concept of kunta 'shame, feeling out of place', and the (Anglo) English concept of being fair and logical, ethnopragmatic understanding is very important in understanding how speak in their respective cultures. Concepts like this are appropriately termed cultural keywords. Because the concepts in it are part of the framework of internal cultural psychology, ethnopragmatics is compatible with the insights of cultural psychology, because people in different cultures speak differently because they think, feel, and relate differently to other people.

Clyne (1994: 3) in Peeters, et al. (2020) states that cultural values are hidden meanings that underlie the structure of discourse. One can use a variety of linguistic evidence to assist in the process of uncovering meaning, or to test substitutability conditions. According to Bromhead (2011) in Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) analysis, collocations and phraseology are used to provide clues to the meaning of words. However, being able to understand and explain key ethnopragmatic concepts of other people's cultures is not easy because their culture is embedded in their own language.

Cultural discourses operate at varying levels of generality and often intersect across domains of thought, communication, and behavior. These discourses serve as frameworks through which members of a cultural community interpret and enact their social realities. For instance, Discourse [A] represents what may be considered a high-level or "master script" within Anglo cultural traditions, reflecting a cultural emphasis on personal autonomy. In contrast, Discourse [B] exemplifies a central narrative within Russian culture, which promotes expressive authenticity in both speech and action.

These high-level discourses are not abstract ideals but are manifested concretely through recurrent patterns of speech and communicative behavior within each culture. They are frequently anchored by culturally significant terms or "buzzwords"—such as *freedom* in Anglo discourse and *iskrennost'* in Russian, the latter approximating the notion of sincerity or emotional honesty.

Discourse [A] – associated with the Anglo value of personal autonomy – may be expressed in the following terms:

“When someone does something, it helps if that person can think about it like this: ‘I do this because I want to do it.’”

Discourse [B] – reflecting the Russian cultural value of emotional expressiveness – might be framed as:

“It is good if someone wants others to know what they are thinking. It is good if someone wants others to know what they are feeling.”

While these discourses may exert a dominant influence within their respective cultural contexts, it is important to note that they are not universally accepted or internalized by all individuals within those societies. Nonetheless, even those who do not personally subscribe to these cultural narratives are often aware of them, as such discourses form part of the shared interpretive backdrop that shapes social interactions.

A defining feature of such cultural scripts is their evaluative component—phrases like “it would be good if...”, “it is not good if...”, or more nuanced variants such as “it could be good if...” or “it could be bad if...”. These expressions encode value judgments and normative expectations within the discourse. Another significant component of cultural discourse involves perceived constraints or permissions, commonly articulated through formulations such as “I can say/think/do...” or “I can’t say/think/do...”.

Building on this theoretical framework, the present study seeks to examine the cultural values and social norms embedded in the linguistic taboos of the Asahan Malay language. By analyzing these forms of speech regulation, this research aims to highlight the cultural wisdom inherent in local practices and contribute to efforts to preserve and promote the region's intangible heritage.

## 2. Literature Review

Taboo studies through various approaches have been carried out by several previous researchers. Some of these studies contributed to this research. Some of the research that is used as a reference in conducting this research is:

Jue (2010) analyzed the use of taboo words on the internet based on gender. The results of the analysis showed that men used taboo words more than women. Laksana (2009), in discussing the concept of taboo in the Balinese language, draws upon the theoretical framework of Douglas (1966/1992). The findings obtained from the study: first, the way the Balinese people embody their verbal behavior against taboos in their culture by using metaphors and metonymia (majasi language), euphemisms, paraphrasing, transcoding (and diglossia), and technonyms. Second, the use of swearing, which cannot be realized in other ways, such as swearing, blasphemy, curses, swearing, chaos, and throwing/exclamating. While the research by Gao (2013) aims to group the main variations of the taboos in English, the results of which are body excretion, death and disease, gender, "four-letter words", privacy and discrimination, which are each defined and exemplified concretely, then find a way to avoid taboos is through euphemism and indirect speech. Then

Edwards (2015) researched the relationship between language and culture to the formation of taboo concepts, and found that changes in society and culture caused a shift in semantic meaning to the term that was taboo. In addition to the research above, other related research that is presented as a reference is the research conducted by Barus (2018). The research conducted aims to study and revise taboo expressions in the Karo language, i.e. verbal and nonverbal expressions that are considered to violate language rules, and verbal expressions that can result in "loss of face" or pose a danger to the speaker and listeners. The results show that the Taboo of the Karo language is classified into three groups, namely: the expression taboo in kinship relationships, the context-specific expression taboo, and the general expression taboo. Sensitivity is not only based on the lexical aspect or text used, but also because of the context and co-text in the process of expression. Taboo expressions in kinship relationships can be avoided by intermediary strategies, and context-specific taboos and general taboos can be avoided by their respective forms of euphemism. It was different from previous related studies which generally emphasized the classification and avoidance of taboos. This study emphasizes the meaning and cultural values contained in Asahan Malay taboos, which can be expressed through an ethnopragmatic approach which is described in the form of a cultural script.

### 3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative method, as it aims to produce descriptive data in the form of spoken language from native speakers of Asahan Malay. The research adopts an ethnolinguistic approach and is conducted within the framework of cultural semantics, which emphasizes the study of meaning within a cultural context. This approach aligns with cross-linguistic semantics, as it seeks to understand speech practices in relation to the language and cultural identity of the community under study.

The research was carried out in Tanjungbalai City, North Sumatra. This location was chosen because Tanjungbalai is the former capital of the Asahan Sultanate and historically served as the center of the development of the Asahan Malay language (Wahid, 2008).

The primary research instrument was an interview guide, and data were collected using the participant-observation method. Four informants, all native speakers of Asahan Malay, participated in this study: Nurhasby (74), Kosim (65), Nusaisyah Siagian (51), and Rizal Sinaga (61). The informants were selected randomly, provided they met the predetermined qualifications. Each informant was given a questionnaire containing both general (textual) and specific (contextual) questions related to taboo words in the Asahan Malay language.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Based on the results of participatory observations, researchers found that there are two types of taboo words in the Asahan Malay language. The first one is the general taboo, namely Asahan Malay words, which are literally taboo because they are words related to sex, dirt, swearing or cursing and are rude or degrading. The second one is a special taboo, namely Asahan Malay words which, based on Asahan people's beliefs, can have bad impact from their cultural perspective.

The general Asahan Malay taboo words will literally be presented in the following table:

Taboo subject	Taboo expression
Sex activity and organ	<i>Baranak, bijik londir, bujang, bunting, cepet, kentot,</i>

	<p><i>kontol, kulup, nonong, parkosa, pepet, puki, sodom, tetek, totong</i></p> <p>(giving birth/giving birth, testicles, vagina, pregnancy/pregnancy, vagina, intercourse, penis, foreskin/tip of penis, penis, rape, vagina, vagina, sodom, breast, penis)</p>
organs and waste products of the body	<p><i>Beol, berak, burit, ikur, koncing, kontut, pantat</i></p> <p>(defecate/defecate, defecate/defecate, anus, urinate, fart, buttocks)</p>
Swearing or cursing	<p><i>Dajjal, fir'aun, gilo, pesong, jahanam, kimpat, mampus, manyingkot, mati, senget, setan, taun</i></p> <p>(Dajjal, Pharaoh, crazy, sane, evil, insane, dead, dead, dead, insane, devil, a kind of ghost)</p>
Rude or condescending	<p><i>Anjing, babi, babu cino, balangkas, bobal, buruk cokik, gatal api, gilo bayang, gilo tolur, haram jadah, jalang koda, kapalo angin, kapalo atok, kapalo utak, kapinding, koro, lonte, lotong, manggaliting, manggaronyam, pantat barasap, pokak, sompor, tampurung, tungkik</i></p> <p>(dog, pig, Chinese maid, lepankas, stupid, greedy, flirtatious, pretentious, flirtatious, illegitimate child, bitch, troublemaker, grandfather's head (derogated), brain head (debased), bedbug, monkey, slut/prostitute, langur (mongkey), extremely furious, messy, Smoking buttocks, deaf, bent, coconut shell (cursing), deaf)</p>

From the table above, it can be seen that all words contain elements of activity or sexual organs, dirt and words that have the value of swearing and cursing as well as being rude or degrading. It is classified as taboo, referring to the theoretical concept of taboo (Compare: Affini (2017), Barus (2018), Mocanu (2017) & Zhao (2013)).

For special taboos, the meaning is not found in the lexical meaning, but in the context of its use, an ethnopragmatic approach will be used in uncovering the meaning, which will be explained in this section because the reasons behind certain words being taboo are influenced by local cultural customs which are motivated by the ideology and paradigm of the Asahan Malay community. In general, Malay society has relatively similar paradigms and ideologies. Moreover, Malay people who live in geographically close areas, for example the Asahan Malay community, will have close language relations with Batubara Malay, Deli Malay, Langkat Malay and Labuhan Batu Malay because still in the same province, so fellow Malay speakers in North Sumatra province found many similarities in linguistic phenomena, including the phenomenon of language taboos.

This finding is certainly different from the results of previous studies. For example, in Balinese society, where it is considered taboo to mention certain words to a higher caste, or in Karo society, where it is considered taboo if a daughter-in-law speaks directly to her

father-in-law. This language taboo phenomenon is not found at all in Asahan Malay society which shows that the further the cultural kinship between community groups, the further the similarities in language phenomena will be, because culture greatly influences language.

The Asahan Malay community, in their daily activities, interprets certain words as taboo. Even though these words do not contain elements of taboo, this is of course influenced by the values inherent in the Asahan Malay community. However, in general, researchers have found that there are two categories that cause a word or phrase to be considered taboo; the first if a particular word or phrase is believed to bring anger, and the second if a particular word or phrase is offensive or impolite. If seen from its lexical meaning, then the word "Certain words" is not considered taboo. Therefore, their presentation must also be accompanied by a context of use. The explanation regarding this matter will be presented in the following table:

Taboo expression	Using context
1. <i>Gomuk, lagak, Sehat (dsb)</i> (fat, beautiful, healthy)	Praise the baby
2. <i>Atok, inceK, omak, nama (si fulan)</i> Atok, inceK, omak, name of someone	Mention the name of someone who has died
3. <i>Tumpur, Tamamud (tamakan mudal)</i> Bankrupt	When selling/trading
4. <i>Bale, pulut, kain sarung, dsb</i> balai, sticky rice, sarong	when <i>manyonggot</i> event will be held
5. <i>Angin koncang, bosar ombak, hanyut, tanggolam, dsb</i> Strong winds, big waves, drifting, drown, etc	While at sea
6. <i>Buayo, harimo</i> Crocodile, tiger	When you're on the river and on the forest
7. <i>mak awak pigi yo, elok-elok omak yo, bepisah kito (dsb)</i> then I'll go, OK, Mama, let's go our separate ways (etc.)	When will go away/separate
8. <i>Taun, setan, anak jin (dsb)</i> Taun, devil, son of genie (etc.)	When it is noon or dusk before sunset in the forest
9. <i>Banyak/ sedikit</i> Many/little	When asked about the number of fish caught while fishing/fishing, etc.
10. <i>Tak takut aku, dsb</i> I'm not afraid, etc	When reminded to be careful and introspective
11. <i>Bilo balek?</i> when are you coming home?	When there are guests visiting

In this section, based on the perspective of the Asahan Malay community, several words and expressions are identified as potentially harmful (data 1–10) or offensive (data 11). These linguistic items will be examined within their respective contexts of use and interpreted using an ethnopragmatic approach, framed through the lens of cultural discourse analysis.

A discussion of taboo expressions begins as follows:

## 1. Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse to Avoid Harm When Praising Infants

*Gomuk* ('fat') and *lagak* ('beautiful' or 'handsome') are considered taboo when uttered in reference to a baby, especially while observing or praising the infant. For example, if someone sees a baby who appears chubby (*gomuk*), cultural norms require that the term be replaced with more neutral or contrary expressions such as *kurus* ('skinny') or *semangat* ('enthusiastic'). The word *gomuk* is avoided due to the belief that using it may bring harm or illness upon the child. Similarly, the term *lagak* is rarely used directly; instead, Asahan Malay speakers prefer to describe the baby as *jolek* or *hudoh* ('ugly'). Paradoxically, these words are not interpreted negatively within this cultural context. Rather, they function as protective praise—intended to avert misfortune—where the semantic inversion is understood and accepted by both the speaker and listener.

### [A] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Harm When Praising a Baby

"It is not appropriate to speak positively about a newborn. People believe such praise may invite harm."

"Therefore, when we want to say something about a baby, it is better to use the opposite of what we mean."

## 2. Avoiding Direct Reference to the Deceased in Asahan Malay Cultural Norms

Words or phrases that refer directly to the name of a deceased individual—especially parents or elders—are considered culturally sensitive and potentially dangerous within the Asahan Malay community. Mentioning the name of someone who has passed away is believed to result in a spiritual affliction known as *katoguran*. As defined in the *Kamus Bahasa Melayu Asahan* (Asahan Malay Dictionary) by Prof. Ramli Abdul Wahid, *katoguran* refers to an ailment caused by being spiritually reprimanded or disturbed by the deceased. To avoid this condition, community members tend to avoid stating the deceased's name outright. Instead, they substitute it with the respectful term *mandiang*, which denotes a deceased person. For example, rather than saying "*Atok*" (grandfather) directly, one would say "*mandiang atok*" to refer respectfully and cautiously to the deceased grandfather.

### [B] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Harm When Mentioning the Name of a Deceased Person

"It is not appropriate to say the name of someone who has passed away. I may experience something unpleasant as a result."

"Therefore, when we need to refer to someone who has died, we must first use another word, like *mandiang*, to show respect and to protect myself."

## 3. Taboos in Business and Commerce

In the Asahan Malay community, certain terms—such as *tumpur* (bankrupt) or *tamamud* (an acronym for *tamakan mudal*, meaning 'devoured by capital')—are considered taboo in commercial contexts. These words are avoided in everyday trade discourse due to the cultural belief that speech functions as a form of prayer; thus, uttering negative terms is feared to manifest negative outcomes. Merchants intentionally refrain from verbalizing such terms to avoid bringing misfortune to their enterprises.

### **[C] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Harm through Speech in Commerce**

“It is inappropriate to say negative things while trading. If we utter them, we may encounter misfortune. Therefore, we must use cautious language and avoid terms that suggest loss or failure.”

### **4. Taboos in Ritual Speech – The *Disonggot* Ceremony**

The *disonggot* is a ritual healing event in the Asahan Malay community. Prior to this event, relatives are prohibited from mentioning words associated with the ceremony—such as *bale*, *pulut*, or *sarung*. This stems from the belief that if the individual to be treated hears the ceremonial terms prematurely, the ritual’s effectiveness will be compromised. It is thought that foreknowledge disrupts the spiritual efficacy of the treatment.

### **[D] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Ritual Failure by Restricting Speech**

“It would not be good to say anything related to *manyonggot*. If the person hears it and becomes aware, the treatment may no longer be effective. We should avoid saying these words.”

### **5. Taboos at Sea and Among Fisherfolk**

Among the Asahan Malays—many of whom live by the coast and work as fishermen—there are strict speech taboos while at sea. Terms like *angin koncang* (strong winds), *bosar ombak* (big waves), *tanggolam* (sinking), and others are avoided due to the belief that uttering such words can summon misfortune. One particularly potent belief prohibits whistling at sea, as it is thought to attract storms.

### **[E] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Danger through Silence at Sea**

“It is not appropriate to say negative things while at sea. If we do, bad things may occur. Therefore, we must speak cautiously or remain silent.”

### **6. Taboos in the Forest and Rivers**

In forested and riverine environments, the Asahan Malays refrain from naming dangerous entities such as *buayo* (crocodile), *sane* (a type of water spirit), or *harimo* (tiger). Instead, euphemisms like *atok* or *datuk* (grandfather) are used, reflecting respect and fear toward these beings. This linguistic strategy aims to avoid provoking supernatural forces believed to inhabit these natural spaces.

### **[F] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Harm by Not Naming Wild Beings**

“It feels wrong to name wild animals directly. If we mention them, something bad may happen to me. It is safer to refer to them using respectful or coded terms.”

### **7. Taboos around Farewell Expressions**

Utterances that imply final separation or farewell are also considered taboo. For example, a statement like “*bepisah kito*” (let’s go our separate ways) may be interpreted as a death omen. The Asahan Malays believe that such expressions can attract actual separation, illness, or death, and listeners often immediately correct the speaker to counter any perceived harm.

### **[G] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding the Power of Farewell Words**

“It’s not proper to say things that suggest permanent separation. If we say them, others will feel uneasy, and we too might suffer consequences.”

### **8. Taboos on Reckless Behavior and Speech in Sacred Times and Places**

Reckless speech or behavior—especially in remote, spiritually charged places like deep forests or rivers—is prohibited. Saying obscene or disrespectful things in such locations is believed to cause *tekono*, a spiritual illness triggered by unseen forces. Additionally, specific times like *tengah hari* (noon) and *sonjo* (dusk) are seen as spiritually sensitive; during these periods, vulgar words, loud noises, and provocative songs are taboo.

#### **[H] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Harm through Restraint in Sacred Contexts**

“It is disrespectful to speak carelessly in certain places or at sacred times. If we do, we may become ill or face misfortune.”

### **9. Taboos on Disclosing Fishing Success**

For the Asahan Malay people, fishing is both livelihood and tradition. It is taboo to state the quantity of the catch explicitly, whether large or small. Saying “a lot” may decrease future catches; saying “a little” might invoke scarcity. The neutral response *ado jugo* (there is also / not bad) is used to deflect bad luck and maintain humility.

#### **[I] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Misfortune through Humble Speech in Fishing**

“It’s not proper to say exactly how many fish I caught. If we say too much or too little, we may ruin my luck. It is better to give a vague answer.”

### **10. Taboos Against Arrogant Speech**

Boastful language—particularly when related to threats or dangers—is strictly avoided. A person mocking a potentially dangerous situation, such as mistaking a crocodile for driftwood and belittling it, is believed to invite real harm. The community sees arrogant speech as provoking the supernatural and violating the humility expected in uncertain or threatening environments.

#### **[J] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Danger through Humility in Speech**

“It’s not wise to boast or speak arrogantly. If we do, misfortune may come. Therefore, we must speak humbly and respectfully.”

### **11. Taboos Against Inappropriate Social Questions**

In social interaction, particularly with guests, the Asahan Malays avoid questions or statements that may suggest impoliteness, such as asking a guest when they intend to leave. Such expressions are viewed as offensive and inhospitable, potentially making the guest feel unwelcome. Cultural etiquette dictates restraint in speech to preserve harmony and mutual respect.

#### **[K] Asahan Malay Cultural Discourse: Avoiding Offense through Polite Interaction**

“It is not courteous to ask a guest when they will leave. If we say it, the guest might feel offended, and that will make us feel bad too. We must be careful with our words.”

## **5. Conclusion**

The researchers found that taboo words in the Asahan Malay language could be categorized into several groups: references to sexual organs or sexual activity (15 instances), bodily organs or waste products (7 instances), swear words or curses (12 instances), and harsh or degrading expressions (25 instances). These are classified as general taboos, as they are lexically considered taboo in accordance with established theoretical frameworks. In addition, several verbal expressions were identified as taboo because speakers of Asahan Malay perceive them as potentially harmful (10 instances) or offensive to others (1 instance). These findings are closely tied to local cultural values, highlighting the need for contextual analysis of verbal usage and a description of the relevant cultural discourse. Given that the study involved only four respondents, the findings may be limited in scope. To enhance validity and comprehensiveness, future research is encouraged to involve a larger and more diverse pool of respondents. Furthermore, this study focused primarily on the cultural values and normative meanings associated with taboo expressions. A noteworthy area for future investigation is the phenomenon of taboo avoidance—particularly whether there are significant differences in avoidance strategies when compared across different linguistic or cultural contexts.

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