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A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF BATAK PROVERBS (UMPASA) AND CULTURAL VALUES

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ABSTRACT

Batak proverbs (*umpasa*) are an essential component of North Sumatran cultural heritage, carrying communal wisdom, social norms, and moral guidance. This study applies discourse analysis to examine how Batak *umpasa* construct and transmit cultural values. Using qualitative document analysis, ten commonly cited *umpasa* were analyzed for discourse features, including metaphors, directives, prohibitions, and evaluative utterances. The findings reveal that *umpasa* function as structured cultural discourse, conveying values such as kinship, respect for elders, moral responsibility, collective harmony, religiosity, and balanced personal character. Each proverb performs a social function, guiding behavior, regulating interaction, and reinforcing communal identity. This research highlights the role of *umpasa* in intergenerational knowledge transmission and emphasizes their importance as a resource for cultural preservation, education, and ethical socialization.

Keywords: Batak *umpasa*, proverbs, discourse analysis, cultural values, oral tradition, Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are cultural expressions that contain communal wisdom, social norms, and moral guidance. In many societies, proverbs are used to educate, advise, and guide behavior, allowing cultural values to be passed down from one generation to the next. Rather than serving only as stylistic language, proverbs function as meaningful discourse that reflects how a community understands life, social relations, and morality (Norrick, 2021).

From a discourse perspective, proverbs are not fixed texts with a single meaning. Their meanings depend on how and where they are used. Kramsch (2020) explains that language and culture are closely connected, and cultural meanings are created through language use in social contexts. Similarly, Gee (2021) states that discourse is a way of using language to express identity, values, and social relationships. Based on this view, proverbs can be understood as cultural discourse that both reflects and shapes social values.

In indigenous communities, proverbs play an important role because oral traditions are still widely practiced. Proverbs are part of oral discourse that helps preserve cultural knowledge and social values. Sharifian (2021) notes that indigenous expressions often contain local wisdom and cultural knowledge that are transmitted orally. Through proverbs, communities maintain their cultural identity while responding to social change.

In Batak society of North Sumatra, *umpasa* are traditional proverbs commonly used in customary ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and other ritual events. *Umpasa* are delivered to give advice, express hopes, and remind people of social responsibilities. According to Sihombing and Gultom (2022), *umpasa* reinforce important Batak values such as respect for

elders, kinship, cooperation, and moral responsibility. As oral discourse, *umpasa* are closely tied to social context and perform functions that go beyond their literal meanings, which supports Yule's (2020) view that meaning is created through language use in context.

Recent studies show that *umpasa* contain rich cultural meanings expressed through metaphor and symbolism. Sirait, Simanjuntak, and Hutagalung (2023) explain that Batak proverbs often use references to nature and daily life to communicate moral lessons and social values. Maharani et al. (2023) also point out that the meanings of Batak proverbs are shaped by cultural experience and social structure. These studies suggest that *umpasa* should be understood as cultural discourse rather than simple sayings.

However, most previous research on Batak *umpasa* has focused on meaning, symbolism, or cultural description. While these studies are useful, they often do not examine how language structures and discourse features are used to build cultural values. Fairclough (2020) argues that meaning is produced through discourse practices shaped by social and cultural contexts. Yet, discourse-based studies of Batak proverbs are still limited.

For this reason, there is a need for research that applies discourse analysis to Batak proverbs. This study addresses this gap by analyzing *umpasa* to understand how cultural values are represented and constructed through language. By focusing on discourse features such as metaphor, repetition, and speech function, this research aims to contribute to the study of language and culture and to support the preservation of Batak cultural knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse Analysis and Cultural Values

Discourse analysis views language as a form of social practice through which meaning, values, and ideology are constructed and communicated. Rather than focusing only on grammatical form, discourse analysis examines how language is used in specific social and cultural contexts (Gee, 2021). From this perspective, meaning is not fixed in words but is produced through interaction between language, speakers, and context.

Fairclough (2020) explains that discourse plays an important role in shaping social relations and cultural understanding. Language choices, such as metaphor, repetition, and speech acts, reflect underlying cultural values and social norms. Similarly, Yule (2020) emphasizes that discourse analysis focuses on meaning in context, highlighting how utterances perform social functions beyond their literal meanings.

When applied to cultural texts, discourse analysis allows researchers to explore how language constructs ideology and worldview. Proverbs, as short but meaningful expressions, are particularly suitable for discourse analysis because they often contain implicit values and moral messages. According to Kramsch (2020), cultural meanings are created through symbolic language, making discourse analysis an effective approach for examining how cultural values are embedded in linguistic expressions. However, studies that apply discourse analysis to indigenous proverbs, especially Batak *umpasa*, remain limited.

Proverbs and Culture

Proverbs have long been recognized as cultural artifacts that encode collective knowledge, moral principles, and social norms. In cultural linguistics, proverbs are understood as reflections of shared conceptualizations shaped by historical, social, and cultural experiences (Sharifian, 2021). Through their repeated use, proverbs function as normative statements that guide behavior and reinforce communal identity.

Norrick (2021) argues that proverbs operate as socially shared discourse units that express communal wisdom rather than individual opinion. They are commonly used to advise, warn, or teach, making them important tools for informal education within a community. Proverbs also play a role in preserving cultural values by passing them from one generation to the next, especially in societies where oral tradition is dominant.

Recent studies emphasize that proverbs should be analyzed not only for their meanings but also for how they function in social interaction. According to Mieder (2020), proverbs are closely tied to cultural context, and their interpretation depends on shared cultural knowledge.

This highlights the importance of examining proverbs as part of cultural discourse rather than isolated linguistic forms.

Batak Proverbs (*Umpasa*)

In Batak culture, umpasa are an integral part of oral tradition and ceremonial communication. They are commonly delivered by elders or customary leaders during traditional events such as weddings, funerals, and other customary ceremonies. Umpasa are valued not only for their aesthetic form but also for their moral and educational content.

Studies on Batak umpasa have identified various cultural themes, including kinship relations, respect for elders, religiosity, cooperation, and harmony with nature. Sihombing and Gultom (2022) note that umpasa play a significant role in maintaining social order and reinforcing Batak cultural values, particularly those related to social hierarchy and communal responsibility. These values are closely connected to the Batak cultural principle of Dalihan Na Tolu.

Anthropolinguistic research by Sirait, Simanjuntak, and Hutagalung (2023) shows that umpasa often use metaphors drawn from nature and daily life to express moral advice and social expectations. Maharani et al. (2023) further explain that the meanings of Batak proverbs are shaped by cultural experience and collective memory, indicating that umpasa function as culturally grounded discourse.

Despite these contributions, most previous studies focus on semantic meaning or cultural description, with limited attention to discourse structure and language use. Therefore, a discourse-oriented analysis of Batak umpasa is needed to understand how linguistic features actively construct and transmit cultural values.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design with discourse analysis as the main analytical approach. Qualitative research is considered appropriate because the study focuses on exploring meanings, cultural values, and discourse features embedded in language rather than measuring variables quantitatively. Discourse analysis enables the researcher to examine how Batak proverbs (*umpasa*) function as cultural discourse and how language is used to construct and convey cultural values within specific social contexts (Gee, 2021).

The data of this study consist of Batak proverbs (*umpasa*) that are commonly used in traditional and ceremonial contexts within Batak society. The proverbs were collected from written sources, such as books and cultural documentation on Batak traditions, as well as from commonly cited *umpasa* found in previous academic studies. The selected data represent proverbs that contain moral messages and cultural values relevant to Batak social life.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis. The researcher identified and selected Batak *umpasa* that reflect cultural values and social norms. Each proverb was transcribed and translated into English to facilitate analysis and ensure accessibility for international readers. The translations were carefully examined by comparing them with existing interpretations and explanations in previous studies to maintain accuracy and cultural meaning.

The data were analyzed using qualitative discourse analysis procedures. First, the researcher read and examined each *umpasa* to understand its contextual meaning. Next, discourse features such as metaphor, symbolism, repetition, and speech function were identified. These features were then analyzed to interpret the cultural values conveyed in each proverb, including values related to kinship, respect, morality, and social harmony. The identified values were grouped into thematic categories, and the findings were interpreted in relation to Batak cultural practices and beliefs (Fairclough, 2020; Yule, 2020).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, theoretical triangulation was applied by drawing on multiple perspectives from discourse analysis and cultural linguistics. In addition, detailed explanations of the analytical process and findings were provided to enhance the credibility of the study. Since this research uses publicly available cultural texts and does not

involve direct interaction with human participants, ethical risks are minimal. Nevertheless, cultural sensitivity was maintained by respecting Batak traditions and avoiding misinterpretation of traditional expressions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents an expanded analysis of Batak proverbs (*umpasa*) and discusses in detail the cultural values constructed through their discourse features. The findings demonstrate that *umpasa* function as culturally embedded discourse that regulates social relations, transmits moral guidance, and preserves Batak identity.

Findings

The analysis of a wider range of *umpasa* reveals recurring cultural values, including kinship (*partuturan*), respect for elders (*hasangapon*), collective harmony (*marsiadapari*), moral responsibility, religiosity, and perseverance. These values are conveyed through metaphorical language, directive expressions, and evaluative statements.

Table 1. Expanded Discourse Analysis of Batak Proverbs (*Umpasa*)

No	Batak Umpasa	Literal Meaning (English)	Dominant Discourse Feature	Cultural Value
1	*Sai horas ma hita sude*	May we all live in well-being	Directive / blessing	Collectivity, harmony
2	*Jolo sinungkun marga, asa binoto partuturan*	First ask the clan name to know kinship relations	Declarative norm	Kinship system, social order
3	*Anakkon hi do hamoraon di au*	My children are my true wealth	Assertion	Family responsibility
4	*Unang jadi jolma na so maradat*	Do not become a person without customs	Prohibitive advice	Respect for tradition
5	*Songon hau di tano, songon ikan di aek*	Like trees on land, like fish in water	Metaphor	Adaptation, harmony with nature
6	*Marbisuk ma ho songon ulok, maralo-aloi songon pardomuan*	Be wise like a snake, gentle like a dove	Metaphorical advice	Wisdom, balanced character
7	*Sai pasu-pasu Tuhan ma di pardalananmu*	May God bless your journey	Religious invocation	Religiosity, faith
8	*Unang marsala-sala di hata, ai hata do panindang*	Do not speak carelessly, words are witnesses	Moral warning	Responsibility in speech
9	*Sai marsipature hutana be*	Let us build and care for our village together	Collective directive	Mutual cooperation
10	*Dijou do hata, dipature do roha*	Words are spoken, hearts are shaped	Evaluative metaphor	Ethical communication

Discussion of Batak Umpasa

1. "Sai horas ma hita sude" – *May we all live in well-being*

Discourse Feature: Directive / blessing

Literal Meaning: Wishing well-being and harmony to everyone in the community.

In-depth Explanation:

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This *umpasa* functions as a directive speech act, but in the form of a blessing. The inclusive pronoun *hita sude* ("all of us") emphasizes collective well-being, reflecting the Batak cultural principle that prosperity and happiness are shared responsibilities. Socially, it is used at gatherings, ceremonies, and formal events to strengthen social cohesion and communal identity. Linguistically, it combines simplicity with universality, making it accessible across generations. The underlying cultural value is collective harmony, reinforcing mutual care and respect in both everyday and ritual contexts.

2. "Jolo sinungkun marga, asa binoto partuturan" – *First ask the clan name to know kinship relations*
Discourse Feature: Declarative norm / social regulation
Literal Meaning: Identify a person's clan before interacting to ensure proper social relations.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* establishes social order and kinship awareness. It functions as a normative declarative statement, guiding behavior by making kinship identification a prerequisite for social interaction. This prevents social conflicts and ensures proper adherence to Batak hierarchy and customs. The cultural value is respect for kinship and social structure. It is often cited during introductions, ceremonial meetings, and marriage arrangements, reflecting the centrality of *marga* in regulating relationships within the Batak community.

3. "Anakkon hi do hamoraon di au" – *My children are my true wealth*
Discourse Feature: Assertion
Literal Meaning: Children are considered the most valuable asset, more than material wealth.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* conveys family-centered moral responsibility. As an assertive utterance, it positions children as the core of one's social and moral obligations. Culturally, it reinforces parental duty, intergenerational care, and moral education. Linguistically, the proverb uses direct statements to express a normative belief about the hierarchy of values. It is commonly cited by elders when teaching younger generations about the importance of family, highlighting the Batak cultural value that relationships and responsibilities outweigh material possessions.

4. "Unang jadi jolma na so maradat" – *Do not become a person without customs*
Discourse Feature: Prohibitive / advisory speech act
Literal Meaning: Avoid abandoning or disrespecting traditional customs and social norms.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* functions as a social control mechanism, using a prohibitive discourse form (*unang* – "do not") to warn against neglecting tradition. It emphasizes the importance of cultural adherence and moral discipline, linking personal behavior to social identity. Linguistically, it commands attention through its prohibitive form, signaling the seriousness of maintaining *adat* (customary law). The cultural value conveyed is respect for tradition, teaching that social and moral identity is inseparable from cultural practice.

5. "Songon hau di tano, songon ikan di aek" – *Like trees on land, like fish in water*
Discourse Feature: Metaphor
Literal Meaning: People must live appropriately according to their environment, as trees and fish do naturally.
In-depth Explanation:
This proverb uses metaphorical language to communicate adaptation, social awareness, and harmony with nature. By comparing humans to trees and fish, it conveys that just as these natural elements thrive in their proper places, humans must understand their social and environmental roles. Discursively, it functions as guidance and moral reflection rather than a direct command. This *umpasa* illustrates the Batak value of balance, encouraging individuals to live responsibly and harmoniously within their communities and surroundings.

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6. "Marbisuk ma ho songon ulok, maralo-aloi songon pardomuan" – *Be wise like a snake, gentle like a dove*
Discourse Feature: Metaphorical advice / directive speech act
Literal Meaning: Encourage wisdom and gentleness in behavior.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* uses animal metaphors to construct ideal personal character. The snake represents wisdom, caution, and intelligence, while the dove symbolizes gentleness, humility, and empathy. Discursively, it functions as a directive speech act, advising individuals on how to behave in social situations. Culturally, it promotes the Batak value of balanced character, combining intelligence with moral restraint. This proverb is often cited by elders when guiding younger generations, reflecting a societal emphasis on ethical conduct, emotional regulation, and social harmony.

7. "Sai pasu-pasu Tuhan ma di pardalananmu" – *May God bless your journey*
Discourse Feature: Religious invocation / blessing
Literal Meaning: Request for divine protection and guidance in life or journeys.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* integrates religiosity into daily communication, reflecting the role of Christianity in Batak cultural life. It functions as a blessing and protective directive, showing that human action is closely linked with spiritual belief. Discursively, it constructs a worldview where God is actively involved in human affairs, highlighting faith and divine guidance as central to moral and social life. Culturally, this proverb reinforces religiosity, ethical living, and community support, as invoking God often occurs in collective gatherings, ceremonies, or farewells, strengthening social bonds and shared spiritual values.

8. "Unang marsala-sala di hata, ai hata do panindang" – *Do not speak carelessly, words are witnesses*
Discourse Feature: Moral warning / evaluative metaphor
Literal Meaning: Words have consequences and shape social and emotional relationships.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* functions as a moral and ethical instruction, emphasizing accountability in speech. The metaphor of words as "witnesses" conveys that careless speech can affect social relationships and community harmony. Linguistically, it is a prohibitive utterance, warning individuals to choose words carefully. Culturally, it reflects Batak norms of politeness, respect, and social responsibility, teaching that communication is an ethical act with tangible social effects. This *umpasa* is often used by elders to guide younger members, reinforcing the principle that language shapes morality, trust, and interpersonal relationships.

9. "Sai marsipature hutana be" – *Let us build and care for our village together*
Discourse Feature: Directive / communal exhortation
Literal Meaning: The proverb instructs members of the community to work together to develop and maintain their village.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* functions as a directive speech act. It does not merely describe or advise but actively commands collective action. Linguistically, the imperative "sai" (let) invites inclusion and participation, emphasizing that social responsibility is shared by all members of the village. From a discourse perspective, this *umpasa* constructs the value of cooperation (marsiadapari) as a social norm, aligning individual behavior with communal goals.
Culturally, it reflects the Batak principle that well-being and prosperity are collective achievements. Each community member is expected to contribute to the common good, whether through physical labor, social support, or moral encouragement. This proverb is frequently recited during village gatherings or ritual events, reinforcing the interconnectedness

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of social roles and obligations. In modern contexts, it serves as a reminder of communal responsibility and social cohesion, especially in times of development or environmental challenges.

10. "Dijou do hata, dipature do roha" – *Words are spoken, hearts are shaped*
Discourse Feature: Evaluative metaphor / reflective statement
Literal Meaning: What people say affects emotions and moral understanding; language shapes the heart.
In-depth Explanation:
This *umpasa* employs metaphorical discourse, conceptualizing speech as an agent of moral influence. The proverb suggests that words are not neutral—they carry ethical and emotional weight that can influence relationships, trust, and communal harmony. In discourse analysis terms, this *umpasa* functions as an evaluative utterance, providing guidance on the ethical use of language.
Culturally, it emphasizes responsibility in communication and aligns with Batak social norms that value politeness, respect, and consideration for others. Misuse of words can lead to conflict or social disharmony, while careful, honest, and respectful speech strengthens relationships and fosters mutual understanding. This proverb is often cited in educational or ritual contexts where elders teach younger members the importance of mindful communication, demonstrating how *umpasa* transmit moral and social norms across generations.
Additionally, the metaphorical framing bridges abstract moral concepts with concrete human behavior, making the lesson easier to remember and internalize. It reinforces the Batak belief that language and morality are inseparable, and that social and emotional well-being depends on ethical speech practices.

CONCLUSION

This study applied discourse analysis to ten selected Batak proverbs (*umpasa*) to examine how cultural values are constructed and transmitted through language. The findings reveal that each *umpasa* functions not merely as a traditional saying but as structured cultural discourse, employing linguistic features such as metaphors, directive statements, prohibitions, and evaluative utterances to convey complex social, moral, and spiritual values.

The analysis shows that Batak *umpasa* consistently encode values related to kinship, respect for elders, moral responsibility, collective harmony, religiosity, and balanced personal character. For instance, proverbs like *"Jolo sinungkun marga, asa binoto partuturan"* emphasize the importance of kinship and social order, while *"Unang marsala-sala di hata, ai hata do panindang"* underscores ethical communication. Collective action and social cohesion are promoted through *"Sai marsipature hutana be"*, and metaphors in *"Songon hau di tano, songon ikan di aek"* guide harmony with nature and society.

These findings suggest that *umpasa* serve multiple functions: they regulate social behavior, teach moral lessons, strengthen communal identity, and transmit indigenous knowledge across generations. The study highlights the importance of preserving *umpasa* as intangible cultural heritage and demonstrates their relevance for both academic inquiry in discourse analysis and practical applications in education and community development.

Future research may expand to include *umpasa* from other Batak subgroups or comparative studies with proverbs from different Indonesian ethnic groups, to further explore the diversity and commonalities in cultural discourse practices.

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