

COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE PRINCIPLES IN BANGKA MALAY TABOO LANGUAGES

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Abstract: Taboo language within the Malay Bangka community acts as a social boundary that regulates behaviors, preventing discomfort or negative outcomes. This study explores the underlying codes and principles behind the use of taboo language in this community, using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory (1995) to discuss Cognitive and Communicative Principles. The primary data comes from the Bangka Malay community across Bangka and South Bangka Regencies, while secondary sources include various literary works. Data were gathered through listening (*simak*), interviews (*cakap*), and document analysis, and were examined using six steps of qualitative analysis. Triangulation was applied to ensure validity, with discussions involving traditional Malay culture experts (*Lembaga Adat Melayu*). The results of the study suggest that, based on the Cognitive and Communicative Principles, speakers use ostensive stimuli (i.e. particular signals or cues that are deliberately used to indicate that someone is trying to convey information), such as coded phrases like "*nanti bengkak kemaluan*" (your genital may swell), to guide listeners toward the intended message, ensuring optimal relevance. Additionally, urban myths, often attributed to supernatural forces like ghosts, are employed to reinforce the consequences of disobedience. From the lens of Relevance Theory, these phrases are effective, as they require minimal cognitive effort for listeners to understand and process the speaker's message.

Keywords: *Bangka Malay; cognitive and communicative principles; relevance theory.*

INTRODUCTION

Taboo language or *Bahasa Pantang Larang* (further abbreviated: BPL), in this context, refers to both spoken and written expressions that are normative and inflexible, intended to educate or to manage individuals behaviours in maintaining a moral, civilized, and ethical social order (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Sulpizio *et al.*, 2024). Rohmah & Purwantoro (2023) explain that the taboo language, or BPL characterizes a cultural heritage rooted in the beliefs of the ancient Malay community. The BPL in Malay community serves as social boundaries, regulating individual behaviour and attitudes that may lead to discomfort, accidents, or adverse outcomes. Similar, Altabaa & Fadzir (2022), Chiatoth & Lando (2021), and Ma'shumah *et al.*, (2022) explain that the characteristics of a taboo language is signified by its inherent sense of threat, wherein failure to adhere to its prohibitions can result in harm or loss to individuals or groups.

Therefore, taboos are regarded as actions or expressions that are forbidden or discouraged. Besides, Allan and Burridge (2006) suggest that taboos can be categorized into several areas, including discussions about the body and its excretions (such as sweat, mucus, faeces, menstrual fluids, etc.), sexual organs, disease, death, and murder (including hunting and fishing). Additionally, taboos extend to naming, greeting, touching, and seeing sacred people, creatures, places, as well as the consumption of food. For instance, as suggested by Wardani & Nuraiza (2021), the use of word *sira* ('salt') at night among the Pidie people is regarded as one of taboo things, as in the phrase *tulong neubi sira bacut!* ('Please give me some salt!'). They believe that uttering the word *sira* after dark may bring about misfortune for the speaker. Additionally, Agita (2024) suggests that Balinese words like *cai*, a casual term for 'you', and *kuluk*, the common Balinese term for

‘dog’ are not just considered impolite; they represent an unconventionality from the community's norms of respect.

Taboo language is deeply intertwined with the culture of Malay communities in Indonesia, making it a subject of interest for many researchers who study the various aspects of taboo language. For examples, Ningsih *et al.*, (2020) conducted to preserve partially oral literature, one of the studies, folklore namely the abstinence speech so that it is not lost in people's lives and is still used well by the community, especially in the Minang community in Ujungbatu area, Rokan Hulu Riau district; Kurniawan (2019) focused on the abstinence for children playing at sun set prayer time as the phenomenon of the living hadith that developed among the Sambas Malays; Rani & Shomary (2024) studied the expression abstinence and prohibition in the people of Sungai Nibung Village, Siak Kecil District, Bengkalis Regency; Harista *et al.*, (2023) examined expressions of pregnancy myths from the perspective of religious leaders; and Sarmidi (2015) investigated the existence of gender-specific taboo language directed toward women in patriarchal cultures. Moreover, Alfarisi *et al.*, (2019) conducted research that discusses taboo language in the form of a myth that the people firmly believe in Gantung village, namely *kepunan*. The term refers to prohibitions against neglecting certain practices, being inattentive, or willingly expressing certain immoral things. The community believes violating BPL will result in disaster or other adverse consequences for the individual.

Learning taboo language extends beyond merely adhering to its prohibitions. Both speakers and listeners must also comprehend the meaning or code that is implicitly underlying the expressions to ensure that the expressions align appropriately with their intended context. It addresses the social dimensions of communication, concentrating on how individuals use language to approach communicative objectives in various situations. Birner (2013), Yule (1996), and Ajayi *et al.*, (2024) explain that understanding pragmatics is crucial for effective communication, as it elucidates how a speaker conveys meaning that extends beyond the literal interpretation of words or sentences. Cultural and social factors significantly influence pragmatics, as different societies have distinct norms and expectations regarding language use in various contexts.

Yule (1996) and Saeed (2016) extend that to analyse the intended meaning of the speakers (including their assumptions, intentions, and

objectives), the study of pragmatics elucidates the hearers in learning the meaning by developing their non-linguistics ability during communication. Also, Leech (1983) explains that there are five communicative aspects that referred to analyse the conversational situations in terms of pragmatics: (1) addresses and addressees, (2) the context of an utterance, (3) the objectives of an utterance, (4) the act of the utterance, and (5) the utterance as a product of a verbal act. This pragmatic study can assist listeners or readers in discovering the intended meaning by interpreting the significance through specific principles, such as those outlined in the Relevance Theory (abbreviated as RT) proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995).

In pragmatic studies, Relevance Theory considers the alignment in the interpretation between the speaker and the hearer, guided by assumptions deemed relevant by the hearer. These assumptions direct the hearer towards understanding the intended meaning conveyed by the speaker in the communication as explained by Bala (2022), Nur Baiti & Yanti (2021), Hassan *et al.*, (2024), Sartika & Pranoto (2021), and Allott (2019). Additionally, Huang (2021) states that, in a specific context, a speaker employs vague words to convey the illocutionary force to the listener. This is known as a strategy of pragmatic ambivalence where the speaker deliberately uses ambiguous language with a clear purpose in the conversation based on a specific context. Similarly, Sperber & Wilson (1995) assert that an assumption is considered relevant if it has a contextual impact within the specific conversation. They further argue that assumptions emerge as a result of either an external or an internal stimulus and are processed cognitively, aiding the hearer in determining what is relevant. Theoretically, it is well-known as the Positive Cognitive Effect that corresponds to the two principles in RT: Cognitive Relevance and Communicative Relevance.

The first principle, the Cognitive Relevance, theorizes that the hearers are inclined to process the most relevant stimuli triggered by the speakers. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 260) state, “Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.” This tendency for human cognition to focus on the most appropriate or relevant stimuli enables individuals to form specific contextual assumptions and leads them to approach the intended conclusions. Aligned with this perspective, Zamani & Hassan (2018: 130) explain that the most relevant stimuli deemed by the speaker will be appointed and processed maximally by the hearer, assisted with particular

contexts to conclude. Meanwhile, the Communicative Relevance principle emphasizes that every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its optimal relevance. The term “ostensive communication” refers to the specific situation where the speaker produces a stimulus that indicates the purpose of communication by involving various surrounding sources. The ostensive stimulus can help the hearer to compromise the presumption of relevance.

Preliminary observations suggest a significant existence of taboo language within the Bangka Malay community. For instance, the phrase *Jen besiul ampek ne kalo ade iblis datang* (‘Avoid whistling on the porch at night, as it may attract demons’) represents a taboo culture intertwined with social and supernatural aspects. The Bangka Malay community believes that whistling on the porch at night may cause a bad result for the man of action. This expression has been widely used since ancient times, but there has been a lack of scientific research into the underlying reasons for principles that inform the use of such taboo language codes or symbols.

Several studies regarding the Bangka Malay taboo languages were conducted to preserve and develop local wisdoms to future generations. Cholid (2019) explored the use of taboo languages within the Bangka Malay community that can be implemented in the guidance and counselling service in the community. Also, Palar *et al.*, (2023) and Purwanto & Rifa’I (2020) unveiled the meaning as well the function of *kepunan* and *malet* culture in Bangka society with a Qur’anic exegeses perspective.

However, the study of taboos or BPL, particularly within the Bangka Malay community, remains relatively uncommon. Consequently, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the fundamental codes and principles that motivate the use of taboo language by the Bangka Malay community, employing a pragmatic approach which then thoroughly examined through the view of Relevance Theory proposed as by Sperber and Wilson (1995) to discuss the connection of both cognitive and communicative principles.

METHOD

This research employs qualitative-descriptive methods. Qualitatively, it involves creating questions for participants to gather information related to the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, this research is conducted to describe the forms of taboo language in the Bangka Malay

community utilizing the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995).

Two sources of data, primary and secondary, were involved. The primary data source for this research is the Bangka Malay community from various regions in Bangka and South Bangka Regencies who are fluent in the Bangka Malay language. Participants were selected through purposeful snowball sampling, concentrating on native speakers (both male and female), indigenous to Bangka (not long-term immigrants), aged between 40 and 80 years, and in good physical and mental health. The participants were recruited from diverse settings like urban areas, rural communities, and different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, the number of referrals each participant was limited to reduce the clustering of similar participants, 2 participants for 1 referral.

To support the primary data, secondary sources were obtained by examining various literary works that provide insights into taboo language within the Bangka Malay community. The data were collected by employing three different methods, listening (*simak*), interview (*cakap*), and document analyses. The collected data were scrutinized and analyzed through six steps of qualitative data analysis: copying the interview-based data, reviewing all information to gain a general understanding, coding the data by segmenting it into different categories and labelling them with typical categories such as taboo languages for kids, adults, pregnant women, culinary activities, and ethics, identifying themes and analytical descriptions based on the concept of Cognitive and Communicative Principles of the Relevance Theory, developing themes into a qualitative narrative based on the a major idea in the database and descriptions or more details of themes which consist of people, places, or events in the research, and interpreting the data. To ensure the validity, data were triangulated and discussed with various traditional Malay culture figures (*Lembaga Adat Melayu*) who are experts on the Bangka Malay language and culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed 39 taboo expressions in the Bangka Malay community, which are categorized as detailed in the following table.

Table 1. *Taboo expressions in the Bangka Malay community*

Category	Amount of data
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Taboo expressions for kids	9
Taboo expressions for adults	15
Taboo expressions for pregnant women	7
Taboo expressions for culinary activities	2
Taboo expressions regarding ethics	6
Total	39

Taboo expressions for pregnant women

The use of taboo language directed at pregnant women is intended to preserve the well-being and safety of both the mother and the unborn child throughout pregnancy, ensuring a secure delivery process. Also, these taboo expressions serve to heighten the expectant mother's awareness of potential risks or complications that may arise during pregnancy or childbirth (Frastika *et al.*, 2023). The following are two examples of taboo expressions specifically addressed to pregnant women in the Bangka Malay community.

- [1] *Jen berdiri di tenga lawang, kalu susa laher*
 (Do not stand in the doorway, as it is believed to cause complications during childbirth)

This expression is commonly directed at pregnant women, cautioning them not to stand or sit in the middle of an open or closed doorway. On a literal level, the underlying rationale is that doorways function as passageways for household members, and this, occupying the middle of a doorway would obstruct the movement of others entering or exiting the space.

The expression “*jen berdiri di tenga lawang, kalu susa laher*”, when examined through the view of Relevance Theory, corresponds to both the Cognitive Relevance and Communicative Relevance Principles. The phrase “*kalu susa laher*” is utilized as an ostensive stimulus, employed as a specific code or reinforcement to leave a strong impression on hearers (pregnant women) who engage in the behavior “*bediri di tenga lawang*”. The ostensive stimulus based on the phrase “*kalu susa laher*” (resulting in a difficult birth) enables the hearer to generate a hypothesis and confirm it, as it is perceived to be contextually relevant—suggesting that sitting in the doorway could obstruct a person's passage, similar to how it could impede the baby's exit during childbirth. Additionally, the ostensive stimulus conveyed by the speaker through the expression is regarded as relevant by the hearer, as it suggests that the physical obstruction of a doorway is a tangible experience that can be observed or felt. Sperber & Wilson (1995) as cited in Hassan (2009) emphasizes that when the speaker presents an

ostensive stimulus that is highly impactful and relevant to the hearer, it will cause minimal cognitive effort for the hearer to process and understand the meaning of the taboo expression.

- [2] *Jen nyangkot andok di leui atau kepalai, dilek bayi delem perot kelilet talet puset*. (Do not wrap a towel around your neck or head, as it is thought to increase the risk of the umbilical cord wrapping around the baby during childbirth)

This example is considered a taboo expression by the Bangka Malay community which is specifically directed at pregnant women. According to Dewi (2021), Stefani (2021), Ariandini *et al.*, (2024), and Novitasari & Fitriyah (2019), many people regard this as a myth. However, she extends that the issue of a baby becoming entangled in the umbilical cord is scientifically caused by excessive baby movement or an unusually long umbilical cord. One of the most common risks associated with a baby being wrapped in the umbilical cord is a decreased fetal heart rate at birth. Typically, it results from reduced oxygen supply and impaired blood flow.

The taboo language “*Jen nyangkot andok di leui atau kepalai, dilek bayi delem perot kelilet talet puset*” is persisted in being used despite being viewed as a myth. The expression intends to prevent pregnant women from engaging in activities that could potentially threaten the safety and health of the baby in the future. This expression frequently stimuli inquiries from adults, as it is perceived to lack a significant impact to be rendered relevant. However, a significant number of pregnant women adhere to the phrase “*dilek bayi delem perot kelilet talet puset*” to increase the risk of the umbilical cord wrapping around the baby during childbirth. The phrase serves as a code that produces an ostensive stimulus, triggering cognitive processes that lead to the assumption that tightly wrapping a towel around the neck or head will result in breeding difficulties or a compressed head. Corresponding to the principle of Cognitive Relevance, the optimal relevance is achieved by the realization of the assumption of the hearer led by the ostensive stimulus, influenced by the speaker.

From the perspective of the principle of Communicative Relevance, the optimal relevance is achieved through ostensive stimuli. The speaker provides a parable based on the abilities and choices as evidence that can be perceived or experienced. This approach extends beyond merely

influencing cognitive impressions, as it engages the hearer more tangibly. Cognitively, individuals select various potential explanations to form assumptions. They will choose those that seem most impactful and relevant to the phrase “*dilek bayi delem perot kelilet talet puser*” or causing birth difficulties due to the wrapping of the umbilical cord. Nevertheless, to approach optimal relevance, the speaker develops an ostensive stimulus with more prominent impacts through speech. This enables the hearer to process the phrases more effectively, requiring less time and effort to perceive them as relevant.

Taboo expressions for culinary practices

[3] *Nyalet luk biar dak kepon* (please try the food/drink so you won't be *kepon*)

The use of the taboo expression “*nyalet luk biar dak kepon*” is familiar within the Bangka Malay community, addressed to people of all ages, including children and adults. According to Purwanto & Rifa'i (2020), the term *kepunan* or *kepon* commonly known as *malet* served as an unwritten norm or rule that is, in a sense, “mandatory” to follow. This becomes captivating when the concept of *kepunan* has a significant impact on the Bangka Malay community, deeply influencing and embedding itself in the customs and local wisdom. In advance, Rizki (2024) explains that the Bangka community perceives the expression *Kepunan* or *Kepon* as a form of curse or misfortune. This term applies to someone who refuses to eat or even touch the food or drinks offered to them by others. For example, when someone offers you a cup of tea, even if you do not wish to drink the tea, you must still touch it with your fingers instead of not consuming it at all. Neglecting to do so is believed to invite misfortune, which may manifest in various forms, including accidents, tripping, hand injuries, or collisions with hard objects.

The term *kepunan* or *kepon* is preserved to be used despite being viewed as a myth. *Kepunan* is an intensely held belief among the Bangka Malay community. They believe that when someone talks about food or drink without tasting it, it is considered highly taboo and may result in bad luck. While *Kepunan* cannot be scientifically explained or figured out, it is widely accepted because it has become ingrained in the culture of the Bangka community. According to Palar *et al.*, (2023) and Dodi (2023), *Kepunan* refers to a sanction imposed when we refuse food or drinks offered to us or

when we are in the mood for a particular food or drink but have not yet had the opportunity to consume it. This sanction can be also perceived as a cultural sanction, which manifests as *balak* (i.e., adverse events), and may result in misfortunes such as getting struck, slipping, accidents, and other similar occurrences.

The phrase *biar dak kepon* is used as a signal that provokes a specific cognitive response (i.e., an ostensive stimulus), leading to the belief that refusing someone's offers in the forms of food or drinks will cause an adverse impact. Simultaneously, the hearer would perceive that declining an offer of food or drink will cause an affront to the provider (the speaker), as it is considered a form of disrespect towards the preparation of the offered items. This assumption is highlighted as contextually relevant. Corresponding to the principle of Cognitive Relevance, optimal relevance is achieved when the hearer's assumptions align with the speaker's intent as prompted by the ostensive stimulus.

In opposition, from the perspective of the Communicative Relevance Principle, an optimal relevance is achieved through ostensive stimuli. Through the expression *biar dak kepon*, the speaker presents a legendary story that draws on the hearer's abilities and choices as tangible evidence that can be perceived or experienced. This principle goes beyond merely shaping cognitive impressions by actively engaging the hearer more concretely. Cognitively, individuals explore various potential explanations to develop their assumptions. The Bangka communities choose the term *kepunan* or *kepon* as it has become perceived impactful and relevant. This enables the hearer to develop the phrase more effectively, requiring less time and effort.

[4] *Jen mawak pisang mas atau telok men nek minter ke sungai, kelak ngundang mese-mese keluar*. (Please do not bring the lady finger banana or eggs when going fishing, it may attract adverse things)

The Bangka Malay community has faith in the expression of taboo *Jen mawak pisang mas atau telok men nek minter ke sungai, kelak ngundang mese-mese keluar* as a cautionary notice typically directed towards individuals who are enthusiasts or hobbyists of fishing. Most people in Bangka perceive that *pisang mas* (Lady Finger Banana) and various types of prepared eggs, including both boiled and fried, brought when going fishing may attract adverse things (*mese-mese*) or misfortunes to the fishermen. The term *mese-mese* refers to

adverse occurrences, such as supernatural disturbances or tangible threats from wild animals in the forest or river. Syarnubi, the leader of the Malay Customary Organization of Bangka Regency, explains that the expression *Jen mawak pisang mas atau telok men nek minter ke sungai, kelak ngundang mese-mese keluar* has been established and developed through generations. This belief is grounded in numerous legendary stories suggesting that carrying the lady finger banana and boiled eggs can attract disaster, such as attacks by crocodiles or wild animals in the forest. Given that ancient forests were dense and teeming with wildlife, there was a significant risk of encounters where such animals could both attack and prey on anglers. He states that the odor of eggs and bananas may incite wild animals, such as crocodiles and monkeys, to approach.

Even today, many people in Bangka, particularly those who enjoy fishing, continue to adhere to and believe in the taboo expression *Jen mawak pisang mas atau telok men nek minter ke sungai, kelak ngundang mese-mese keluar*. The use of the phrase *kelak ngundang mese-mese* gives a sense of fear that can influence an individual's behavior, leading to the avoidance of bringing the lady finger banana and eggs when going fishing. From the view of Relevance Theory, the phrase *kelak ngundang mese-mese* is used as an ostensive stimulus that enables the hearer, using their abilities, to formulate relevant assumptions, thereby creating a strong cognitive impact. Considering the beliefs or customs of Malays, Inge (2021) explains that both the lady finger banana and boiled eggs are related to the ritual practice of *Ancak* (i.e., a traditional ceremony held by Malays for dispelling bad luck or eliminating disease). Those objects are utilized as offerings, after which they are discarded to dispel diseases. This also explains why the ostensive stimulus of the phrase "kelak ngundang mese-mese" generates a relevant assumption, achieving optimal relevance by creating a strong impression with the minimal cognitive effort required for processing.

Taboo expressions for some adults

- [5] *Jen besiok malem-malem, takot ngundang mese-mese*. (Do not whistle at night, it may attract adverse things)

The Bangka Malay community believes that the taboo expression *jen besiok malem-malem, takot ngundang mese-mese* is an important sign that is especially addressed to both kids and mature men.

Most people consider that *besiok* or whistling at night can attract supernatural adverse things to come into their house, resulting in a disruption in family harmony. In many cultures, Erwanto *et al.*, (2016); Ulandari *et al.*, (2022); and Justine *et al.*, (2021) explain that whistling at night or upon the beginning of the Maghrib prayer time is considered to cause bad luck or a disturbance to the environment. In some cases, people use this kind of warning to remind them that whistling at night may also be a way to ward off evil spirits.

The use of this taboo language likely originated because, in ancient times, settlements were typically very quiet, making whistling at night seem like a disturbance to neighbours who were resting. The whistling sound would have been amplified and carried further due to the stillness of the surroundings, allowing the sound waves to spread more quickly and widely. Besides, the sound of whistling, especially during the colonial period, can invoke the enemy's spotters to detect our safehouse. Unsurprisingly, the prohibition against whistling at night has persisted to this day.

The phrase "ngundang mese-mese" or "can summon the devil/adverse thing" apparently evokes a frightening impression that can influence an individual's cognition, leading to the avoidance of whistling activities. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, this phrase is employed as an ostensive stimulus that provides an opportunity for the hearer, with his or her ability, to generate relevant assumptions with a strong cognitive impact. The speaker uses that phrase as a linguistic code that the hearers can interpret based on their abilities and experiences. Considering the belief or faith of the Bangka Malay community, specifically Islam, it is plausible that the taboo expression *jen besiok malem-malem, takot ngundang mese-mese* is rooted in Islamic teaching, as outlined in Surah Al-Anfal verse 35 of the Quran "Their worship around the Kaaba consisted of nothing more than whistling and clapping. Therefore, experience the punishment for your disbelief." According to Zulkarnain & Mubarak (2022), based on this verse, serves as a refutation of the ignorant Sufis who engage in dancing, clapping, and shouting (including whistling). These actions are indefensible and cannot be justified by any rational person in their practices near the Kaaba. This also explains why the phrase "ngundang mese-mese" serves as an ostensive stimulus, as it creates a strong impression with a minimal cognitive effort to result in the relevant assumption.

- [6] *Jen mandik tengah ari takot dikemeh mese la pacak saket atau kesepoh*. (Avoid bathing during the day, as you may risk being urinated by the ghost or getting sick or *Kesepoh*).

Bathing is a key aspect of personal hygiene, essential for maintaining cleanliness and overall health, both physically and mentally (Pandowo & Kurniasari, 2019). However, the Bangka Malay community still strongly upholds a prohibition related to bathing activities, particularly during the day at precisely noon. The expression *Jen mandik tengah ari takot dikemeh mese la pacak saket atau kesepoh* is commonly addressed to both kids and adults in the Bangka Malay community. This taboo language aims to warn and prevent both men and women from bathing during the day, as it is believed to potentially lead to undesirable consequences. In general, daytime bathing is permitted, with no medical or scientific evidence that explains any prohibition about the practice. However, in the Bangka Malay community, daytime bathing is regarded as taboo. This prohibition exists due to being grounded in the local story and tradition, where individuals have reported or perceived that daytime bathing can lead to illness.

However, if the phrase is expressed as *jen mandik tengah ari, kelak sakit* (“avoid daytime bathing, as you may risk getting sick”), it would be regarded as irrelevant, particularly for adults. Nevertheless, the phrase *takot dikemeh mese* (“you will be urinated by a ghost”) has produced an ostensive stimulus that encourages a strong impression for the hearers to avoid daytime bathing. The phrase *dikemeh mese* can evoke feelings of disgust and fear. The speaker employs this expression as a helping code to emphasize the consequences of doing daytime bathing, such as resulting in inconveniencing feelings or getting sick. However, scientifically, Azzahra *et al.*, (2023); and Herniyanti *et al.*, (2023) explain that the prohibition against daytime bathing does not exist, as no empirical studies have explained it. However, individuals with heightened sensitivity may experience discomfort when their body is exposed to extreme temperature changes. For instance, the sudden contact of hot skin following daytime activities may lead to thermal imbalance or other related discomforts after being showered with cold water.

Based on the pragmatic view through the Cognitive and Communicative Relevance Principles, every taboo expression that initiates an

ostensive stimulus can lead to optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, as cited in Zamani & Hassan, 2018). A listener tends to choose the most relevant assumption based on the speaker’s utterance, informed by their background of knowledge or experience. The expression *Jen mandik tengah ari takot dikemeh mese la pacak saket atau kesepoh* (“avoid daytime bathing as you may risk being urinated by ghosts or getting sick”) is used to prevent listeners from experiencing negative consequences after daytime bathing that may affect their bodily systems. The supporting phrase *dikemeh mese* influences the listeners’ cognition by prompting assumptions perceived as relevant and aligned with their understanding. Communicatively, the speaker employs this phrase to illustrate the negative consequences that may be attributed to supernatural forces, such as ghosts, that may harm the listener’s health. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the phrase effectively conveys the speaker’s intentions, as it is easily understood by listeners and allows them to process the information with minimal cognitive effort.

Taboo expressions for kids

- [7] *Jen dudok pek bantal, kelak pantat bisulan*. (“Do not sit on a pillow, or you will get ulcers on your buttocks”)

Generally, this expression is aimed at teaching children to avoid immoral behaviors or actions that conflict with the customs, beliefs, and religious practices of the Bangka Malay community, while also promoting their health and safety. Specifically, this taboo discourages children from using pillows as seating or play objects. Pillows are meant for resting the head during sleep, and the head is considered as *hulu* (“the highest part of the body”). *Hulu* is acknowledged as sacred, representing the highest, most honorable, and life-giving principle. As a result, the elders consistently teach the children to show respect toward *hulu* as the source or principle of life. Moreover, sitting on the pillow is symbolically equated with sitting on the head or *hulu*. In Balinese consciousness and culture, according to Windiasih (2019); and Yudiastini & Rachmawati (2023), *hulu* is considered as the Sun. The existence of the sun is perceived to be essential for life on Earth. In their practices, Balinese Hindus adhere to be belief that there the sun is the primary and foremost source of life.

If the children are advised with *jen dudok pek bantal, kelak kutor bantal* (“do not sit on the

pillow, or it will get dirty”), it will be considered a normal expression without resulting in a strong prohibition impression for the listeners. However, the speaker employs the supporting phrase *kelak pantat bisulan* (“you will get ulcers on your buttocks”) to produce a forceful prohibition for the children. Besides, Andany (2019) explains that in medical terms sitting on a pillow is regarded as unacceptable behavior, as an individual may risk getting infected, particularly if the pillowcase remains unchanged for the entire week, leading to the development of acne particularly in those with sensitive skin.

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the use of the supporting or coded phrase *kelak pantat bisulan* (“you will get ulcers on your buttocks”) as an ostensive stimulus can influence the listener’s cognition to make relevant inferences about the message intended by the speaker. The word *bisul* (“ulcer”) will lead the listener’s cognition to a skin disease caused by microorganisms that affect to have difficulty sitting and require a long time to heal. This is considered the highest inference that can be understood by the listeners as they need less time and less effort to process the taboo language to achieve optimum relevance. However, the optimum relevance can only be derived from the background knowledge of the listener. The expression *kelak pantat bisulan* (“you will get ulcers on your buttocks”) is perceived quickly and hesitant to act by children. This is because of the speaker’s communication skills, making “ulcer” a code word that is straightforward for listeners to interpret and understand.

- [8] *Jen ngemeh sebasang lubeng takot tumbong.*
 (“Do not urinate in the burrowing animal nests, or your genitals may swell”)

The phrase *Jen ngemeh sebasang lubeng takot tumbong* (“do not urinate in the burrowing animal nests, or your genitals may swell”) is a form of taboo language addressed to children. The burrowing animal nests referred to may include those of ants, snakes, ground rats, or others typically found in yards, fields, or forests. This phrase is used as a warning, suggesting that urinating into these nests could pose risks to both the individual and the animals inhabiting the nests. The underlying aim of this taboo is to educate responsible behavior in young people by encouraging them to protect and preserve the environment. Urinating on burrowing animal nests could disrupt their habitats and potentially harm the ecosystems within them.

The phrase *takot tumbong* (“your genitals may swell”) carries a more intimidating tone which serves as an ostensive stimulus from the speaker. If the expression were performed *kelak rusak saran e* (“the nest could be damaged”, the taboo would lose its impact, as it does not directly affect the individual’s cognition. The reference to the genitals, a critical part of the body that must be protected, enhances the gravity of the warning. Besides the health concern due to the prolonged healing process, the phrase “swollen genitals” is also seen as a source of embarrassment, making the taboo particularly effective in deterring the behavior.

According to the Relevance Theory, the coded phrase *takot tumbong* (“your genitals may swell”) as an ostensive stimulus can lead the listener to make assumptions regarding urinary activity in a burrowing animal’s nest, resulting in a significant cognitive effect. However, negative consequences may arise if the burrowing animals react aggressively to the intrusion. Furthermore, the speaker may connect this taboo language to the concept of animal cruelty, which is prohibited in Islamic teachings. The Prophet Muhammad forbade the killing of four specific animals: ants, bees, the hud-hud (hoopoe), and the shurad (a type of bird). This prohibition recognizes the potential benefits that animals living in the soil may offer for human well-being. The expression *Jen ngemeh sebasang lubeng takot tumbong* (“do not urinate in the burrowing animal nests, or your genitals may swell”), when accompanied by religious information, can significantly influence the listener’s cognitive processing, making it easier to comprehend the speaker’s message.

Taboo expressions regarding ethics

- [9] *Men nek masok utan neratap luk.*
 (“Remember to ask for permission before entering the forest”)

The people of the Bangka Belitung Islands hold deep respect for the forest as they preserve the tradition of *neratap*, which is employed in practices related to the forest. For those who are living in rural areas, particularly the elderly, it is important to preserve the harmonious connection between the macrocosm (nature) and microcosm (human). Therefore, the Bangka community still believes in the concept of seeking permission from the guardians or inhabitants before entering the forest.

The guardian or inhabitant does not refer to an ordinary human. Nurhayati (2011) and Ismi (2021) explain that the term *the guardian of the forest* refers to an unseen being, often called “Atoq” (great grandfather) or “Nek” (great grandmother). Normally, when someone enters the forest, the phrase *Permisi Neq keq Atoq, cucuk nek liwat, jen deganggu* (“Pardon me, ancestors, your grandchild wishes to pass through; please do not be disturbed”) is spoken. The practice of reciting that spell is known as *neratap*. Furthermore, Ismi (2021) states that the culture of *neratap* originated from the actions of the ancestors who had taken measures to protect their land, including forests, from tin mining activities in several parts of the Bangka Belitung Islands. This protective practice, known as *sarat*, is a ritual using oral literature practiced by a shaman in the form of incantations or spells. This ritual also incorporates various objects such as flowers, perfumes, food, and other offerings. Based on the legendary story, if a group of people enter a particular area, that has been protected through *sarat*, without seeing permission, they may become trapped and unable to leave the area.

The ritual *neratap* has been practiced for generations within the Malay Bangka community. This ritual is perceived and interpreted as a code of behavioral ethics, maintaining the harmonious connection between the macrocosm (nature) and microcosm (human). The expression *men nek masok utan neratap luk* (“remember to ask for permission before entering the forest”) is used as a taboo language that is addressed to those who want to clear land for farming purposes or build houses. Violating this taboo will lead to adverse consequences, such as disturbances from forest animals or supernatural and unseen entities. According to the Relevance Theory, the phrase *neratap* represents the ritual as well as the consequences for those who violate it. The speaker uses it as an ostensive stimulus that can lead the listener to assume the ritual of *neratap*. The assumption is emphasized by the urban myths of *Bujang Limpu* (i.e., the word Bujang refers to an unmarried young man) and *Nek Usang* (“Grandmother Usang”), explained by Sarman (2016), who conducted the ritual *neratap* to successfully cut down the *Nibung* tree, which is considered difficult to be felled recklessly. Communicatively, the speaker employs this phrase and also the urban myth to illustrate the negative consequences that may be attributed to supernatural forces, such as ghosts, that may hurt the listener. From the perspective of Relevance

Theory, the phrase effectively conveys the speaker’s intentions, as it is easily understood by listeners and allows them to process the information with minimal cognitive effort.

- [10] *Jen dudok pek mije takot banyak utang.*
 (“Do not sit at the table, or you will be in debt”)

The second expression of taboo concerning ethics within the Malay Bangka community is *jen dudok pek mije takot banyak utang* (“do not sit at the table, or you will be in debt”). It is a metaphorical warning, suggesting that taking unnecessary risks or getting involved in affairs that are not one’s concern can lead to financial or personal troubles. This phrase is often used to advise caution and responsibility in one’s actions and decisions. Kulainiy (2020) explain that the phrase “do not sit at the table or you will be in debt, traditionally, is how the parents teach their children about wisdom and proper behavior. They emphasize that use a chair to sit purpose instead of a table, a medium for placing items and food. Sitting in a place designed for food is seen and perceived as inappropriate and disrespectful.

The expression *takot banyak utang* (“you will be in debt”) is used as a coded phrase to produce a prohibition force for the listeners. If the taboo language was *jen dudok pek mije, dak sopan* (“do not sit at the table, it is an impolite action”), the listener would have ignored it because the phrase did not strongly pursue an act of prohibition. The coded phrase *takot banyak utang* does not correlate with the exclusion *jen dudok pek mije*. However, that phrase corresponds to the principle of Cognitive and Communicative of the Relevance Theory. The RT focuses on the significant cognitive effect of comprehending speech while aiming to minimize the effort required for information processing. Achieving optimal relevance is tied to how well the listener understands the speaker’s message (Zamani & Hassan, 2018). The speaker employs the coded phrase *takot banyak utang* (“you will be in debt”) as an ostensive stimulus and it is comprehensible to be processed to reach the optimum relevance. This phrase is not a complex or hard-to-understand language but is commonly used in daily conversation. The quicker a piece of information is processed; the more optimal level of relevance is reached as the result of the strong cognitive impact.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explain the fundamental codes and principles that motivate the use of taboo language by the Bangka Malay community through the view of Relevance Theory by Sperber and Wilson (1995) to discuss the connection of both Cognitive and Communicative Principles.

The analysed data reveal the relevance between the Relevance Theory Principles, Cognitive and Communicative, that drive the employment of taboo language in the Bangka Malay community. The results of the study suggest that there are five categories of BPL within the Bangka Malay community: (1) for pregnant women; (2) for kids; (3) for adults/general activities; (4) for culinary activities; and (5) regarding ethics. The speaker employs an ostensive stimulus by utilizing salient coded phrases, e.g. *nanti bengkak kemaluan* (“your genital may swell”), *kelak pantat bisulan* (“you will get ulcers on your buttocks”), or *nanti dikencingi hantu, bisa sakit atau Kesepoh* (“as you may risk being urinated by the ghost or getting sick or *Kesepoh*”) to attract listener’s assumption to process the speaker’s message and reach the optimum relevance. the speaker also employs the urban myth to illustrate the negative consequences that may be attributed to supernatural forces, such as ghosts, that may hurt the listener.

Relevance Theory highlights the importance of speech being easily comprehended and quickly processed by the listener based the ostensive stimulus that is most relevant based on the information received by the listener. The stimulus allows the listener to understand the meaning while achieving optimal relevance. Simply, from the perspective of Relevance Theory, the phrase effectively conveys the speaker’s intentions, as it is easily understood by listeners and allows them to process the information with minimal cognitive effort.

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