

SEMANTIC CATEGORIZATION OF HOBAR IN ANGKOLA BATAK WEDDING CEREMONIES

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Abstract

This study examines the semantic categorization, meaning construction, and cultural values of *hobar*, the institutionalized ritual speech performed in Angkola Batak wedding ceremonies in Padangsidempuan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Employing the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework, this study analyses *hobar* utterances through universal semantic primitives to reveal their culturally embedded meanings and communicative functions. The findings identify four major categories of *hobar*: (1) Expressive, including apology, respect, and gratitude; (2) Evaluative, represented by praise and positive assessment; (3) Directive, including commands, suggestions, hopes, prayers, and prohibitions; and (4) Commissive, including promises and negotiations. These categories are structured through semantic components such as SAY, WORD, PERSON, SOMETHING, GOOD, BAD, WANT, and THINK, and are realized within the kinship relations of the *dalihan na tolu* system. The study reveals that *hobar* functions not merely as verbal interaction but as a cultural mechanism that regulates social relations, maintains adat obligations, and transmits collective values. A significant ethnopragmatic finding is the anticipatory apology meaning encoded in the ritual expression *sattabi sappulu*, which reflects politeness, humility, and respect before speaking in an adat context. This study contributes a systematic semantic and cultural representation of *hobar*, supporting the documentation and preservation of Angkola Batak oral heritage.

Keywords: *hobar*; Natural Semantic Metalanguage; semantic categorization; ritual speech; ethnopragmatics; cultural values

1. Introduction

Oral tradition constitutes a fundamental dimension of cultural heritage, serving simultaneously as a medium of communication and repository of collective values. Among Angkola Batak communities in South Tapanuli, *hobar* is the central institutionalized form of ritual speech performed across *adat* events, particularly the wedding ceremony (*siriaon*) and mourning ceremony (*silulutan*). It is governed by the *dalihan na tolu* kinship principle, structured around three pillars: *kahanggi* (patrilineal kin), *anak boru* (wife-takers), and *mora* (wife-givers).

Despite its centrality in Angkola *adat*, the semantic identity of *hobar* remains inadequately defined. Existing studies have examined it from rhetorical (Zulkarnain et al., 2021), literary (Putra, 2020), pragmatic (Siregar et al., 2023), semiotic (Hennilawati et al., 2018), and speech act perspectives (Lubis, 2021), yet none has resolved its semantic categorization systematically. Competing spellings *hobar*, *khobar*, *makkobar*, *markobar*

further complicate intelligibility (Ritonga, 2020). Dictionaries define the term circularly through other culturally specific expressions (Balai Bahasa Sumatera Utara, 2021).

This study applies Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), originally developed by Wierzbicka (1972) and extended by Goddard (1996), to address Research Question 1: *How can the semantic categorization of hobar in Angkola Batak Language (bBA) be systematically formulated?* NSM decomposes complex meanings into universal semantic primitives are SAY, WORD, PERSON, SOMETHING, GOOD, BAD, WANT, THINK, that are cross-culturally transparent and circularity-free (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014). The study constitutes the first NSM application to Angkola Batak ritual speech and responds to the cultural preservation mandate of Law No. 5 of 2017 on Cultural Advancement.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

NSM, proposed by Wierzbicka (1972) and developed by Goddard (1996, 2006, 2008), holds that all human languages share approximately 65 universal semantic primitives — irreducible conceptual atoms expressible in every natural language. The foundational semiotic principle holds that any complex meaning can be explicated without circularity through combinations of these primitives (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002). For *hobar* analysis, the key primitives are SAY/WORDS, PERSON/SOMEONE, GOOD/BAD, WANT/THINK, SOMETHING/DO, and FEEL/KNOW. Where cultural concepts such as *namboru* (wife's sister) or *rohani* (inner feeling) exceed the primitive inventory, *semantic molecules* [M] are employed as intermediate analytical units (Goddard, 2006, 2008).

2.2 Ethnopragmatics and Cultural Script Theory

Ethnopragmatics examines systematic relations between language use and the social characteristics of participants, foregrounded by cultural values (Wibowo, 2018; Goddard, 2006, 2009). Within NSM-based ethnopragmatics, *cultural scripts* are semi-formal statements describing shared norms of interaction (Goddard, 1997; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014). The five-component model of proverbial metaphor structure are (a) traditionality of words and message, (b) identification of recurrent situations, (c) proverbial advice, (d) proverbial analogy, and (e) folk-wisdom status guides the explication of metaphorical utterances abundant in Angkola wedding *hobar*.

2.3 Research Gap

Prior studies define *hobar* circularly rather than reductively (Lubis, 2018; Hennilawati et al., 2018; Ritonga, 2020). No study has (1) applied NSM to categorize *hobar* utterances through semantic primitives, (2) produced non-circular explications of the kinship speech roles operating within *hobar*, or (3) mapped semantic components to cultural values within a single coherent framework. This study fills all three gaps.

3. Research Method

3.1 Design and Setting

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within a phenomenological paradigm (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Research was conducted across six sub-districts (*kecamatan*) of Padangsidimpuan City, North Sumatra, Padangsidimpuan Utara, Selatan, Batunadua, Hutaibaru, Angkola Julu, and Tenggara where the *hobar* tradition remains actively practised. The researcher holds Angkola native speaker status (Harahap clan), ensuring cultural and linguistic insider perspective (Mulyadi, 2012).

3.2 Data, Sources, and Informants

Primary data consist of *hobar* utterances from eight ceremonial stages of the Angkola wedding: *marpege-pege*, *pajonjong los*, *makkuras*, *mamasu dahanon*, *makkubak sibodak*, *mardandang*, *manggule*, and *manukkus indahan*. Three complementary sources were triangulated: (1) oral data from six purposively selected native-speaker informants (one per sub-district); (2) written data from authoritative ethnographic texts (Nasution, 1994; Alam et al., 2022); and (3) intuitive data from the researcher's bBA/Indonesian bilingual competence. Informants met nine criteria including first language bBA acquisition, harajaon status, age 40–70, and uninterrupted residence in the community (Davies, 2003; Mahsun, 2007).

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Two complementary methods were employed. The *simak* (observational listening) method involved participant observation at wedding ceremonies with digital audio recording and field notes. The *cakap* (conversational elicitation) method used unstructured interviews with face-to-face follow-up to elicit metalinguistic judgements. Audio data were transcribed using F4 software.

Analysis applied two methods: (1) the *padan* (referential equivalence) method with PUP technique to sort utterances by ceremonial role and communicative goal; and (2) the *agih* (distributional segmentation) method with BUL technique to decompose utterances into NSM semantic primitives. Proverbial and metaphorical utterances were analysed using Goddard and Wierzbicka's (2014) five-component cultural-script model. Data validity was established through source triangulation, member checking, and analytical peer discussion.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Four Core Semantic Primitives of Hobar

Analysis identifies four semantic primitives as the foundational components of all *hobar* meaning: (a) SOMEONE (*seseorang*), (b) SAY (*ujar*), (c) SOMETHING (*sesuatu*), and (d) WORD (*kata*). The central diagnostic formula is:

- a. SOMEONE THINKS SOMETHING LIKE THIS
- b. SOMEONE WILL SAY SOMETHING
- c. SOMETHING IS MANY WORDS
- d. MANY WORDS SAID IN A PLACE IN FRONT OF MANY PEOPLE

This framework avoids circularity by reducing *hobar* to universal components rather than culturally specific terms such as *adat berbicara* or *markobar*.

4.2 Semantic Components of the Ten Kinship Roles

The SOMEONE primitive in *hobar* is realized through ten distinct kinship roles derived from the *daliha na tolu* system. A structural distinction emerges: *kahanggi*, *mora*, and *anak boru* are constituted as MANY PEOPLE (collective entities), while *suhut*, *hatobangon*, *harajaon*, and the four bridal roles are constituted as SOMEONE (singular agents). Spatial indexicality (PLACE) is a constitutive semantic feature distinguishing bridal identity: *boru/bere* (bride's village frame) contrasts with *parumaen/amang* (groom's village frame).

Table 1. Consolidated NSM Taxonomy of Hobar Categories in Angkola Batak Wedding Ceremonies

Category	Sub-types	NSM Anchor	Core Formula	Kinship Roles
Expressive	Apology (<i>sattabi</i>), Respect (<i>hormati/parsangga</i> <i>pi</i>), Gratitude (<i>tarimo kasih</i>)	SAY + FEEL + GOOD/BAD	SOMEONE THINKS LIKE THIS: SOMEONE WILL SAY SOMETHING / SOMEONE FEELS SOMETHING GOOD/BAD	All 10 roles; <i>suhut</i> , <i>harajaon</i> , <i>hatobangon</i> as recipients
Evaluative	Praise of personal quality (<i>pujian</i> ¹); praise of lineage worth (<i>pujian</i> ²)	SAY + VERY GOOD + SOMEONE	SOMEONE SAYS SOMETHING VERY GOOD ABOUT SOMEONE; I WANT SOMEONE (Y) TO KNOW THIS	<i>Mora</i> , <i>hatobangon</i> → <i>boru</i> , <i>amang/bere</i>
Directive	Command (<i>siapkun</i>), Suggestion (<i>mamasukkon</i>), Hope (<i>harop</i>), Prayer (<i>syukur</i>), Prohibition (<i>ulang</i>)	SAY + WANT/THINK + DO/NOT DO	X SAYS TO Y: "it will be good if you do/do not do this"	<i>Suhut</i> , <i>harajaon</i> , <i>hatobangon</i> → <i>boru</i> , <i>amang</i> , <i>parumaen</i> , <i>bere</i>
Commissive	Promise (<i>padan/jaji</i>), Offer/Negotiation (<i>boima</i>)	SAY + WANT + WILL DO + CANNOT NOT DO	X SAYS TO Y: "I want you to know I will do this; if I don't, it will be very bad"	<i>Kahanggi</i> , <i>anak boru</i> , <i>mora</i> ↔ <i>suhut</i> ; all parties in <i>tuor</i> negotiation

4.3 Expressive Category

Expressive *hobar* utterances are those where SOMEONE (X) says something because X FEELS SOMETHING GOOD or BAD. Three sub-types were identified.

Apology — Sattabi sappulu. The ritual opening formula *sattabi sappulu* (lit. 'pardon ten times') is obligatory at the commencement of all *hobar* sessions. Crucially, it is *not* a prototypical apology — it does not presuppose a prior transgression. Its semantic trigger is *anticipatory*: the speaker is concerned that they might subsequently say words that are bad. NSM explication:

- a. SOMEONE THINKS LIKE THIS
- b. SOMEONE WILL SAY SOMETHING
- c. SOMEONE FEELS SOMETHING BAD
- d. SOMEONE MIGHT SAY MANY WORDS THAT ARE BAD

This culturally specific **anticipatory apology** — encoding pre-emptive humility before any words have been spoken — has no documented equivalent in cross-cultural NSM literature, constituting a novel ethnopragmatic finding.

Respect — Hormati/Parsanggapi. Respect expressions are positively valenced (GOOD) and directed at recognised authorities. The explication is: SOMEONE THINKS LIKE THIS: SOMEONE WILL SAY SOMETHING / SOMEONE FEELS SOMETHING GOOD / SOMEONE ELSE IS IN A PLACE HIGHER THAN SOMEONE.

Gratitude — Tarimo kasih. Two variants emerge: *tarimo kasih*¹ (gratitude for action: SOMEONE ELSE DID SOMETHING GOOD FOR SOMEONE) and *tarimo kasih*² (gratitude for fulfilled commitment: SOMEONE ELSE DID SOMETHING GOOD AS HAD BEEN SAID TO

SOMEONE BEFORE). The second variant shares its temporal component with the Commissive category (*padan*), establishing a cross-category semantic link.

4.4 Evaluative Category

Evaluative *hobar* utterances are characterized by SOMEONE SAYING SOMETHING (VERY) GOOD ABOUT SOMEONE. Two sub-types of praise (*pujian*) were identified:

*Pujian*¹ (praise of personal quality): SOMEONE SAYS SOMETHING VERY GOOD ABOUT SOMEONE / I WANT SOMEONE (Y) TO KNOW THIS. Example: *boru sangkibung* ('precious daughter').

*Pujian*² (praise of lineage worth): SOMEONE SAYS SOMETHING VERY GOOD / SOMEONE HAS SOMEONE (ELSE) THAT IS VERY GOOD / BECAUSE OF THIS SOMEONE WANTS SOMETHING GOOD / I WANT SOMEONE (Y) TO KNOW THIS. The public-witness component — **I WANT SOMEONE (Y) TO KNOW THIS** — renders praise a performatively communal act directed at the assembly, not merely an internal valuation.

4.5 Directive Category

Directive *hobar* utterances are those where SOMEONE (X) SAYS SOMETHING TO SOMEONE (Y) WITH THE INTENTION THAT (Y) DOES OR DOES NOT DO SOMETHING. Five sub-types comprise the most semantically differentiated category, distinguished by the degree of speaker certainty about recipient compliance.

Command (Siapkon). Encodes speaker certainty: SOMEONE (X) KNOWS THAT SOMEONE (Y) WILL DO IT AFTER THIS. Example: *Siapkon hamu surat-surat natarsangkut tu ketentuan ni pamarentah* ('Prepare all documents pertaining to government requirements.').

Suggestion (Mamasukkon). Encodes epistemic openness: MAYBE YOU WILL DO IT AFTER THIS, I DO NOT KNOW. The semantic distinction from Command is precisely this uncertainty component. Example: *Malo-malo maho mamasukkon dirimu, dohot mambuat rohani namborutu* ('Be wise in introducing yourself and in winning over your mother-in-law's heart.'). The molecule *rohani* [M: inner feeling/intention] is required here, confirming the necessity of semantic molecules for culturally embedded kinship concepts.

Hope (Harop). X SAYS SOMETHING TO Y: X REQUESTS SOMETHING GOOD FROM Y / IT WILL BE GOOD IF Y FEELS/DOES SOMETHING GOOD AS X WANTS IT. Example: *Haro ni hami harop dapot nian martoruk ni abara...* ('We hope to receive a warm welcome from our mora and all elders.').

Prayer (Syukur dohot puji). X REQUESTS SOMETHING GOOD FROM A HIGHER ENTITY (Z): SOMETHING GOOD WILL HAPPEN LATER / IT IS LIKE MANY PEOPLE WANT IT. Although expressive in origin, prayer's performative context, spoken aloud before the assembly, makes it directive in function, implicitly inviting collective assent.

Prohibition (Larang). Shares the speaker-certainty component with Command but encodes DO NOT DO SOMETHING. Example: *"Ulang togu-togu di napejet, palua dinabagas"* ('Do not push from what is already heavy; release from within.'). Prohibition carries the same weight of adat authority as Command, making non-compliance equally culturally costly.

4.6 Commissive Category

Commissive *hobar* utterances are those where SOMEONE (X) COMMITS THEMSELVES TO A FUTURE ACTION. Two sub-types were identified.

Promise (Padan/Jaji). The NSM component **I CANNOT NOT DO IT** captures the moral compulsion unique to *padan* in *adat* discourse. Violation of an adat pledge (*mangingkiri*

padan) constitutes formal social transgression. Example: *Hami padangka songon ayu, dipasirpang boti songon dalan...* ('We stand firm like a tree, we are spread like a road; and we are ready to shoulder the burden together.'). The tree-and-road metaphor functions as semantic molecule [M: permanence and reliability], reinforcing the moral force of the promise.

Offer/Negotiation (Boima). The sole *hobar* category with an inherently dialogic semantic architecture: (X) proposes → (Y) counter-proposes: I CANNOT DO THAT; CAN WE DO THIS? The negotiation of *tuor* (bridewealth) demonstrates that Commissive *hobar* is constitutively tied to the economic obligations of the *daliha na tolu* system.

4.7 Cross-Category Semantic Connections and Cultural Values

The four categories are not semantically isolated. Three cross-category connections emerge: (1) *tarimo kasih*² (Expressive) shares the temporal component AS HAD BEEN SAID BEFORE with *padan* (Commissive), indicating that gratitude is frequently the expressive consequence of a completed commissive act; (2) Prayer (Directive) and Praise (Evaluative) both contain the public-witness component I WANT SOMEONE TO KNOW THIS, rendering both performatively communal; (3) Command and Prohibition share the speaker-certainty component, marking both as authority-based directives distinct from Suggestion and Hope.

The taxonomy also maps systematically to Angkola cultural values: the Expressive category encodes *kesopansantunan* (courtesy) and *holong* (deep affective attachment); the Evaluative category encodes *kebanggaan keluarga* (family pride); the Directive category encodes *gotong royong* (mutual assistance), *kesabaran* (patience), and *ketaatan kepada Tuhan* (devotion); and the Commissive category encodes *tanggung jawab* (responsibility) and *musyawarah* (deliberative consensus). This alignment with Sibarani's (2014) local wisdom classification confirms that *hobar* functions simultaneously as a semantic institution and a vehicle for cultural transmission.

5. Conclusion

This study produces the first systematic NSM-based semantic taxonomy of *hobar* in Angkola Batak wedding ceremonies, resolving the circularity that pervaded prior definitions. The four categories of taxonomy are Expressive, Evaluative, Directive, Commissive is grounded exclusively in universal semantic primitives (SAY, WORD, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, GOOD, BAD, WANT, THINK) and linked to ten *daliha na tolu* kinship roles.

Three principal findings advance the understanding of ritual speech semantics and contribute to the documentation of Angkola Batak cultural practices. First, the SOMEONE primitive in *hobar* is not interpreted as a generic human agent but as a kinship-positioned participant whose social role within the *daliha na tolu* system directly shapes the categorization and interpretation of utterances. Second, the four identified categories of *hobar* form a coherent and internally structured semantic system, interconnected through shared semantic primitives such as SAY, WORD, PERSON, SOMETHING, GOOD, BAD, WANT, and THINK. This semantic organization extends previous speech act analyses by demonstrating that ritual utterance categories are not only determined by communicative intentions but also by culturally specific systems of social relations and values. Third, the anticipatory apology script encoded in the ritual formula *sattabi sappullu* represents a significant ethnopragmatic finding, revealing how politeness, humility, and respect are embedded in culturally specific semantic structures. This finding contributes to broader discussions of politeness universals

and cultural script theory by showing how local communicative practices can enrich cross-cultural understandings of human interaction.

Methodologically, NSM combined with the *simak-cakap* data collection methods and triangulation of oral, written, and intuitive data from six sub-districts provides a robust framework for minority language oral tradition documentation. Semantic molecules [M] effectively handle kinship terms that exceed the primitive inventory, confirming NSM's flexibility for culturally embedded lexical items.

The practical implications respond directly to Law No. 5 of 2017 on Cultural Advancement: the non-circular, cross-culturally transparent NSM explications can serve as the basis for bilingual educational materials, *adat* training resources for younger *daliha na tolu* participants, and cross-community documentation efforts across Batak sub-groups.

Directions for further research include: extension to the mourning ceremony (*silulutan*) variant of *hobar* and to related traditions such as *mangupa* and *ende-ende*; comparative NSM study across Batak sub-ethnic groups (Toba, Mandailing, Simalungun, Pakpak, Karo); sociolinguistic investigation of generational shift in *hobar* competence; cross-cultural investigation of *sattabi sappulu* analogues in other Austronesian oral traditions; and corpus-based quantitative mapping of the four *hobar* categories across ceremonial stages and kinship roles.

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