

PRAGMATIC MEANING IN TRADITIONAL CAREMONIES: ENGLISH DESCRIPTIONS OF BATU BARA CULTURE

Izhar Fadli¹

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia
e-mail: fadliizhar45@gmail.com

Jumino Suhadi²

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia
e-mail: minohadi54@gmail.com

Efendi Barus³

Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara (UISU), Medan, Indonesia
e-mail: efendiuisu@gmail.com

Cecep Maulana⁴

Universitas Royal, Medan, Indonesia
e-mail: Cecep.maulana1977@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the pragmatic meanings embedded in the traditional ceremonies of the Batu Bara Malay community as expressed through English descriptions. These rituals are rich in cultural values and communicative intentions. However, they have rarely been examined from a linguistic perspective that focuses on language use in context. The main objective of this research is to investigate how ritual expressions such as blessings, symbolic utterances, and culturally marked instructions are conveyed in translated or interpreted English texts. Using a qualitative descriptive method grounded in speech act theory and ethno-pragmatics, data were collected from four primary sources: interviews with cultural figures (35%), ritual observations with audio-video recordings (30%), bilingual document analysis (25%), and field notes on the ceremonial context (10%). The results indicate that 67% of English translations partially retained the original communicative force, 23% showed significant meaning shifts, particularly in indirect speech acts and politeness strategies, and only 10% fully preserved the original sociocultural intentions. These findings reveal the complexity of maintaining cultural meanings in cross-linguistic communication and the potential for meaning loss during translation. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural pragmatics in multilingual translation and highlights the importance of culturally sensitive translation practices. It concludes that such practices are crucial to preserving the sociocultural integrity of local traditions and promoting more effective intercultural understanding.

Keywords: *Batu Bara, Ceremony, Communication, Discourse Analysis, Ethno-Pragmatics, Intercultural Communication, Malay Culture, Speech Acts, Translation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a system of symbols; it is a social tool used to perform actions, express values, and negotiate relationships. This is especially evident in traditional ceremonies, where language shapes

rituals and transmits cultural meaning. In the Batu Bara Regency of North Sumatra, Indonesia, traditional ceremonies such as Nasi Adap-Adapan are rich in symbolic and communicative practices that reflect local customs, spiritual beliefs, and communal norms.

These ceremonies feature distinctive verbal interactions, including ritual blessings, symbolic utterances, prayers, honorific expressions, and culturally marked instructions that serve both ceremonial and pragmatic purposes (Gunas et al., 2023). However, when these practices are translated and documented in English for educational, cultural, or tourism purposes, subtle pragmatic meanings may be altered, reduced, or lost entirely (Tilshunoslik et al., 2025).

The present study focuses on the pragmatic meanings embedded in English descriptions of traditional Batu Bara ceremonies. These English translations appear in various forms cultural documentation, local tourism narratives, ethnographic records, and educational materials intended for international audiences. Although the surface meanings of ritual expressions can often be rendered into English, their deeper intentions such as commands disguised as polite requests, culturally encoded blessings, and indirect expressions of respect may not be adequately conveyed. Thus, this research aims to uncover how such meanings are expressed and interpreted in translated descriptions, shedding light on the intersection between language, culture, and communication.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both pragmatic linguistics and intercultural communication. As globalization increases the demand for culturally sensitive and accurate translations, understanding how local meanings are transmitted or distorted through language becomes increasingly vital. Cultural traditions like those in Batu Bara are now more visible to global audiences through English. Therefore, it is crucial that translations convey not only what is said, but also what is

meant. Without understanding the pragmatic functions of ceremonial expressions, readers may misinterpret their tone, purpose, or significance, leading to cultural misunderstandings. Analyzing these translated utterances helps preserve cultural depth and supports more effective cross-cultural communication.

While scholarly interest in the intersection of language and culture in Indonesia has grown, most existing research adopts ethnographic, anthropological, or sociolinguistic perspectives (Maulana & Loebis, 2022). Studies such as (Tarigan, 2025), have examined the ritual structures and oral traditions of North Sumatran communities but stop short of analyzing how ceremonial language functions pragmatically. Moreover, few if any studies explore the English translations of such ceremonial discourse. In contrast, the present research applies a pragmatic framework grounded in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and ethnopragmatics (Strukowska, 2024), to reveal how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and sometimes reshaped in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic contexts.

This research fills a gap in applied pragmatics and translation studies by examining how pragmatic features such as indirectness, politeness strategies, speech act categories (e.g., directives, commissive, expressive), and implicatures manifest in the English renderings of traditional expressions. For instance, a blessing uttered by an elder may carry multiple layers of social, spiritual, and familial meaning that are not easily preserved through direct translation. Similarly, ritual instructions may employ softening strategies reflecting cultural norms of humility and respect, which are often flattened in literal English equivalents.

By analyzing these nuances, the study offers a deeper understanding of the pragmatic complexities involved in cultural translation.

What makes this study unique is its focus on translated ceremonial language rather than on the original native-language expressions alone. This comparative perspective highlights both what is retained and what is lost in translation, revealing key insights into intercultural meaning transfer. Previous studies tend to overlook this analytical layer, often treating translations as neutral representations of culture. This study challenges that assumption by arguing that translation is itself a cultural act shaped by pragmatic choices, assumptions, and limitations.

The objective of this research is to investigate how pragmatic meanings particularly speech acts, politeness strategies, and cultural references are represented in English descriptions of Batu Bara's traditional ceremonies. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What types of speech acts and pragmatic functions are embedded in ceremonial expressions?
2. How are these expressions rendered in English translations?
3. To what extent do the translations preserve or alter the original pragmatic intent?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the field of pragmatic translation, supports cultural preservation, and provides valuable insights for educators, translators, and intercultural communicators.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research at the intersection of pragmatics, translation, and cultural traditions has been steadily growing but remains limited, especially concerning traditional Indonesian ceremonies. This

study builds upon several strands of recent scholarship: pragmatic analysis in cross-cultural contexts, applications of speech act theory in ritual language, and the translation of culturally grounded expressions into English.

(Rehiraky, 2025), emphasizes the role of ethnopragmatics in understanding how cultural values shape language use, particularly within speech communities where traditional norms guide social interaction. This framework supports the analysis of how speech acts in traditional ceremonies are grounded in cultural scripts, making it highly relevant to the present study. Rehiraky's work also underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches when interpreting indirectness, honorifics, and communal expressions in non-Western cultural settings.

Similarly, (Mulyana, 2023) analyzed the pragmatic functions of speech acts in Javanese wedding ceremonies, showing how expressions of blessing and command are often embedded within layers of politeness and religious context. Their findings highlight the symbolic function of ritual language and provide a useful comparative perspective for this research, which examines similar ceremonial practices in Batu Bara, albeit through English translations.

In a related study (Sihombing et al., 2021) explored the translation of cultural expressions in Batak Toba oral traditions into English. Their research revealed significant meaning shifts due to differences in pragmatic norms and linguistic structures. This supports the notion that translated ceremonial utterances often undergo semantic reduction or transformation, especially when cultural values such as seniority, modesty, or harmony are not explicitly represented in English.

Building on this idea, (Dewi et al., 2024), conducted a pragmatic analysis of directive speech acts in Sundanese traditional rituals. They demonstrated that indirectness is commonly employed in ritual discourse as a marker of respect and spiritual reverence. Their application of Searle's (1969) taxonomy of speech acts aligns with the framework adopted in the present research, which also investigates the functions of directive and expressive acts within ceremonial interactions.

Furthermore, (Sari Harahap, 2021), provided a descriptive account of communicative patterns in North Sumatran traditional rituals, although without a specific focus on pragmatic analysis. Nevertheless, her documentation offers valuable background on the ceremonial structure and the significant role played by elders and community leaders in performing speech acts during rituals in regions culturally adjacent to Batu Bara.

Lastly, (Fitria, 2025), examined intercultural pragmatics in English translations of Indonesian religious discourse, demonstrating that speech acts such as blessings and apologies often lose their intended illocutionary force when translated without sufficient attention to cultural context. These findings reinforce the need for translation strategies informed by pragmatics, particularly when documenting ritual discourse for international readers.

Collectively, these studies highlight several critical issues that the present research seeks to address: the role of culture in shaping pragmatic meaning, the challenges of translating culturally situated expressions, and the limited focus given to traditional Indonesian ceremonies within pragmatic and translation studies. Unlike most previous research, which either

concentrates on native-language pragmatics or on general translation strategies, this study uniquely investigates the pragmatic implications of translating ceremonial discourse into English, with a specific focus on the cultural context of Batu Bara.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method to analyze how the pragmatic meanings of traditional ceremonial expressions from the Batu Bara Malay community are conveyed through their English translations (Abdulhamzah, 2025). The approach is grounded in Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969) and Ethno-pragmatics (Rosa Anjani et al., 2024), which together enable an in-depth exploration of both linguistic forms and sociocultural functions.

According to (Hakim, 2025), qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining processes and meanings in natural settings, especially when dealing with complex human communication.

3.1 Data Collection

Data were obtained from four main sources to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation of information:

1. Interviews with cultural figures (35%). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with traditional leaders and elders to explore the intentions, meanings, and functions of ceremonial expressions.
2. Ritual observations (30%). Real-time observations of three major ceremonies were recorded through audio and video devices to capture authentic speech and interactional patterns.
3. Document analysis (25%). Bilingual ceremonial texts both original and

English versions were collected from community archives and local translators to examine linguistic equivalence.

4. Field notes (10%). Detailed notes were taken during the ceremonies, documenting contextual information such as setting, participant interaction, and relevant non-verbal cues.

This combination of data sources produced a rich, triangulated dataset that accurately reflects authentic language use in its cultural context.

3.2 Measurement and Evaluation

After collecting the data, the next step was to evaluate how effectively the English translations captured the original pragmatic force and sociocultural meaning of the ceremonial expressions. The evaluation followed an analytical rubric based on three main dimensions:

- 1) Illocutionary accuracy. Whether the translation preserved the intended speech act (e.g., blessing, instruction, request).
- 2) Politeness strategies. Whether culturally appropriate levels of politeness or honorifics were maintained.
- 3) Contextual equivalence. Whether the English translation reflected the social and cultural context of the original expression.

Each translated expression was then categorized into one of the following groups:

- 1) Fully preserved (10%). The English translation retained the full pragmatic force and cultural nuance.
- 2) Partially preserved (67%). Some aspects of meaning were maintained, but key sociolinguistic features were altered or lost.
- 3) Significantly shifted (23%). The translation changed the intended meaning, particularly regarding indirectness, politeness, or symbolism.

To ensure reliability, the evaluation results were validated by two bilingual linguists and one cultural practitioner. Their expert reviews strengthened the credibility and dependability of the analysis, following the qualitative rigor criteria established by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for qualitative rigor.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Result

This study examined 40 ritual expressions drawn from three traditional ceremonies of the Batu Bara Malay community, focusing on their English translations. Each expression was categorized based on speech act type (Searle, 1969) and evaluated for how well the pragmatic meaning was preserved in translation. The results follow the research flow: identification of speech act categories, classification of translation accuracy, and analysis of pragmatic shifts.

Table 4.1 Summary of Findings

Speech Act type	No. of Expressions	Fully Preserved	Partially Preserved	Significantly Shifted
Expressive (blessing, praise)	12	1 (8.3%)	8 (66.7%)	3 (25.0%)
Directive (instruction, request)	10	2 (20.0%)	6 (60.0%)	2 (20.0%)
Commissive (vow, promise)	5	0 (0%)	4 (80.0%)	1 (20.0%)

Declarative (formal act)	5	1 (20.0%)	3 (60.0%)	1 (20.0%)
Symbolic/metaphorical	8	0 (0%)	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)
Total	40	4 (10%)	26 (67%)	10 (23%)

These figures support the abstract’s claim that only 10% of translations fully retained the original communicative force, 67% showed partial preservation, and 23% experienced significant shifts particularly in indirect speech acts and politeness strategies.

Examples of Translation Outcomes

Example 1: Fully Preserved (Directive Speech Act)

Original : "*Mohon berdiri menghadap Utara sebelum do'a dimulai.*"

English: "Please stand facing north before the prayer begins."

Analysis: The directive and politeness marker “*Mohon*” was correctly translated as “*please,*” and the ritual instruction remained clear. No pragmatic meaning was lost.

Example 2: *Partially Preserved (Expressive Speech Act)*

Original: "*Semoga rezekimu mengalir seperti Sungai yang tak pernah kering.*"

English: "May your fortune flow like a river that never dries."

Analysis: The blessing intent is preserved; however, the metaphor of the river as a symbol of endless livelihood may not resonate with English-speaking audiences unfamiliar with local agricultural values.

Example 3: *Significantly Shifted (Symbolic Utterance)*

Original: "*Padi ditanam, adat ditanam, hidup bermakna.*"

English: "Rice is planted, tradition is planted, life is meaningful."

Analysis: The literal translation fails to capture the symbolic depth in the original, where “*planting*” signifies community cooperation, cultural continuity, and sacred duty. The deeper meaning is lost in the direct English version.

4.2 Discussion

These findings reveal a pragmatic gap in ceremonial language translation. Ritual expressions-laden with cultural nuance and symbolic depth often depend on shared cultural knowledge that is challenging to transfer across languages and cultural contexts.

This study confirms earlier arguments by (Julistiana et al., 2024) who emphasize that speech acts are culture-bound, and direct translations often fail to preserve their socio-pragmatic intent. Similarly, (Simamora et al., 2024), argue that ethno-pragmatics is vital for interpreting meaning embedded in ritual expressions, particularly in non-Western societies.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how pragmatic meanings embedded in the traditional ceremonial expressions of the Batu Bara Malay community are conveyed in English translations. The analysis revealed that while some ritual speech acts were effectively translated, a substantial portion underwent partial or significant shifts in meaning, especially in expressions rich in cultural

metaphor, indirectness, or politeness strategies. Specifically, only 10% of translations fully preserved the original pragmatic intent, 67% were partially preserved, and 23% experienced significant shifts.

The findings directly answer the research questions by showing that ritual expressions such as blessings, symbolic utterances, and culturally marked instructions are often not fully retained in English due to linguistic and cultural mismatches. Symbolic and expressive utterances were the most affected, while directive acts showed greater pragmatic consistency. Translation outcomes were influenced by factors such as the translator's cultural awareness and the nature of the ritual context.

The main contribution of this study lies in providing empirical evidence of the challenges in translating culturally embedded speech acts. It emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive translation practices and proposes integrating ethnopragmatic awareness into translation training and cross-cultural communication. This research enriches the growing field of intercultural pragmatics and offers valuable insights for linguists, translators, and cultural educators seeking to preserve the integrity of Indigenous traditions in multilingual contexts.

Future studies are encouraged to expand the sample size, include comparative data from other regions, and explore back-translation techniques to further validate the preservation of pragmatic meaning. This study underscores that language translation is not merely a linguistic act but also a bridge for fostering cultural understanding and respect.

Additionally, the findings emphasize the importance of

collaboration between linguists and cultural experts in future studies. By integrating linguistic theory with anthropological insights, researchers can create a more holistic framework for understanding intercultural communication.

Furthermore, this study provides a reference model for local governments and cultural organizations in promoting regional identity through multilingual documentation. Such initiatives not only preserve linguistic heritage but also strengthen cultural diplomacy.

Ultimately, understanding the pragmatic aspects of ceremonial language contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to the preservation of national cultural integrity in the era of globalization. The findings of this study hold significant implications for both theoretical and practical domains of pragmatics and translation studies.

Theoretically, the results reinforce that speech acts and politeness strategies are deeply embedded in cultural contexts and cannot be fully captured through literal translation. This highlights the necessity of integrating ethnopragmatic perspectives into translation theory, particularly for ceremonial or ritual discourse that conveys layered sociocultural meanings.

Practically, the research suggests that translators, language educators, and cultural mediators should develop greater awareness of the pragmatic dimensions of local expressions. Incorporating ethnographic and cultural insights into translation training can help practitioners better preserve the communicative intentions and symbolic depth of traditional speech acts. This awareness also contributes to intercultural understanding and helps ensure that local traditions are

represented authentically in global communication.

For future research, it is recommended to explore pragmatic translation in other regional ceremonies across Indonesia, employing comparative and back-translation approaches. Such studies would deepen understanding of cross-linguistic meaning transfer and further support the preservation of cultural identity through language.

In a broader theoretical sense, this research also extends the application of speech act theory and ethnopragmatics to the study of local traditions, an area often overlooked in mainstream linguistic research. By contextualizing language use within Indigenous ceremonial practices, this study demonstrates that pragmatic analysis can reveal deeper layers of meaning that conventional semantic or syntactic studies might neglect. Therefore, it not only broadens the scope of linguistic inquiry but also affirms the relevance of local knowledge systems in shaping modern theories of communication and translation.

This study provides an essential contribution to the fields of linguistics, translation, and cultural preservation. The pragmatic perspective applied to the Batu Bara traditional ceremonies offers valuable insights for translators and educators working within multilingual contexts. It highlights how the act of translation must not only focus on linguistic accuracy but also on cultural and pragmatic equivalence. (Putri et al., 2025)

From an educational perspective, this study can serve as a model for English language teaching materials that incorporate local cultural values. Introducing pragmatic aspects of local ceremonies in English classes can help students develop cross-cultural

awareness while improving their communicative competence. Similar findings are reported in *The Influence of Pragmatics on the Effectiveness of Intercultural Communication between Malay and Javanese* (Tri Indah Rizky, 2025)

In addition, the findings can be applied in designing digital or multimedia resources that present traditional expressions in both the native and English languages. Such innovations would enhance public appreciation of local wisdom and ensure that younger generations continue to value cultural traditions through modern linguistic channels. Moreover, as shown in *The Role of Context in Pragmatic Interpretation* (Nazeeva Yusrina et al., 2025)

Furthermore, the practical relevance of this study extends to policymakers and cultural agencies. By emphasizing the need for pragmatic sensitivity in translation, this research supports government programs focused on preserving intangible cultural heritage and promoting intercultural communication.

Moreover, the results of this research underline the significance of context-sensitive translation practices in multilingual societies. Translators and educators working in Indonesia and similar cultural settings can use these findings as a guide to ensure that local traditions are represented faithfully in global communication. Such pragmatic awareness is crucial for avoiding cultural misinterpretation, particularly when sacred or ceremonial expressions are adapted into English or other international languages.

Finally, this study strengthens the call for interdisciplinary collaboration between linguists, anthropologists, and cultural practitioners. The combination of linguistic analysis with ethnographic

insight enables a more comprehensive understanding of meaning negotiation across languages and cultures. It also encourages the development of community-based translation projects that empower local speakers to take an active role in preserving and disseminating their cultural heritage through linguistic documentation.

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