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Silent Songs of Kolbano : Messages And Meanings In Dawan Death Speech Tradition In South Pene Kolbano Subdistrict South Central Timor Regency

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas "Fungsi, Makna, dan Nilai Tuturan Kematian Etnik Dawan di Desa South Pene, Kecamatan Kolbano, Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan." Tuturan kematian merupakan bagian sentral dalam ritual pemakaman yang menjadi media ekspresi budaya, sosial, dan spiritual masyarakat Dawan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data mengacu pada teori linguistik budaya, fungsi bahasa Jakobson, serta klasifikasi nilai menurut Alisjahbana. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tuturan kematian memiliki berbagai fungsi utama: membimbing arwah ke alam leluhur (fungsi spiritual), menyatukan komunitas dalam suasana duka (fungsi sosial), menegaskan hak waris (fungsi adat), menyampaikan ajaran moral (fungsi edukatif), serta melestarikan identitas budaya (fungsi kultural). Tuturan ini mengandung makna simbolik, religius, historis, dan genealogi, serta mencerminkan nilai-nilai kehidupan yang esensial bagi masyarakat Dawan. Kesimpulannya, tuturan kematian bukan sekadar tradisi, tetapi merupakan warisan budaya takbenda yang penting dan perlu dilestarikan serta diwariskan kepada generasi mendatang.

Abstract

This study explores the "Function, Meaning, and Value of the Death Speech of the Dawan Ethnic Group in South Pene Village, Kolbano Subdistrict, South Central Timor Regency." The death speech is a central element of funeral rituals, serving as a medium for cultural, social, and spiritual expression. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method, with data gathered through observation, interviews, and documentation. The analysis is grounded in cultural linguistics, Jakobson's theory of language functions, and Alisjahbana's classification of values. Findings reveal that death speech performs multiple essential functions: guiding the soul to the ancestral realm (spiritual), uniting the community in mourning (social), affirming inheritance rights (customary), conveying moral lessons (educational), and preserving cultural identity (cultural). It embodies symbolic, religious, historical, and genealogical meanings and reflects the core values of Dawan life. The study concludes that death speech is not merely a traditional practice but a vital form of intangible cultural heritage that must be preserved and passed on to future generations.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Concept of Death in Cultural Contexts

Death is not merely a biological event; it is a profoundly social, cultural, and spiritual phenomenon (Durkheim, 1912). Across cultures, death is accompanied by rituals, language, and symbolic acts that reflect a community's worldview and cosmology. Among the Dawan people of South Pene, Kolbano Subdistrict, death speeches (*natoni mate*) serve as a core ritual element, not only to mourn but also to reassert social cohesion, transmit ancestral values, and mediate the spiritual passage between the living and the dead (Isu, Rudolof. J. 2025).

From an anthropological standpoint, Malinowski (1923) argues that ritual language in funeral contexts helps reestablish emotional and social equilibrium. In the same vein, Van Gennep (1909) introduced the notion of *rites of passage*, wherein death rituals—including speech—facilitate the symbolic transition from one social or spiritual state to another.

What makes Dawan death speech unique, as highlighted by Isu, Rudolof. J. (2025), is its dual function: it operates as both an expressive act of grief and solidarity and a declarative act that affirms identity, lineage, and cosmological beliefs. This duality is rarely examined using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)—a notable gap this study aims to address.

2. Death Speech as a Ritual Genre

Death speech refers to oral expressions delivered during the rituals associated with death, including tributes, invocations, and moral exhortations. In the Dawan tradition,

these speeches are highly formulaic, metaphorical, and symbolic, reflecting both spiritual beliefs and social structure (Isu, Rudolof. J.2025).

3. According to Searle's Speech Act Theory (1969), such utterances can be categorized primarily as expressive (revealing grief, respect) and declarative (performing social acts like blessings or farewells). Meanwhile, Jakobson (1960) classifies ritual speech under phatic (maintaining social bonds) and emotive (expressing internal states) functions.

Despite their depth and complexity, most prior studies have not examined Dawan death speech from a functional linguistic perspective. Existing works like Benu (2013, via ResearchGate) focus primarily on ethnographic documentation, leaving a gap in linguistic analysis related to semantic, interpersonal, and textual features of such speech genres.

4. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Linguistics and SFL

This study draws on Cultural Linguistics (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2017) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) to explore the structure and significance of death speech. Cultural Linguistics recognizes that language encodes cultural conceptualizations, including values, schemas, and metaphors. Palmer (as cited in Pastika, 2005) defines cultural linguistics as an approach that emphasizes the interplay between linguistic expressions and cultural practices.

Halliday's SFL framework is particularly useful for analyzing how meaning is realized through language across three metafunctions: Ideational

(experiential meaning and worldview), Interpersonal (social roles and relationships), and Textual (cohesion and coherence in discourse). These frameworks allow for an analysis of Dawan death speech not just as ritual utterance, but as a meaning-making event that shapes and reflects cultural identity.

Although East Nusa Tenggara's ritual language traditions have been partially documented (e.g., by Benu, 2013; Koreh, 2009), most research has remained descriptive, with minimal linguistic-functional analysis. No prior study, to the researcher's knowledge, has systematically analyzed Dawan death speech using SFL to uncover its communicative functions and embedded cultural values.

This research offers the following novelties: It applies SFL and Cultural Linguistics to a previously under-analyzed ritual genre in Indonesia. It reveals how language functions as a medium of cultural continuity in the face of mortality. It contributes empirical data to the field of linguistic anthropology, particularly within Eastern Indonesian communities.

5. Function and Meaning of Ritual Language

According to Halliday & Hasan (1985), language functions within context; its meanings emerge from social and cultural usage. In ritual settings, language not only communicates but performs: it binds the community, channels grief, and evokes sacred cosmologies.

Jakobson's six functions (1960) are also relevant: Emotive: expressing sorrow or reverence, Conative: directing others in ritual acts, Phatic:

maintaining social contact, Referential: transmitting knowledge or cosmology, Poetic: emphasizing form, style, and symbolism, Metalingual: explaining or reinforcing ritual language itself.

Dawan death speeches thus operate across multiple functions simultaneously, revealing their depth as multifunctional, culturally anchored discourse.

6. Value in Cultural Expressions

Value, as discussed by Alisjahbana (in Sabon Ola, 2004), emerges from how language encodes morality, identity, and spirituality. In Dawan death speeches, values are transmitted in the form of: Cultural values: respect for ancestry and tradition, Moral values: social obligation to the dead and the living, Spiritual values: belief in life after death and the unseen world.

These values are encoded not just in content, but in the structure, choice of metaphors, lexical repetition, and stylistic rhythm of the speeches.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative design to explore the functions, meanings, and values of *death speech* (natoni mate) in the Dawan ethnic tradition of South Pene Village, Kolbano Subdistrict, South Central Timor Regency. A descriptive qualitative method is suitable for analyzing linguistic and cultural phenomena in their natural settings, allowing for rich, contextual understanding (Creswell, 2014; Moleong, 2019).

According to Sugiyono (2022), qualitative research is grounded in post-positivist philosophy, conducted in natural settings where the researcher acts as the primary instrument of data collection. This approach aims not to generalize findings,

but to understand phenomena deeply and interpretively, especially those related to language, tradition, and belief systems.

The fieldwork was conducted in South Pene Village, located in the Kolbano Subdistrict of South Central Timor Regency (Kabupaten Timor Tengah Selatan), East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. This location was chosen because it is one of the areas where the tradition of death speech is still actively practiced and preserved within the Dawan ethnic group.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on cultural elders (*tobe*), traditional speakers, and local informants who possess deep knowledge and experience in performing or interpreting death speech rituals.

The main instruments used in this study were: Participant observation, where the researcher directly witnessed and recorded death speech rituals as they occurred; Audio-visual recordings, used to capture the speech in its original linguistic and performative form; Semi-structured interviews, conducted with key informants to gather explanations, interpretations, and cultural meanings behind specific expressions or segments of the speech. These instruments were chosen to ensure triangulation of data, which enhances the credibility and depth of analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

According to Creswell (2014), data collection in qualitative research involves gathering information through observation, interviews, and document analysis in a flexible, emergent process. The procedures in this study include: Non-participant observation during death ritual events to identify the structure, delivery, and setting of death speeches; Audio recording of the death speeches for linguistic transcription and analysis; In-depth interviews using

open-ended questions to elicit detailed responses regarding cultural meanings and traditional values and field notes to record context, gestures, audience reactions, and other non-verbal cues accompanying the speech.

Data analysis was carried out following the interactive model by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three core steps: Data Condensation: Transcribing audio recordings into written texts; selecting relevant excerpts for analysis, Data Display: Organizing linguistic features, cultural references, and thematic categories in tables or matrices to facilitate interpretation, Drawing Conclusions and Verification: Interpreting the speech based on cultural linguistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), focusing on its ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, as well as the cultural values conveyed.

The analysis paid particular attention to metaphors, symbolic expressions, lexical choices, and speech structure, to uncover the communicative and ritual functions of the death speech within the Dawan community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the author aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the collected data to elucidate the Function, Meaning, and Value of the Death Speech of Dawan Ethnic in South Pene Kolbano Subdistrict, South Central Regency. The chapter is structured into two primary sections: findings and discussion, providing a comprehensive examination of the subject matter.

FINDINGS

Death Speech Presentation and Ritual Practices in South Pene

The researcher has conducted extensive field research employing interviews, documentation, and recordings to acquire reliable and comprehensive data. The findings reveal a profound and sacred tradition of death speech (tuturan kematian) among the Dawan ethnic group in South Pene. This practice holds significant importance in both the mourning process and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Delivery of Death News to Mourners

In Dawan tradition, mourners typically gather in groups at the residence of the bereaved family. It is customary for the family to verbally convey the news of the death, particularly to visitors who may not be direct relatives and are thus unaware of the circumstances. The family presents a detailed account of the deceased's illness and passing, beginning with the initial signs of sickness and concluding with the final moments before death. This narration is recited publicly to ensure clarity and to prevent any potential misunderstandings regarding the event.

Excerpt in Dawan:

Lasi mana pinat neou ak lahat, hai ma usi kai ma tua kai, ma ama kai ma ena kai.
(Let us speak clearly at this grave moment, to you, the brothers, elders, fathers, and mothers.)

This utterance signifies the moment of public communication and serves to provide closure, confirming that the death is acknowledged collectively by both the family and the wider community.

Request for Communal Support

The mourning period in Dawan society extends over a full 24-hour cycle, during which the family extends an open request for support and cooperation from all relatives and community members. The phrase “bahu membahu sampai penguburan” (shoulder to shoulder until burial) emphasizes the collective

responsibility inherent in this cultural practice. This appeal reflects a deeply rooted expectation of solidarity and mutual assistance during a time of loss.

The Ritual of “Penyerahan Palu/Paku” to the Heir (Pewaris)

An essential component of the death speech is the ritual known as “Penyerahan Palu/Paku,” during which symbolic objects—such as a hammer or nail (palu/paku), and at times money or blankets—are entrusted to the rightful heir (pewaris) or “bapak pohon.” This gesture symbolizes the transfer of responsibility for the legacy of the deceased, encompassing both spiritual and material obligations.

Es ham etut on i ma mi tonat on i He nat ta hinem tat ninat tahin-yo ma na pi nat neon ne, ak la hat.

We hereby declare, in the presence of all witnesses, that the life and death of this individual have been duly acknowledged and are no longer subject to question.)

This statement confirms that all duties and narratives related to the deceased have been resolved, thereby safeguarding the heirs from future disputes or supernatural repercussions.

Significance of Life Narration Before Burial

Prior to interment, Dawan tradition mandates that the life of the deceased is publicly narrated, with emphasis placed on any unresolved matters. This practice is believed to prevent future misfortunes or “spiritual debts” that may affect descendants. The narrative serves as a form of ritual cleansing—by disclosing the truth, it fosters spiritual balance and ensures that the inheritance (warisan) is transferred without the burden of unresolved issues.

Hem tunom Nane ma nae yom Nane, nena nenat tahun ma tat minat: tahin.

(Let the children and grandchildren clearly understand the path that has been taken, so that the name may endure in the years to come.)

This statement illustrates the intergenerational importance of death speech, highlighting its role in preserving memory and lineage.

Cultural Consequences of Silence

Should the death speech not be properly articulated, it is believed to result in enduring spiritual and social repercussions. Families may face ongoing misfortunes, and the lineage may gradually diminish within the community. This belief further underscores the critical importance of oral tradition and ritual performance in maintaining the well-being of the community.

DISCUSSION

This research examines two primary forms of traditional funeral speeches among the Dawan people in South Pene Village, Kolbano Subdistrict:

1. Speeches delivered to the mourners by the bereaved family.
2. The handover of the nail (*kusa nakaf*) to the heir (*Atoin Amaf*).

These forms of speech are analyzed concerning their functions, meanings, and values, incorporating theoretical frameworks established by Halliday & Hasan, Roman Jakobson, Geoffrey Leech, as well as insights from cultural and religious scholars such as Alisjahbana and Adisusilo.

Functions of the Traditional Funeral Speech

Referential / Informative Function

The funeral speech provides chronological information regarding the deceased's transition from illness to death, illustrating the role of language as a vehicle for conveying factual content.

Dawan Language:

"Lasi mana pinat neon aklahat, hai ma usi kai ma tua kai, ma ama kai ma ena kai."

"Has passed away to the grave, our brothers, our elders, our father, and mother."

This demonstrates the referential function of language, as articulated by Roman Jakobson, emphasizing the importance of information transmission.

Conative (Persuasive) Function

The bereaved family extends an invitation to the mourners to engage in the burial process, effectively making a courteous request for communal support.

"Jadi mohon uluran tangan bahu membahu sampai kepada penguburan..."

English:

"We kindly request your assistance and cooperation through to the burial..."

This form of expression aims to invite active participation from the audience, consistent with Jakobson's conative function.

Emotive Function

Parts of the speech convey profound grief, sorrow, and respect for the deceased, reflecting the emotional atmosphere of mourning.

Indonesian Example:

"Telah meninggal saudara kami yang tercinta, mari kita doakan bersama..."

This expression embodies a deep emotional resonance, in line with Jakobson's emotive function of language.

Phatic (Social) Function

The act of welcoming mourners and employing traditional greetings fosters social relationships and cultivates familiarity among attendees.

Indonesian Example:

"Terima kasih atas kehadiran Bapak/Ibu dalam duka ini..."

The phatic function serves to reinforce social bonds and maintain communal solidarity during times of grief.

Poetic/Aesthetic Function

The traditional speech utilizes figurative language, repetition, and specific rhythms, which contribute to its beauty. This embodies the aesthetic function of language.

Dawan Language Example:

"*Ko lo ma nu na niu lek leko na pe he ne, lek leok.*"

("Eyes that close, a body that rests in eternity...")

This poetic style enhances the emotional depth and elegance of the message.

Meanings in the Traditional Funeral Speech

Denotative Meaning

This meaning explicitly refers to tangible events or entities, such as death, inheritance, and burial rites.

Example:

"This nail is handed over as a symbol of redemption to Atoin Amaf..."

This conveys a clear and straightforward denotative meaning.

Connotative Meaning

This involves implied or symbolic meanings. For instance, the absence of the handover ritual can signify misfortune or a disruption in lineage.

Indonesian:

"Kalau tidak dituturkan, maka turunan itu bisa habis dan keluarga mendapat pencobaan bertubi-tubi."

Thus, the connotative meaning serves as a symbol of fulfilling both spiritual and social responsibilities.

Religious Meaning

The speech reflects a connection to the divine, as exemplified by the mention of "Uis Neno" (God), signifying a spiritual dimension and acknowledgement of divine authority.

Dawan:

"*Uis Neno pil ma ba tis amonita...*"

Indonesian:

"God who creates and gives life..."

This illustrates an understanding that life and death are under divine sovereignty.

Social Meaning

The speech emphasizes the importance of unity, collaboration, and recognition of social roles and rights within the extended family structure.

Example:

"The handover of kusa to the maternal-side relative as heir..."

This reflects the social framework and kinship dynamics characteristic of the Dawan community.

Historical Meaning

Speeches that recount the life journey of the deceased serve as oral historical records for the family.

Indonesian Example:

"Their life must be spoken of as a fact so that it is not questioned later..."

This reinforces the significance of oral history within indigenous communities.

Values Reflected in the Funeral Speech

Cultural Values

These values manifest the ethnic identity of the Dawan people and their

commitment to preserving connections with ancestors and the spiritual realm.

Example:

The handover of kusa/nail as a component of traditional inheritance and fulfillment of spiritual obligations.

Moral Values

The emphasis on duty to parents and ancestors, alongside adherence to customs, reflects deeply rooted moral principles.

Example:

"If it is not done, the descendants will receive a curse."

This indicates a moral commitment to the community and cultural heritage.

Religious Values

The speeches demonstrate spiritual awareness and reliance on God, as illustrated through expressions of gratitude and acknowledgment of divine influence throughout the discourse.

Example:

"I express my gratitude to God for being my true parent..."

This statement exemplifies the deep religious values inherent in every expression of sentiment.

Social Value

This address strengthens the social bonds among mourners and families, enhancing the sense of brotherhood and social solidarity.

Example:

"I kindly request that everyone collaborates until the burial is complete..."

This underscores the significance of cooperation and communal support within the social framework of Dawan society.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that death speech (*tuturan kematian*) within the Dawan ethnic tradition in South Pene Village, Kolbano Subdistrict, is not merely a form of verbal communication, but a rich cultural expression filled with profound meanings and socio-spiritual values. Through the analysis of two main forms of speech—the announcement of death to mourners and the symbolic handover of the kusa nakaf (nail) to the heir—this research arrives at several important conclusions:

1. Functions of the Death Speech

The speech fulfills various language functions as defined by Roman Jakobson, including:

- Referential function, providing factual information about the deceased's passing.
- Conative function, inviting or requesting communal involvement in funeral rituals.
- Emotive function, expressing sorrow, respect, and deep emotion for the deceased.
- Phatic function, fostering social interaction and connection among mourners.
- Poetic/aesthetic function, evident through symbolic, repetitive, and rhythmic language use.

2. Meanings in the Death Speech

The speech conveys multiple layers of meaning:

- Denotative meaning, referring directly to events such as death and inheritance.
- Connotative meaning, symbolizing spiritual obligations and social responsibilities.
- Religious meaning, reflecting belief in Uis Neno (God) and divine authority over life and death.
- Social meaning, affirming kinship roles and the communal structure of Dawan society.

- Historical meaning, serving as an oral record of the deceased's life for future generations.

3. Values Reflected in the Speech

The funeral speech embodies four main categories of values:

- Cultural values, preserving ancestral heritage and ethnic identity.
- Moral values, emphasizing the duty to respect elders, parents, and tradition.
- Religious values, expressing faith, gratitude, and spiritual awareness.
- Social values, reinforcing solidarity, cooperation, and mutual care during times of grief.

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