

Cultural Meanings in Indonesian and English Proverbs: A Semiotic–Ethnolinguistic Perspective

M. Dalyan¹, Mastang², Muslimin MT², Citra Andini¹

¹Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

²Politeknik Negeri Ujung Pandang, Indonesia

Co-email: m.dalyan@unhas.ac.id

Abstract: This study explores the cultural meanings embedded in Indonesian and English proverbs through the combined lenses of semiotics and ethnolinguistics. Using Roland Barthes’ theory of denotative and connotative meaning, the research analyzes how linguistic signs within proverbs reflect the values, beliefs, and worldviews of their respective societies. Five pairs of proverbs with similar moral implications but different symbolic representations were examined to reveal how ecological environments and cultural experiences shape metaphorical expressions. The findings show that Indonesian proverbs, such as “*Bagaikan air di daun talas*” and “*Ada udang di balik batu*,” are rooted in agrarian and maritime traditions, emphasizing harmony, humility, and acceptance. In contrast, English proverbs, including “*Like water off a duck’s back*” and “*There’s no use crying over spilt milk*,” reflect rational and pragmatic values characteristic of Western culture. Through this analysis, the study demonstrates that proverbs function as ethnolinguistic artifacts that preserve cultural identity and transmit traditional wisdom across generations. The research contributes to cross-cultural understanding by highlighting how different societies express universal human experiences through culturally specific linguistic symbols.

Keywords: Semiotics; ethnolinguistics, Indonesian proverbs, English proverbs, cultural values, cross-cultural meaning.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are two inseparable entities that mutually shape and reflect each other. Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of collective experience and worldview. One of the clearest reflections of cultural values in language can be found in proverbs, which encapsulate a community’s wisdom, moral lessons, and perception of life (Bria et al., 2025; Dalyan et al., 2022). Proverbs express how people interpret their surroundings—nature, behavior, and social norms—through linguistic symbols (Habur, 2025; Khan et al., 2025; Suma et al., 2024). Therefore, analyzing proverbs can reveal the way different societies construct and communicate meaning.

In Indonesian and English, proverbs often express similar ideas but through different cultural symbols. For instance, the Indonesian proverb “*bagaikan air di daun talas*” and the English proverb “*like water off a duck’s back*” both describe something that does not stick or affect a person. However, the linguistic imagery differs: the Indonesian version refers to *daun talas* (taro leaf), a common plant in tropical agricultural life, while the English version uses duck, a bird typical of temperate regions. These distinct symbolic choices reflect the ecological environments, cultural experiences, and worldviews of each society. Such variations demonstrate how environmental familiarity shapes metaphorical expression and cultural symbolism. They also highlight the deep interconnection between language, nature, and identity in the formation of proverbial wisdom.

Through such differences, proverbs become valuable linguistic data that illustrate how a community conceptualizes reality. The meaning of each proverb operates on two semiotic levels: denotative (literal meaning) and connotative (cultural meaning), as proposed by Roland Barthes. The denotative level conveys what the words literally represent, while the connotative level reveals deeper cultural values and ideological meanings embedded in those expressions (Faisal et al., 2025; Yaumi

et al., 2024; Junaid & Andini, 2025). When examined ethnolinguistically, these connotations illuminate how culture, environment, and social norms influence linguistic expression.

Previous studies on proverbs have mostly focused on their structural, moral, or didactic functions, yet only a few have examined them through the lens of semiotics and ethnolinguistics in a comparative cultural framework. This study seeks to bridge that gap by exploring how linguistic signs in Indonesian and English proverbs represent their respective cultural values through denotative and connotative meanings. By comparing these two linguistic traditions, the research aims to reveal both universal and culture-specific patterns of meaning. This comparative perspective provides deeper insight into how societies conceptualize wisdom, morality, and human relationships through language.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explain how linguistic signs in Indonesian and English proverbs reflect the cultural values of their respective societies through a semiotic and ethnolinguistic approach. This research is important because it contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and culture, demonstrates how meaning is culturally constructed, and provides insights into cross-cultural communication and translation by highlighting the role of local ecology and cultural experience in shaping metaphorical language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Semiotics and the Theory of Meaning

Semiotics is the study of signs and how meaning is produced and communicated. According to Roland Barthes (1972) in *Mythologies*, every linguistic sign operates on two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. The denotative level represents the literal or surface meaning of a sign, while the connotative level refers to the cultural, emotional, or ideological meanings associated with that sign. Through these two levels, Barthes reveals how everyday language and symbols can construct myths that naturalize cultural values. This framework enables researchers to uncover the hidden ideological messages embedded within seemingly ordinary expressions.

Barthes extends Ferdinand de Saussure's idea of the signifier (the form of a sign) and the signified (its meaning) by arguing that signs in modern culture carry mythic dimensions—that is, they reflect and reproduce cultural ideologies. In this framework, a proverb such as “*bagaikan air di daun talas*” has a denotative meaning (water that does not stick to the surface of a leaf) and a connotative meaning (a person who is emotionally detached or unaffected). The English proverb “like water off a duck's back” expresses a similar idea but through a different cultural symbol, the duck, reflecting a distinct environmental and cultural context. Through this dual-level analysis, Barthes' theory allows researchers to decode how language transforms everyday objects or natural phenomena into carriers of cultural meaning. Thus, semiotic analysis does not stop at the lexical level but extends to the interpretation of signs as reflections of cultural identity and worldview.

B. Ecolinguistic and Cultural Dimensions of Language

Ethnolinguistics, or linguistic anthropology, examines the relationship between language, culture, and society. Duranti (1997) defines it as the study of how language practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, the cultural values and social organization of a community. Similarly, Palmer (1996) emphasizes that language reflects the cognitive and symbolic systems of a society, meaning that linguistic forms—including proverbs—are rooted in the community's environment, worldview, and shared experiences.

In this regard, language does not exist in isolation. It is deeply intertwined with the ecological environment and cultural practices of its speakers. For example, the use of *taro leaves* in Indonesian proverbs arises from the tropical agricultural lifestyle familiar to the people, while the English use of *duck* originates from a temperate, livestock-oriented society. Both reflect how ecological realities influence linguistic creativity and metaphorical thinking. Therefore, an ethnolinguistic approach helps

uncover how cultural knowledge is encoded in language. Proverbs, as condensed linguistic forms of cultural wisdom, serve as excellent data to examine how a society categorizes and interprets its environment.

C. Proverbs as Cultural and Semiotic Texts

Proverbs are more than fixed linguistic expressions; they are semiotic texts that encode the moral values, traditions, and collective experiences of a people. As noted by Norrick (1985), proverbs are linguistic artifacts that express shared cultural truths and conventionalized meanings. Each proverb embodies a social attitude, a worldview, or a principle of conduct deeply rooted in the society that created it (Emedo, 2025; Juthi et al., 2025). Thus, studying proverbs offers valuable insights into how language preserves and transmits cultural knowledge across generations. They serve not only as tools of communication but also as repositories of a community's moral and philosophical heritage.

From a semiotic perspective, proverbs use metaphorical imagery to represent complex human experiences. The choice of imagery—whether drawn from plants, animals, or daily life—reveals what is culturally salient or symbolically significant to the speakers (Prior, 2023). Consequently, comparing proverbs across cultures enables researchers to explore both universal human experiences and the local color of cultural expression. Through this lens, proverbs function as semiotic windows into the collective consciousness of a community. They encapsulate how people perceive, interpret, and communicate values, emotions, and social norms through culturally grounded symbols.

D. Integration of Semiotics and Ethnolinguistics in Cross-Cultural Study

Combining semiotic and ethnolinguistic approaches allows for a holistic analysis of language as both a system of signs and a product of culture. The semiotic analysis decodes how meaning is constructed at denotative and connotative levels, while ethnolinguistics situates those meanings within their cultural and ecological contexts. This integrative perspective reveals how symbols and linguistic expressions are shaped by social values, traditions, and collective experiences. It also highlights the dynamic interaction between language, thought, and environment in the continuous process of meaning-making.

In the case of Indonesian and English proverbs, this integration reveals that while both cultures may share similar moral values or psychological insights, the symbolic representations differ because each draws on its own environmental experiences and cultural imagination. For instance, the Indonesian proverb “*nasi sudah menjadi bubur*” (denotatively about food) and the English “*there's no use crying over spilt milk*” (denotatively about drink) express the same moral teaching—accepting irreversible mistakes—but through culturally specific symbols. Thus, the combined framework of semiotics and ethnolinguistics provides a comprehensive way to understand how language encodes culture and how culture gives meaning to language.

III. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a library research approach. The qualitative design is chosen because the analysis focuses on interpreting meanings, symbols, and cultural values embedded in language rather than measuring numerical data. The library research approach involves analyzing and interpreting data derived from written materials such as dictionaries, proverb collections, books, and scholarly journals related to semiotics, ethnolinguistics, and cultural studies. The collected data are examined to identify patterns of meaning and cultural representation within linguistic expressions. Through careful interpretation, the study seeks to uncover how signs and symbols reflect the worldview and identity of a particular community. Ultimately, this method allows for an in-depth understanding of how language operates as both a communicative tool and a cultural artifact.

IV. RESULTS

A. Findings

The data in this study consist of several pairs of Indonesian and English proverbs that share similar meanings but employ different linguistic symbols reflecting distinct cultural and ecological backgrounds. These proverbs were selected based on their thematic relevance and frequency of use in daily communication, as well as their representativeness of each culture's worldview. Each proverb pair demonstrates how language embodies cultural experience through symbolic choices derived from the natural and social environment of its speakers. By examining these proverbs, the study aims to uncover how similar moral values are expressed through diverse linguistic imagery. The selected data are presented in the following table.

1. Data 1. Like water off a duck's back (*Bagaikan air di daun talas*)

Aspects	Indonesian	English
Proverb	<i>Bagaikan air di daun talas</i>	Like water off a duck's back
Denotative meaning	Water does not stick to the surface of the taro leaf.	Water does not wet the duck's feathers.
Connotative meaning	Something that does not cling or lasts briefly (such as feelings, promises, or advice).	Criticism or advice that has no effect.
Cultural background	Taro leaves are commonly found in tropical rice fields — a symbol of non-attachment.	Ducks are common in European livestock culture — a symbol of resilience against pressure.
Cultural values	Tropical agrarian communities interpret it as emotional inconsistency.	Western societies interpret it as emotional endurance or resilience.

The proverb “*Bagaikan air di daun talas*” in Indonesian and “*like water off a duck's back*” in English share a similar conceptual meaning but differ in their linguistic and cultural representations. Denotatively, both describe water that does not adhere to a surface—whether a taro leaf or a duck's feathers—symbolizing the idea of non-attachment. Connotatively, the Indonesian proverb expresses something fleeting or insincere, such as emotions or promises that fail to last, whereas the English proverb conveys indifference or resistance to criticism. These differences reflect distinct cultural environments: the Indonesian expression draws from a tropical agrarian setting where taro plants are common, while the English version originates from a temperate, livestock-based culture familiar with ducks. Consequently, each proverb mirrors its society's worldview—the Indonesian one emphasizing emotional inconsistency, and the English one highlighting resilience and composure. This comparison illustrates how similar human experiences are linguistically encoded through culturally specific symbols.

2. Data 2. Like a frog in a well (*Seperti katak dalam tempurung*)

Aspects	Indonesian	English
Proverb	<i>Seperti katak dalam tempurung</i>	Like a frog in a well (originating from Chinese and Japanese proverbs, but also understood in modern English contexts)
Denotative meaning	A frog that lives inside a coconut shell.	A frog that lives inside a well.
Connotative meaning	A person with a narrow mindset who knows nothing about the	A person with limited perspective who only knows their own environment.

	outside world.	
Cultural background	The coconut shell is a natural object typical of the Indonesian archipelago.	The well symbolizes a closed and limited space in European or East Asian culture.
Cultural values	Reflects the importance of broad knowledge in a collective culture.	Reflects the imp

The proverb “*Seperti katak dalam tempurung*” and its English counterpart “*Like a frog in a well*” both describe individuals with narrow worldviews, yet they use different cultural imagery rooted in their respective environments. Denotatively, both depict frogs confined within limited spaces—a coconut shell in the Indonesian version and a well in the English (and East Asian) one. Connotatively, they symbolize ignorance or restricted understanding of the world beyond one’s immediate surroundings. The choice of imagery reflects the distinct ecological and cultural settings of each language: in Indonesia, the coconut shell is a familiar natural object in tropical life, while in English and East Asian traditions, the well represents confinement and lack of exposure. These metaphors reveal differing yet converging cultural emphases—Indonesian culture values collective learning and shared knowledge, whereas Western culture stresses rationality and the pursuit of individual insight. Despite their different symbols, both proverbs convey a universal cultural warning against narrow-mindedness.

3. Data 3. There’s no use crying over spilt milk (*Nasi sudah menjadi bubur*)

Aspects	Indonesian	English
Proverb	<i>Nasi sudah menjadi bubur</i>	There’s no use crying over spilt milk
Denotative meaning	Cooked rice that has turned into porridge cannot be returned to its original form.	Milk that has been spilled cannot be put back into its container.
Connotative meaning	Regret is useless once something has already happened.	Regret does not change the situation.
Cultural background	Rice is the staple food of Indonesian people.	Milk is a staple product in European societies.
Cultural values	Depicts realism and acceptance of fate in an agrarian society.	Reflects pragmatism in Western culture.

The Indonesian proverb “*Nasi sudah menjadi bubur*” and the English expression “*There’s no use crying over spilt milk*” both emphasize the futility of regret after an irreversible event, though each draws its imagery from distinct cultural contexts. Denotatively, the Indonesian proverb refers to rice that has become porridge—an everyday image in an agrarian, rice-based society—while the English version refers to spilled milk, a product central to European households. Connotatively, both convey the same moral lesson: that lamenting what cannot be undone is meaningless. However, their symbolic choices reveal cultural nuances. The Indonesian expression embodies a sense of acceptance and realism, reflecting the agrarian worldview that values patience and harmony with life’s outcomes. In contrast, the English version represents pragmatism and rational problem-solving, suggesting one should move forward rather than dwell on mistakes. Together, these proverbs show how universal human experiences—such as regret and acceptance—are expressed through culturally specific symbols shaped by each society’s staple products and ways of life.

4. Data 4. Empty vessels make the most noise (*Tong kosong nyaring bunyinya*)

Aspects	Indonesian	English
Proverb	<i>Tong kosong nyaring bunyinya</i>	Empty vessels make the most noise
Denotative meaning	An empty drum makes a loud sound when struck.	An empty container produces a louder sound.
Connotative meaning	A person who talks too much usually lacks knowledge.	A person who talks a lot is often unwise or lacks understanding.
Cultural background	The drum or metal barrel is commonly used in rural areas.	The vessel (made of metal or pottery) is typical in European culture.
Cultural values	Teaches humility and the importance of substance (knowledge).	Emphasizes wisdom in silence and the value of depth over noise.

“*Tong kosong nyaring bunyinya*” in Indonesian and “*Empty vessels make the most noise*” in English convey the same moral message—those who speak the most often possess the least knowledge—yet they arise from distinct material and cultural contexts. Denotatively, both proverbs describe empty containers that produce loud sounds when struck, symbolizing hollowness or lack of content. Connotatively, they warn against arrogance and superficiality, encouraging individuals to value depth and wisdom over excessive talk. The imagery in the Indonesian version originates from the rural environment, where wooden or metal drums are familiar tools, while the English version draws on the European context of metal or ceramic vessels. Despite these differences, both proverbs express similar moral and educational values: humility, thoughtfulness, and the importance of substance over appearance. This parallel demonstrates that although languages differ in their cultural symbols, they share universal ethical principles embedded in everyday experiences.

5. Data 4. There’s something fishy (*Ada udang di balik batu*)

Aspects	Indonesian	English
Proverb	<i>Ada udang di balik batu</i>	There’s something fishy
Denotative meaning	Shrimps often hide behind rocks in rivers or the sea.	“Fishy” literally means smelling like fish (not fresh).
Connotative meaning	There is a hidden intention behind someone’s actions.	Something suspicious or dishonest is occurring.
Cultural background	The shrimp is a tropical marine creature often symbolized in coastal life.	The fish is an essential part of maritime European culture.
Cultural values	Coastal communities interpret it as a warning to be cautious of others’ motives.	Western culture emphasizes alertness to deception and dishonesty.

The Indonesian proverb “*Ada udang di balik batu*” and the English expression “*There’s something fishy*” both convey the idea of suspicion or hidden motives, though they employ different cultural symbols derived from their respective ecological settings. Denotatively, the Indonesian proverb describes shrimps hiding behind rocks—an image rooted in the tropical, coastal environment familiar to Indonesian speakers—while the English expression uses the term “*fishy*,” which literally refers to the smell of unfresh fish. Connotatively, both expressions suggest deceit or concealed intentions, urging caution and critical awareness. The Indonesian version reflects the wisdom of maritime and fishing communities, where observing nature provides moral metaphors for human

behavior. In contrast, the English version draws from Western maritime culture, associating unpleasant smells with corruption or dishonesty. Despite their differing imagery, both proverbs emphasize cultural values of vigilance and discernment, illustrating how similar moral lessons emerge through distinct environmental and linguistic symbols.

B. Discussion

From an ethnolinguistic perspective, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a cultural repository that encodes the worldview, values, and lived experiences of its speakers. Proverbs, as linguistic expressions rich in metaphor and symbolism, reveal how each society interprets the world around them. The comparative analysis between Indonesian and English proverbs demonstrates that while both languages may express similar moral lessons, their linguistic signs and imagery emerge from distinct ecological and cultural contexts.

In the Indonesian context, proverbs such as “*Bagaikan air di daun talas*” and “*Ada udang di balik batu*” draw heavily from agrarian and maritime life. These expressions reflect the close relationship between humans and the natural environment in the Indonesian archipelago. The frequent use of natural elements—plants, animals, and daily life objects—illustrates how traditional communities construct meaning through observable phenomena in their surroundings. This aligns with the ethnolinguistic notion that local ecology shapes linguistic metaphors, showing that language evolves from people’s interaction with their environment.

Meanwhile, English proverbs such as “*Like water off a duck’s back*” and “*There’s no use crying over spilt milk*” emerge from the sociocultural experiences of European societies, which are more industrialized and rational in worldview. The objects used as metaphors—ducks, milk, vessels—reflect temperate environments and domesticated life central to Western culture. Ethnolinguistically, these symbols indicate that English speakers conceptualize life lessons through practical, human-centered imagery, mirroring a more pragmatic orientation toward problem-solving and emotional control. When viewed semiotically, the denotative and connotative meanings of these proverbs reveal the cultural logic underlying each expression. The *denotative* level presents direct references to the physical world, while the *connotative* level embodies social and moral interpretations that represent each community’s collective consciousness. Ethnolinguistically, these connotations demonstrate how shared experiences become codified in language, turning ordinary natural elements into cultural symbols.

Thus, this study highlights that proverbs function as ethnolinguistic artifacts—verbal signs that preserve and transmit cultural wisdom. The Indonesian proverbs emphasize values such as emotional harmony, humility, and acceptance, reflecting a collectivist and nature-oriented worldview. In contrast, English proverbs convey values like resilience, rationality, and independence, aligning with the Western emphasis on individual agency and pragmatism. These differences reaffirm that linguistic expressions are not merely tools for communication but living representations of how different cultures construct and perceive reality.

V. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that proverbs in both Indonesian and English serve as powerful linguistic mirrors reflecting the cultural identities and worldviews of their respective societies. Through semiotic analysis, it becomes evident that while many proverbs in both languages share similar moral or philosophical meanings, their denotative and connotative layers are shaped by distinct ecological and cultural experiences. The Indonesian proverbs draw from agrarian and maritime environments, emphasizing collective harmony, acceptance, and moral reflection. In contrast, English proverbs originate from more individualistic and rational contexts, stressing pragmatism, resilience, and self-control.

From an ethnolinguistic standpoint, these findings affirm that language and culture are inseparable—each shaping and reinforcing the other. The metaphors and symbols embedded in

proverbs arise not arbitrarily but through generations of cultural observation and adaptation to the environment. Consequently, understanding proverbs through both semiotic and ethnolinguistic lenses allows for a deeper appreciation of how different societies construct meaning, express wisdom, and navigate human experience. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of cross-cultural linguistic research as a means of fostering intercultural awareness. By comparing how Indonesian and English communities encode similar values through diverse symbols, we gain insight into the universality of human thought and the unique ways it is shaped by culture, history, and environment.

Financing

The authors did not receive financing for the development of this research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1957)
- Bria, F. M. U., Taolin, H., Monteiro, A., Taka, S. D., & Bustan, F. (2025). An analysis of proverbs in Indonesian language as frames of reference in cross-cultural communication. *SPARKLE Journal of Language, Education, and Culture*, 6(1), 11–20.
- Dalyan, M., Darwis, M., Rahman, F., & Latjuba, A. Y. (2022). Cultural discourse in Indonesian humor: A case study of some short dialogues. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 12(5), 1009–1018.
- Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic anthropology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Emedo, C. C. (2025). Exploring African worldview as a philosophy: A critical reflection on the features, values, and impacts on the contemporary African philosophy. *Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy*, 8(2).
- Faisal, R., Rahman, F., & Effendi, S. (2025). Cultural adaptation and branding strategy in noodle advertising: A semiotic and marketing perspective. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science*, 8(9), 171.
- Habur, A. M. (2025). Proverbs in action: Exploring their meaning and internalization in Manggarai's Teing Hang rituals. *Journal of Innovation in Educational and Cultural Research*, 6(3), 600–607.
- Junaid, S., & Andini, C. (2025). Symbolism of Victorian society in the anthropomorphism of the Peter Rabbit picture book (1901). *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8(1), 278–288.
- Juthi, R. Z., Muzahid, M. A. U., & Molla, R. I. (2025). Religious morality in education for serving the purpose of our life. *Islamic University Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 310–340.
- Khan, K., Ullah, K., & Nawab, H. U. (2025). Unpacking cultural values through Kalasha proverbs: A sociolinguistic study of the Kalash Valleys, Pakistan. *Dialogue Social Science Review (DSSR)*, 3(6), 1–20.
- Norrick, N. R. (1985). *How proverbs mean: Semantic studies in English proverbs*. Mouton.
- Palmer, G. B. (1996). *Toward a theory of cultural linguistics*. University of Texas Press.
- Prior, K. S. (2023). *The evangelical imagination: How stories, images, and metaphors created a culture in crisis*. Baker Books.
- Suma, M., Rahman, F., Dalyan, M., Andini, C., & Wajadi, A. M. F. (2024). Cultural aspects of

character education found in comic Pelayaran ke Dusung: An ecranization through the application of augmented reality. *Journal of Ecohumanism*, 3(4), 739–753.

15. Yaumi, M. T. A. H., Rahman, F., & Sahib, H. (2024). Bridging language and technology through semiotic technology. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 7(1), 52–61.