

## **The Figurative Language of the Indigenous Semai People of Lembah Jelai, Malaysia**

**Abu Hassan Abdul\*<sup>1</sup>, Mohd. Rasdi Saamah<sup>2</sup>, Razali Ayob<sup>3</sup>, Wahibah Twahir<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia  
ahassan@fbk.upsi.edu.my\*<sup>1</sup>

**Article History:** Received: 10 November 2020; Revised: 12 January 2021; Accepted: 27 January 2021; Published online: 05 April 2021

**Abstract:** This study aims to examine aspects of the figurative language of a sub-group of the Orang Asli of Malaysia, namely the Semai people, living in Lembah Jelai, Pahang, Malaysia. This qualitative study was based on a semi-structured interview method involving five native speakers of the Semai language. The researchers used an adapted version of the cognitive-linguistic framework of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to analyze the interview data. The findings showed that most of the figurative expressions used in their language were primarily based on natural and cultural elements that heavily influenced the way they led their lives. In particular, the findings showed that the Semai community used figurative expressions in their conversations not only to articulate their feelings and thoughts but also to serve as unwritten social guidelines. Overall, these findings indicate that indigenous communities living in far remote areas in jungles use figurative languages to guide their peoples in forging close kinships, in cementing strong societal bonds, and in dealing with the spiritual realm. The findings also provide greater insight into the understanding of the uniqueness of the figurative language of the Semai community, which is considered as a sub-language of the mainstream Malay language in the Malay Archipelago. Surely, such a language needs to be persevered to ensure it will continue to thrive among the younger generation of the Semai people, given its significant influence on the development of their emotions, thinking, and culture.

**Keywords:** Figurative language; Orang Asli; Semai; culture; Malay; Indigenous People

### **1. Introduction**

From a communication perspective, a language is used by a speaker to convey his or her ideas, feelings, and views in numerous situations. The use of languages by societies using diverse strategies can highlight the social and cultural values that they practice. Such an assertion is consistent with the view that all languages in the world are used with a wide spectrum of verbal strategy to convey ideas and emotions of the speakers (Bush, 1973; Clore, Ortony, & Foss, 1987; Davitz, 1969; Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Ortony, Clore, & Foss, 1987, and Fussell, 2002, cited in Bahren Umar Siregar, 2010). As such, the pattern and form of a language rely on the person who speaks with it in a particular situation (Nik Safiah Karim, 1992).

One of the symbol systems used native speakers to convey their ideas is through a figurative language, of which its meaning is not exactly the same as that conveyed by the original words as shown in a dictionary. Thus, in such a language, a certain word, phrase, or sentence has a meaning that is different from the literal meaning of words making up a sentence (Asmah Hj. Omar, 2005). Virtually, all languages in the world, including the languages of indigenous peoples, have some form of a figurative languages that uses natural and cultural elements as core analogies. In particular, the natural element represents morals, principles, and ethics that symbolize the relationships between humans and the environment.

### **2. Problem Statement**

Malaysia is a multi-cultural country consisting of diverse ethnic groups in which the Malay language is the national language as defined by Malaysia's constitution. Nevertheless, other languages are also widely spoken by many peoples of various races throughout the country. Inevitably, such diversity creates cultural schism that eventually becomes a barrier to form a strong national unity. In 2008, the population of indigenous peoples or Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia was around 142,000 (about 0.5% of Malaysia's population), making them the smallest ethnic group.

The communities of Orang Asli consist of three main sub-ethnic groups, namely Senoi, Negrito, and Proto-Malay, who live in rural areas throughout the peninsula except the states of Perlis and Penang. The Semai people (who fall under the Senoi category) is the largest indigenous community numbering 42,383 or

 [CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>

constituting 30% of the total population of Orang Asli in Malaysia. Each sub-ethnic group speaks with their own languages. Inevitably, such a pluralistic background encompassing many cultures, languages, and religions, has posed many challenges to Malaysia, in particular those that can lead to a deepening cultural schism that may cause racial conflicts (Hashim Awang, 1998). In this regard, such a cultural schism needs to be carefully addressed to ensure all communities in Malaysia, notably the minority groups, are not marginalized from the mainstream community.

### **3. Literature Review**

To date, many studies of the influences of nature and cultures on languages have been carried out; but those that focus on sub-languages are simply too few. According to Roswita Salalihi (2005), most studies that deal with languages spoken by peoples in specific communities have been limited to examining the general aspects of meanings, synonyms, antonyms, and the ambiguity of meanings, with few studies, thus far, being dedicated to investigating their detail aspects. Based on a study by Setyo Enturo (2009), a community can learn, adapt, or assimilate the positive values of other particular ethnic groups. One of the ways to achieve this is for the former to learn and understand the expressions or proverbs used in the language spoken by the latter. As acknowledged, proverbs are imbued with a diverse range of values relating to the social, culture, religion, economy, worldview, leadership, and politics of a community. Also, proverbs can function as a tool to advise people, counsel those with emotional problems, and critique a person's worldview or behavior, among others.

From a linguistic perspective, Asmah Hj. Omar (2005) asserts that the development of a figurative language stems from the ability of humans in relating their existence to their environment transcending not only space but also time. Such an ability is crystallized in a language they inherited from generation to generation. On the other hand, Rosta Harun et al. (2002) contends that almost all traditional civilizations emphasize the importance of respecting the environment and inculcate a sense of fear toward unseen elements that manifest in animate and inanimate objects in this world.

According to Saidatul Nornis Mahali (2007), through culture, humans enforce certain rules that restrict the movements and behaviors of the members of their society. By keenly observing the environment, ancient humans placed the importance of the environment as one of the means to educate and articulate the masses through the use of their languages. As revealed in previous studies, nature and cultures had significantly influenced – and will continue to influence – the creation of terms or phrases in a particular language.

### **4. Method**

This study was based on field research using a semi-structured interview technique, which is one of the efficient data collection methods (Schensul et al., 1999; Othman Lebar, 2009). Such a technique allows researchers to explore and explain the factors and sub-factors involved in a particular study. For this study, the use of this technique allowed the respondents to openly and freely explain the underlying concept, meaning, and functions of a figurative language. The study sample consisted of five Orang Asli, namely Achom bin Luji (a public-servant retiree, aged 62), Sembunyanak Jamil (a public-servant retiree, aged 53), Pong a/p Panjang (a housewife, aged 60), Batin Achom a/l Khamis, (a village worker, aged 70), and Munan a/l Yai (a village worker, aged 42).

They hailed from the Semai community in Kampung Kuala Koyan, Lembah Jelai, Kuala Lipis, Pahang. They were specifically selected because of their vast knowledge, experiences, and involvement in activities relating to the Semai language at district and national levels. The interviews helped highlight the existence of and the role played by a figurative language infused by the nature and culture of the Semai people in Lembah Jelai, Pahang, which have a strong influence on their lives. It is important to note the language spoken by the Semai community in Lembah Jelai, Pahang is different from those spoken by the Semai peoples in other parts of the Peninsular, such as Perak.

### **5. Findings and Discussion**

The findings showed that the figurative language of Orang Asli from the Semai ethnic group is heavily influenced by nature and their culture. The following are the details of some examples of Semai's figurative



[CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>

language consisting of metaphors relating to nature, fauna, flora, human, and terrains to denote specific functions, such as the maturation of fruits, time, space, the beauty of women, human characters, time, distance, leadership, oaths, customs, and beliefs.

### The Maturation of fruits

The findings showed the Orang Asli from the Semai ethnic group use animals to indicate the level of maturation of fruits, especially those that they consume as their main food. The types of animals used in their figurative language consist of both domestic animals, such as chickens, ducks, and wild animals, such as monkeys, wild boars, deer, birds, snakes, and also insects. For example, they use the term *celunrau*, which means the back of a monkey as an analogy to show the level of fruit maturation.

Specifically, rambutans that are not fully ripened or not suitable to be consumed are denoted by the yellowish furs on the back of a monkey means. Likewise, they also use the terms *ketjelor*, which means the belly of a leech (which looks reddish because of its blood), and *bihipkap*, which means the tail of a fish, to show the level of maturation of rambutans. Rambutans that are analogized by the term *ketjelor* are yellowish, which means they are not ready to be eaten. In contrast, the same fruits that are analogized by the term *bihipkap* are reddish and, therefore, can be eaten. Such analogies based on animals, such as monkey, leech, and fish, used in the Semai's figurative language show the ingenuity of this indigenous community to denote the different levels of maturation of fruits, especially rambutans, by comparing the colors of the furs of a monkey's back, the belly of a leech, and the tail of a fish with varying colors of such fruits as they mature.

The findings also revealed the use of figurative language to indicate the ripening of other fruits. The Semai people use the term *celuttajuk*, meaning the back of a snake, to denote ripened bananas. To show ripened areca nuts, they use the term *kit o*, meaning the hip of a hornet. This part of the insect is yellow to indicate the color of nuts that are ready to be picked. To indicate upland padi which are almost ready to be harvested, they use the term *sentakkak*, which means a fishtail. Such a figurative term uses a comparative concept to compare the color of fishtail (*bihipkap*), which slightly greenish, with that of padi grains that are maturing. All the above examples suggest that Semai's figurative language serves two purposes. Firstly, it used to inform the Semai people that the fruits or grains that they have planted in their orchards or fields are almost ready to be picked or harvested. Secondly, it is used to remind their children that such fruits are not yet ready to be picked for consumption. Table 1 summarizes the pronunciations and the analogies of the above figurative expressions or phrases.

**Table 1.** The pronunciations and the analogies of the figurative phrases relating to the maturation of fruits

| No. | Phrases            | Pronunciation      | Analogy         |
|-----|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1   | <i>celun rau</i>   | <i>cəlun rau</i>   | A monkey's back |
| 2   | <i>ket jelor</i>   | <i>kət jelər</i>   | A leech's belly |
| 3   | <i>bihip kap</i>   | <i>bihip kap</i>   | A tailfish      |
| 4   | <i>celut tajuk</i> | <i>cəlu? tajo?</i> | A snake's back  |
| 5   | <i>kit ot</i>      | <i>kit o?</i>      | A hornet's hip  |
| 6   | <i>sentak kak</i>  | <i>sənta? ka?</i>  | A tailfish      |

### The Measurement of Areas

Figurative expressions are also used by the Semai people to indicate the measurement of areas of their homes, farms, orchards, and others. For such expressions, they typically use animals as the object of comparison, which is hardly surprising as these animals are commonly found in their villages. For example, they use the phrases *marha-woc-dog*, *marhaseningkangrau*, *ensop cep*, *kadoqcok*, and *nelumpatrusak*, which mean as big as a monkey's belly button, as wide as the step of a monkey, a bird nest, a dog's limbs, and a deer's jump, respectively. The above first two expressions are used to indicate the area of a piece of land, farm, or orchard that is small and narrow. Whereas, the last expression is used to denote a partially burned piece of land for planting purposes.

This expression compares the distance between successive jumps of a deer with the burned patches of the cleared land, which symbolizes a newly opened piece of land that they can cultivate. For the measurement of their dwellings, this group of Orang Asli uses the phrase *ensop cep*, which means a bird nest, to highlight a house

 [CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>

that is too small for a large family. To indicate the height of supporting pillars of homes, they use the phrase *kadoqcok*, which means the limbs of a dog. This means that their village houses are raised from the ground by half-a-foot or a foot, which is about the same as the distance between any two limbs of a dog. They use the phrase *deg puk*, which means a chicken coop, to indicate a poorly constructed house built by an unskilled builder. Table 2 summarizes the pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to the measurement of areas.

**Table 2.** The pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to the measurement of areas

| No | Phrases              | Pronunciation     | Analogy                 |
|----|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| 1  | marha-woc-dog        | marha wɔc dɔg     | A monkey's belly button |
| 2  | marha seningkang rau | marha sniŋkaŋ rau | A monkey's step         |
| 3  | ensop cep            | ɛnsop cɛp         | A bird's nest           |
| 4  | kadoq cok            | kado? co?         | A dog's limbs           |
| 5  | nelumpat rusak       | nəlumpa? rusa?    | A deer's jumps          |
| 6  | deg puk              | dɛg pu?           | A chicken coop          |

### The Beauty of Women

In the context of beauty, the Semai community use several figurative words, such as *isihubik* (sweet potato), *bungakseteq* (a type of flower), *sooq bungakpalei* (lush hair), *ser ren wok teli* (the trunk of a banana tree), *cahayakgecek* (moonlight), and *sumbakkumoh* (dark red). Specifically, the phrases, *cahayakgecek* (moonlight) and *bungakseteq* (a type of flower) symbolize an attractive woman endowed with natural beauty. They use the phrase *sooq bungakpalei*, which means lush hair, to describe a woman with lush, wavy hair, which is symbolized by the beautiful flowers of the bayas tree (a type of palm tree found in the Equator). To describe a woman with a fair complexion, they use the phrase *ser ren wok teli*, which means the white trunk of a banana tree.

They also use certain figurative words to describe the transient beauty of women, such as *isihubik*, which means the fiber of sweet potato, symbolizing a woman who looks beautiful after putting her make up. Likewise, the phrase *sumbakkumoh*, which means red safflower, is used to symbolize the eventuality of one's beauty and wealth to fade away. Clearly, such expressions are enriched with educational values to remind people of the temporal nature of their possessions. Also, the red safflower symbolizes temporary beauty and wealth, given its initial red color will lose its intensity with passing time. These revelations indicate that the Semai community has the same philosophy as those of mainstream societies that acknowledge the temporal nature of one's beauty and wealth, which will eventually lose their luster. Such a common worldview held by virtually all communities is hardly surprising as everyone knows that everything in this world will eventually cease to exist. Table 3 summarizes the pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to the beauty of women.

**Table 3.** The pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to the beauty of women

| No. | Phrase            | Pronunciation    | Analogy                    |
|-----|-------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| 1   | isi hubik         | isi hubi?        | A sweet potato             |
| 2   | bungak seteq      | buŋa? sɛtɛ?      | A type of flower           |
| 3   | sooq bungak palei | so? buŋa? paɫɛi  | The hair of a bayas flower |
| 4   | ser ren wok teli  | sɛr rɛn wo? tɛli | The trunk of banana tree   |



[CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>

|   |               |               |           |
|---|---------------|---------------|-----------|
| 5 | cahayak gece  | cahaya? gɛɛ?  | Moonlight |
| 6 | sumbak ku moh | sumba? ku mɔh | Dark red  |

### Human Characters

To describe human characters, the Sema people use many figurative expressions that can be divided into two main categories, positive and negative characters. Surprisingly, the findings showed that they have more negative expressions than positive ones. Figurative expressions that describe positive characters include the phrase raha-pok, which means 'like a chicken' to denote a diligent person. The Sema people view chickens as 'diligent' animals because these domestic fowl will usually rise early in the morning to look for food. The same symbolic meaning can be expressed by the phrase bi rayot, which means 'not sitting tight' to indicate someone that is tirelessly busy doing his or her work. They will utter the phrase ce'osood, meaning dry firewood, to denote someone who is willing to lend his or her hands. To indicate a person whose work is impeccably flawless, they will use the term tehlabok, which means 'blown dust' that symbolizes the high perfection of someone's work, which is free from dust.

Figurative expressions that describe negative characters include the term tokentaq, which means 'no ears', and pekberij wet, which means 'without a heart'. The former is used to refer to an obstinate person who is not willing to listen to advice. On the other hand, the latter is used to describe a heartless person who lacks compassion. For someone who is lazy, they use the words cap bed, which means 'eat-and-sleep'. To indicate a slavish person, the words sentakentok, which means the tail of a cawi-cawi bird (which looks like the end of an arrow) is used. Apparently, they use this term to denote the authority of an individual over others, as symbolized by smaller birds flying closely behind the tail of a cawi-cawi bird.

Other negative characters are also likened to certain parts of animals. For example, they use the term hatiular, meaning the heart of a snake, to denote a highly temperamental person. Likewise, they utter the phrase le-em – le-em, mohgau, which means 'the soft nose of a wild boar' to describe a person who behaves aggressively despite his or her outward gentle look. To indicate someone who is homeless because of his or her laziness, they use the phrase macammawas, meaning 'like an ape'. In terms of table manners, they refer to those who lack such attributes to raha-caknapug, which means eating disorderly like chickens. To describe someone as extremely stingy, they use the term raha-rau/dog. Table 4 summarizes the pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to human characters.

**Table 4.** The pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to human characters

| No. | Phrase                | Pronunciation       | Analogy                           |
|-----|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1   | raha-pok              | raha po?            | Like a chicken                    |
| 2   | bi rayot              | bi rayo?            | Not sitting tight                 |
| 3   | ce'os sood            | ce 'os so'od        | Dry firewood                      |
| 4   | tehol abok            | tehol abo?          | Blown dust                        |
| 5   | tok entaq             | tɔ? ənta?           | 'No ears'                         |
| 6   | pek ber eij wet       | pɛ? bɛr eij wɛt     | 'Without a heart'                 |
| 7   | cap bed               | cap bɛd             | Eat-and-sleep                     |
| 8   | sentak tentok         | sɛnta? tɛnto?       | The tail of a cawi-cawi bird      |
| 9   | sengik tajuk          | sɛŋi? tajo?         | A snake's heart                   |
| 10  | le-em – le-em moh gau | lɛ'em-lɛ'em mɔh gau | The softness of a wildboar's nose |

 [CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>

|    |                 |                  |                         |
|----|-----------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| 11 | raha-weoi       | raha wəoi        | Like an ape             |
| 12 | raha-cak nakpug | raha ca? na? pug | Eating like a chicken   |
| 13 | raha-rau/dog    | raha rau/dog     | Like a monkey or an ape |

### Distance and Time

The findings also revealed that the Semai community uses several figurative expressions to depict distance and time. For example, the use the expression noklernurbakou, meaning a tree trunk, to show the distance to an intended place. Similarly, the phrase sempakpasir, which means ‘a sand’s throw’, and sepelontarsepahsirih, which means ‘a betel leaf’s throw’ carry the same meaning. On the other hand, the phrase noklernurbakou, which means a cigarette, is used to denote that the time it takes to reach a destination is the same as the time it takes to smoke a cigarette. Thus, the distance inferred by this phrase is far greater than those inferred by the above phrases. Clearly, such a diversity of figurative phrases shows the close intimacy between the Semai people and nature, which is rich with flora and fauna.

In addition to measurements of distance, aspects relating to time are also emphasized by this group of Orang Asli. Many expressions stressing such aspects can be found in their figurative language. For example, they use the words noklaknikand nokperiuk, which mean a pan of rice and a pot of rice, respectively, to denote the time it takes to perform a task as symbolized by the time to cook rice in such cooking utensils. However, for a shorter duration, they use figurative words selah leu and nget leu, which mean a withered bamboo and a charred bamboo, respectively. Such usage stems from their cultural practice of cooking rice, fish, and other types of food in bamboo stems, which usually take less time than cooking using a pot or a pan. Such practices mirror that of the Malay culture of cooking glutinous rice in bamboo stems.

The time inferred by the term selah leu refers to the time it takes to completely cook food in a bamboo stem by putting it over a fire, the process of which turns the bamboo from green to white. In contrast, the term nget leu has a slight meaning in that it refers to the time needed to turn a green bamboo into a slightly darkened bamboo as symbolized by putting the food inside a bamboo stem over fire until it becomes slightly cooked. Thus, the time inferred by the latter is longer than that inferred by the former. Symbolically, both words denote the time needed to perform certain tasks is relatively shorter than that implied by the terms noklaknik and nokperiuk. Table 5 summarizes the pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to distance and time.

**Table 5.** The pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to distance and time

| No. | Phrase           | Pronunciation   | Analogy           |
|-----|------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1   | nok lernur bakou | nə? lənur bakou | A tree            |
| 2   | sempak pasir     | səmpa? pasir    | A sand’s throw    |
| 3   | nok laknik       | nə? lə?ni?      | A pan of rice     |
| 4   | nok periuk       | nə? pəriu?      | A pot or rice     |
| 5   | selah leu        | səlah leu       | A withered bamboo |
| 6   | nget leu         | ŋe? leu         | A charred bamboo  |

### Leadership

There are three main figurative phrases used by the Orang Asli of the Semai background to convey the concept of leadership, namely karapi-kit, karapi-ikuli, mairaknak, and bah bergul. The literal meanings of the first two are ‘a raff submerged at its rear’. The meanings of the third and fourth phrases are an old man and a benevolent man, respectively. From a leadership perspective, the phrases karapi-kit and karapi-ikuli convey the meaning of the responsibility that the common people have to bear when bad things befall unto their leader. Similar to the Malay society, the Semai community also shares the same notion that the actions or inactions of their leader will have serious repercussions on their people, which may last several generations.

The phrase mairaknak is used by the Semai community to refer to a person who is the central figure in a family, institution, and community. Also, the same figurative phrase carries the meaning of an influential

 [CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>



individual in making decisions, such as a village head in presiding over matters relating to local customs and affairs. On the other hand, the Semai community use the phrase *bah bergul* to symbolize a virtuous man who tirelessly takes care of the need of others in his community. Also, such a person is viewed as a charismatic personality who they can rely on as their leader to help them deal with a myriad of issues. Table 6 summarizes the pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to leadership.

**Table 6.** The pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to leadership

| No. | Phrase                | Pronunciation         | Analogy                      |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1   | <i>karap i-kit</i>    | <i>karap i-kit</i> ,  | A raff submerged at its rear |
| 2   | <i>karap i-ikuliu</i> | <i>karam i-ikuliu</i> | All are submerged            |
| 3   | <i>mai raknak</i>     | <i>mai ra?na?</i>     | An old man                   |
| 4   | <i>bah bergul</i>     | <i>bah bərgul</i>     | A benevolent man             |

### Oaths, Customs, and Beliefs

In many parts of the world, the natives practice cultural traditions that have been well preserved to this day. Likewise, the Semai people in Lembah Jelai also have their own unique cultural tradition encompassing various religious and cultural aspects, such as oaths, traditions, and beliefs, which are figuratively expressed in various forms in the Semai language, such as the phrases *nyongenit*, *be lenlotru mat arik*, *ngecat reis*, *rahnahcok*, *telakmaluk*, *perensolbicaraa*, and *bermat*. To emphasize the importance of honoring an oath, they use the phrase *nyongenit*, which means ‘by considering bad things’, and *be lenlotru mat arik*, which means ‘to lie under of the sun’. The former carries the meaning that a person who has taken an oath will not err again, or a person is not to stay at the same place after committing an offense or after having an altercation with another person in his village. This means that in an altercation such a person may swear he will never speak again to the other person or vow to never return to his village again. Likewise, the phrase *be lenlotru mat arik* has the same meaning as that of the phrase *nyongenit* in that swearing under the sun is sacred, as the sun is an object of reverence to the Semai people.

There are other figurative phrases, such as *rahnahcok* (which means ‘to pull a rattan’) and *ngecat reis* (which means ‘decisions made by the heart’) that emphasize the permanency of decisions (reached after disputes) or the preservation of sacred prohibitions (which have been passed down over many generations). The former is used to denote the finality of a decision made in a *majlis* or meeting that cannot be revoked. On the other hand, the latter is used to highlight the irrevocability of words uttered in a conversation, such that a promise made must be delivered and honored. The same figurative meaning can be expressed by the phrase *jerlokkajekku lubok*, which means ‘a foot caught in a hole’, to denote that a person cannot retract what he or she has uttered. In fact, this phrase carries the same meaning as that of the Malay proverb *terlaluperahubolehdiundur*, *terlajak kata burukpadahnya*.

In a Semai’s tribal council, a guilty man who is handed with punishment is said to be sitting or standing in the state of *telakmaluk*, which means ‘to look at one’s genital’. Figuratively, it means such a person is in a state of abject shame after the pronouncement of the punishment. However, in certain cases, such a person is given the rights to ask for evidence of the alleged offence from his or her accuser, as implied by the phrase *perensolbicaraa*, which means to cross-examine. The former will admit his guilt after mounting evidence is brought by latter in the tribal council, after which the tribal head will mete out the appropriate punishment.

Similar to other native peoples in other parts of the World, the Orang Asli of the Semai ethnicity also believe in supernatural power and beings. Such a belief is evident in many of the figurative expressions or terms existing in their local language. One term that merits attention is the term *Tok Halaq*, which represents a shaman who mediates between the visible and spirit worlds. Furthermore, he is said to possess a *bermat*, which means a sharp pair of eyes that enables him to see the unseen beings or to sense their presence. In their community, a patient of a certain shaman is prohibited from seeking help from another shaman, the breach of which can cause death or further deterioration of illness, as implied by the phrase *tekreg*, which means ‘to break a taboo’. Table 7

 [CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>

summarizes the pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to oaths, customs, and beliefs.

**Table 7.** The pronunciations and analogies of the figurative phrases relating to oaths, customs, and beliefs

| No. | Phrase                | Pronunciation         | Analogy                         |
|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1   | nnyong enit           | ɲoŋ ənni?             | By considering bad things       |
| 2   | be lenlot ru mat arik | bə lənlo? ru ma? ari? | Telling lies under the sun      |
| 3   | ngecat reis           | ŋəca? reis            | Decisions made by the heart     |
| 4   | rahnah cok            | rahnah co?            | Pulling a rattan                |
| 5   | telak maluk           | təla? malu?           | Looking at one's genital        |
| 6   | perensol bicaraa      | pərənsol bicaraa      | Cross-examining                 |
| 7   | bermat                | bərma?                | A sharp pair of eyes            |
| 8   | jerlok kajek ku lubok | jərlo? kajɛ? ku lubo? | A foot trapped in a hole        |
| 9   | tekreg                | te?reg                | Breaking a taboo or prohibition |

## 6. Conclusion

As revealed in this study, the elements of nature and culture play an important role in the development of the figurative language of the Semai peoples, one of the three major groups of Orang Asli in Malaysia, who live Lembah Jelai, Pahang. This main finding is consistent with AsmahHj. Omar's (2005) view that the development of a figurative language stems from humans' relational skills in relation to the environment that transcend not only space but also time. The findings indicate that the close relationship between the Semai community in Lembah Jelai, Pahang and the environment has a profound impact on their daily lives. Such a finding further reinforces the ecological and social theory proposed by Julian Steward (cited in Hashim Awang, 1998), which propounds that the environment has a huge impact on less technologically developed communities. Essentially, according to Steward, the environment in which a community lives help shape its culture. From the perspective of nature, the findings provide evidence to assert that the Semai people of Lembah Jelai use names or words based on animals and plants as the core analogy used in their figurative language. From a cultural perspective, their daily life experiences, such as hunting, farming, cooking, and opening a new farm or village, also provide the source for analogies to be included in their language. The use of natural and cultural elements has helped develop both positive and negative expressions, with the latter exceeding the former quantitatively. In summation, the figurative language of the Semai community in Lembah Jelai serves as guidelines to help them establish a strong social order, the impact of which helps them to live harmoniously in synergy with nature.

## 7. Acknowledgements

This article is based on a study entitled Peribahasa Suku Kaum Semai di Lembah Jelai Pahang: Satu Pengamatan Retorik Dari Aspek Simbol dan Motif, which was carried out using the University Grant (2015-0126-107-01) awarded by Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI). The authors wish to extend their gratitude to the director and staff of the Research Management and Innovation Center (RMIC) for their support and encouragement.

## References

1. Abd. Rahim Abd. Rashid. (2001). Nilai-nilaimurnidalampendidikan: menghadapiperubahan dan cabaranalafbaru. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributions Sdn. Bhd.
2. Abdullah Yusof & Ahmad Kamil Ghazali. (1996). Kognisi dan hubungannyadenganbahasa. Jurnal Dewan Bahasa, 40 (2), 164-173.
3. Asmah Haji Omar. (2005). Budaya dan bahasakiasan. Jurnal Peradaban Melayu, Vol. 3. 25 April 2011 dalam penerbit.upsi.edu.my/website\_e-jurnal/jurnal%20site/.../bab1.html



[CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 Deed Attribution 4.0 International attribution which permits copy, redistribute, remix, transform, and build upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the Ninety Nine Publication and Open Access pages <https://turcomat.org>



4. Bahren Umar Siregar. (2010). Emosi dan kebudayaan dalam bahasa kiasan. 1 April 2011 dalam <http://sastra.um.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/104-Bahren-Umar-Siregar-LTBI-UAJ-Emosi-dan-Kebudayaan-dalam-Bahasa-kiasan.pdf>
5. Darian, Steven. (2001). Peranan bahasa kiasan dalam tekssains peringkat pengenalan. *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa*, 1 (1), 55-86.
6. Dentan, Robert Knox. (1979). *The Semai: A nonviolent people of Malaya*, fieldwork edition, case studies in cultural anthropology. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
7. Hashim Awang A. R. (1998). *Budaya & kebudayaan: Teori, isu dan persoalan*. Kuala Lumpur: Citra Budaya.
8. Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia. (2003). *Huraian sukatan pelajaran bahasa Semai*, peringkat 1 Tahun 3 dan 4. Kuala Lumpur: Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum, KPM dan Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
9. Nik Safiah Karim. (1992). *Beberapa persoalan sosiolinguistik bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
10. Rajiee Hadi. (1995). Bahasa dan fikiran: hubungan antara struktur lahir dengan struktur batin. *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa*, 39 (11), 1017-1023.
11. Rosta Harun, Zaidi Hassan & Azizi Muda. (2002). Masyarakat Melayu dan etika alam sekitar. *Prosiding Simposium Melayu Malaysia*, 24-25 Ogos 2002. 466-472. Persatuan Kakitangan Akademik, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
12. Roswita Silalahi. (2005). Metafora dalam bahasa Batak Toba. *Jurnal Ilmiah Bahasa dan Sastra*, 1 (2), 96-100.
13. Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J. & Le Compte, M. D. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: ethnographer's toolkit*. New York: Altamira Press.
14. Setyo Untoro. (2009). *Peribahasa bahasa-bahasa daerah sebagai cermin keanekaragaman budaya di Indonesia*. Makalah Ringkas KIMLI 2009. 30 April 2011 dalam <http://sastra.um.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/090-Setyo-Untoro-Pusat-Bahasa-Peribahasa-Bahasa-bahasa-Daerah.pdf>.

