



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Semantic Variation of Yakan Literature Among Four Yakan-Dominated Municipalities in Basilan Province: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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This qualitative study explores the semantic variation of Yakan literature among four Yakan-dominated municipalities in Basilan Province, Philippines: Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, Lantawan, and Tuburan. Using semi-structured interviews with 16 informants aged 40–60 years and analysis of authentic Yakan poetry including songs, riddles, and tarasul, the research identified significant lexical variations across geographic locations. The study revealed that while all municipalities share core linguistic features, Tuburan exhibits the most distinctive variations, particularly in vowel usage where "e" replaces "a" in word onsets. Findings indicate that Yakan oral traditions are diminishing due to limited intergenerational transmission, reduced performance occasions, and youth prioritization of Western education. All informants confirmed that Yakan literature remains authentic to the dialect and crucial for cultural preservation. The study recommends integrating Yakan literature into school curricula, developing written archives and digital documentation, establishing community-based teaching programs, and creating instructional materials including interactive literary books, educational films, and dialect dictionaries to preserve this endangered cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Human language is fundamentally characterized by variation across multiple dimensions, including gender, social class, and geographic region. Dialectal variation—the manifestation of language differences across geographic regions—represents one of the most prevalent forms of linguistic diversity. Sociolinguistics operates on the fundamental assumption that language variability mirrors social structure (Weinreich et al., 1968). As Weinreich et al. argued, "in a language serving a complex (i.e., real) community, it is the absence of structured heterogeneity that would be dysfunctional" (1968, p. 100). This paradigm shift in understanding language variation was pioneered by seminal works including Labov's studies on Martha's Vineyard (1963) and New York (1966, 1972), and Trudgill's Norwich study (1974), which collectively established the foundation for examining structured variation in phonology and morpho-syntax (Chambers et al., 2002).

Recent developments in Cognitive Linguistics have advocated for a socio-cognitive orientation in linguistic research (Geeraerts, 2005; Kristiansen & Dirven, 2008). Both Cognitive Linguistics and Sociolinguistics share common theoretical grounds, particularly their interest in understanding motivations for speakers' linguistic choices and their commitment to usage-based, empirical approaches to language data analysis. Cognitive Linguistics recognizes meaning as the most critical aspect of linguistic structure (Geeraerts & Cuyckens, 2007), considering semantic structure to flexibly reflect speakers' perceptions while adapting to their interaction with physical and cultural reality.

In the field of language use, literature provides a broad spectrum through which linguistic creativity and technical operation can be observed. While the verbal and imaginary dimensions of

literature have often been overshadowed by performative elements, the researcher advances the position that verbal elements and the conceptions they carry constitute major ingredients in constructing the deepest and most authentic forms of language use. The verbal element, specifically lexical variation, represents a promising field of research for understanding the birth and development of literature from a sociolinguistic perspective.

The Yakan Context

Basilan Island, located at 6°40' N and 122°00' E with a total area of 1,283 square kilometers, forms part of the Sulu Archipelago. The Yakan people represent the dominant tribal culture on this island province, traditionally recognized for their remarkable technicolor geometric weaves called *tennun*. However, another vibrant aspect of their culture—the variation of their dialect, recognizable primarily by the geographic location or origin of native speakers—has received insufficient scholarly attention.

The Yakan language, written in Malay-Arabic script with native words adapted into the alphabet, exhibits structural and syntactic features revealing strong Malay-Indonesian influences, particularly Javanese, which likely occurred prior to Islam's introduction. The classification of Yakan dialect variants presents challenges due to the absence of well-defined and agreed-upon linguistic criteria. Nevertheless, obvious and practical classifications of semantic variation exist among four Yakan-dominated municipalities in Basilan: Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, Albarka (Tuburan), and Lantawan.

As Borgonia (2017) emphasized, indigenous knowledge and practices represent cultural paradigms that must be well-preserved and continuously promoted. However, Yakans often face misrepresentation when only partial aspects of their culture are used to epitomize the entire tribe, leaving many confused and disconnected from their cultural identity. These variations create not language barriers but identity markers for each Yakan community, enabling identification of specific community roots through word use and linguistic choices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Referential Theory of Meaning and Generative Grammar Theory.

The Referential Theory of Meaning encompasses two components: meaning as the relationship between words and objects, and meaning as a triangular relationship. Bloomfield (1933) and Palmer (1981) emphasized the context of situation as essential to meaning. Malinowski (1923) and Firth (1951) further developed this perspective, arguing that language description cannot be complete without reference to the context of situation in which language operates. Firth proposed systematic categories for analyzing contexts of situation, including relevant features of participants, verbal and non-verbal actions, relevant objects, and the effects of verbal action.

Generative Grammar Theory (Chomsky, 1957, 1965) introduced the concepts of deep and surface structure, proposing that sentence meaning depends on the network of relations in deep structure. This framework evolved into two distinct theories: Generative Semantics (Lakoff, 1974) and Interpretive Semantics (Jackendoff, 1972; Katz, 1972; Katz & Fodor, 1963). The latter theory, particularly relevant to this study, emphasizes the complete exclusion of the context of situation from its theoretical framework, focusing on knowledge of language rather than knowledge of the world.

Research Gap and Significance

Limited research exists on Yakan dialect variation, affecting cultural acknowledgment and recognition needed across various disciplines including tourism, culture and arts, and education. Other ethnolinguistic tribes often misunderstand Yakan culture, as no established, structured work adequately documents its vibrancy and heterogeneity. This study addresses this gap by producing relevant materials that can be utilized in teaching and serve as vessels to promote Yakan culture itself. The research adheres to curating and drafting plans for projects or programs that would rekindle the spirit of cultural appreciation not only in the educational sector but also through cooperation with community leaders in the province.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the semantic variation of Yakan literature among four Yakan-dominated municipalities of Basilan Province: Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, Lantawan, and Tuburan. Specifically, this research seeks to:

1. Identify the semantic variation of Yakan literature across the four municipalities.
2. Determine the challenges faced by Yakan people in the usage of Yakan dialect.
3. Draw implications from the use of Yakan literature for preservation and promotion.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design characterized by obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication, allowing in-depth probing and questioning of informants. As defined by Creswell (1994), qualitative study represents "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (p. 15). The research utilized two qualitative methods: one-on-one interviews with informants and record-keeping through pre-existing documents and data sources.

Participants

The study involved 16 native Yakan speakers selected through purposive sampling based on criteria of age (40–60 years), geographic location, and cultural knowledge. This sampling technique, as Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) noted, involves "identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (p. 156). Additionally, three selected pre-existing literary pieces—specifically poetry in forms of songs, riddles, and *tarasul* (poems)—were analyzed from each research locale.

Research Site

Data were collected from four Yakan-dominated municipalities of Basilan Province: Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, Lantawan, and Tuburan.

Materials

The primary instrument was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for key questions while enabling detailed exploration of responses. Lunenberg and Irby (2008) emphasized that qualitative interviews aim to elicit answers directly from indigenous knowledge and experiences. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim to protect against bias and provide permanent records. The interview focused on lexicons expressed in dialect and used in Yakan literature.

RESULTS

Semantic Variation of Yakan Literature

The analysis of Yakan lexicons revealed three distinct patterns of semantic variation across the four municipalities.

Pattern 1: Lexicons with Similar Meaning but Different Forms

Comprehensive analysis of 69 common terms revealed significant lexical variation. Notable examples include:

- "Cold": Sumisip uses *tenne*, while Tipo-Tipo, Tuburan, and Lantawan use *haggut*.
- "Hungry": Sumisip uses *kinaugtuh*, while Tipo-Tipo and Tuburan use *inusan*, and Lantawan uses *kinaugtu'*.

- "To smell": Sumisip uses *inuluk*, Tipo-Tipo uses *sinengngut*, Tuburan uses *inuk*, and Lantawan uses *hinamut*.
- "Thirsty": Sumisip uses *lekkakan*, while the other three municipalities use *ganggang* or *ilanggang*.
- "Song": Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, and Lantawan use *kalangan*, while Tuburan uses *kangan*.

Tuburan consistently exhibited the most distinctive variations from other municipalities. For instance, while Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, and Lantawan use *basu* for "cup," Tipo-Tipo uniquely uses *patikuwan*.

Pattern 2: Lexicons With Similar Meaning but Partly Different Forms

Analysis revealed 30 terms showing partial morphological variation, predominantly characterized by vowel substitution in Tuburan variants. The systematic pattern involves replacing the vowel "a" with "e" in word onsets:

- "Immediately (after something)": Sumisip, Tipo-Tipo, and Lantawan use *magtuy*, while Tuburan uses *megtui*.
- "Fade": Three municipalities use *baluba*, while Tuburan uses *beluba*.
- "Last": Three municipalities use *dambuli*, while Tuburan uses *dembuli*.
- "All": Three municipalities use *kamemon*, while Tuburan uses *kememon*.

This systematic vowel alternation represents a phonological pattern unique to the Tuburan variant, demonstrating structured dialectal differentiation.

Pattern 3: Lexicons With the Same Form but Different Meanings

Twelve lexical items demonstrated semantic divergence despite phonological identity:

- *Batang*: means "trunk" in Sumisip and Lantawan but "want" in Tipo-Tipo and Tuburan.
- *Haggut*: means "cold" in Sumisip and Lantawan but "herb" in Tipo-Tipo and Tuburan.
- *Siya*: means "endangered" in three municipalities but "chair" in Tuburan.
- *Bahan*: means "vine" in Sumisip, "present condition" in Tipo-Tipo and Tuburan, and "work" in Lantawan.

These semantic variations illustrate how geographic isolation and community-specific cultural practices influence meaning assignment to phonologically identical forms.

Challenges in Yakan Dialect Usage

Four major themes emerged from informant interviews.

Theme 1: Origin and Mode of Acquisition

All informants indicated that Yakan poetry originated from cultural celebrations, particularly wedding ceremonies. As Informant No. 14 explained:

In weddings, or in occasions like parties or non-formal seminars. In gatherings. Like weddings, or if it is being requested. Also in games where there are programs, in meetings and gatherings as well such as *pagtammam* (Qur'an Completion).

The acquisition mode followed traditional mentorship, with elders teaching younger generations through modeling strategies. Informant No. 6 described the process:

I learned it from those who are tenured in the field (*luguh*). It is being recited to us and I write it. Those I wrote were practiced repeatedly stanza by stanza in order for me to get familiarized with it and won't be forgotten easily.

Theme 2: Purpose and Meaning of Poetries

Yakan literature serves two primary functions: (a) conveying love stories through metaphorical language during wedding ceremonies, and (b) uplifting religious and cultural consciousness. The *lunsey* and *sa-il* performances before entering the bride's chamber exemplify ritualized verbal art. As Informant No. 1 explained, the groom cannot enter until these oral performances are completed, establishing respect for the bride's family.

Poetry content often employs extended metaphors drawn from nature. One tragic love narrative described a lover compared to a *manuk* (chicken) who was not properly secured and therefore lost to another suitor. Other poetries, such as "Sundalu Muslim," served to motivate freedom fighters during martial law, demonstrating literature's role in political consciousness.

Theme 3: Status of Preservation and Promotion

All informants confirmed that Yakan literature authentically represents the original dialect. However, unanimous concern emerged regarding its diminishing practice. Informant No. 3 stated:

In my opinion, it (Yakan Oral Tradition) had not died yet, nevertheless years from now (it will soon perish). In Sumisip, it can be considered that (Yakan literature, particularly, orature) is not anymore present.

Informant No. 9 expressed urgency:

For me, this (Yakan Literature) is about to perish because like after ten or five years, we (Yakan) probably will lose this especially when there are no longer elders who are alive.

Three factors contribute to this decline:

1. Limited intergenerational transmission due to time constraints on youth.
2. Reduced performance occasions as modern wedding venues (hotels) replace traditional community celebrations.
3. Youth prioritization of Western education and popular culture over traditional knowledge.

Informant No. 6 observed:

It is not performed anymore because there are new (practices already) which became new forms of enjoyment for the youths. Because of this, it (pop culture) starts to mix with the earlier forms of our dialect. The language of before was replaced by the language used now.

Theme 4: Lexical Comprehension

Notably, all informants reported no difficulty understanding lexicons within the poetry they performed, indicating that elder generations maintain comprehensive dialectal competence. However, this contrasts sharply with youth populations who demonstrate limited proficiency in traditional lexicons.

Implications for Cultural Preservation

Informants proposed two primary preservation strategies.

Strategy 1: Curriculum Integration

Multiple informants advocated incorporating Yakan literature into formal education. Informant No. 2 argued:

If I were to judge, it is better to include it (Yakan Literature) in the school curriculum so as in whatever situation, it (knowledge of Yakan Literature) shall be acquired by them. Even if there are no longer parents or elders or author, or performers of the literature, the knowledge is embarked in the curriculum.

Informant No. 4 emphasized documentation:

There must be written records, let us try to see, based from all civilization from the Chinese 2000 years ago before Christ, like the Aztec in Egypt—they have written records albeit nobody can still read it.

Strategy 2: Community-Based Programs

Informant No. 3 offered a counter-perspective:

The initiation (of teaching again through revival the Yakan Literature) must come from the community. If we were to inculcate it to the curriculum, then it should be done to whole of Basilan. It is better that we do it by community because if you go to specific barangays or municipality, there are variations, and they have different traditions.

This approach recognizes that community-level instruction better preserves dialectal heterogeneity, allowing each municipality to maintain its distinctive variants while teaching the broader Yakan literary tradition.

Both strategies emphasize the need for written archives, audio-visual documentation, and systematic teaching programs. Informant No. 15 summarized:

It (Yakan literature) must be put into written records, and must be taught, at the same time must be written. These *lunsey* must be recorded, and these songs too.

DISCUSSION

This sociolinguistic study of semantic variation in Yakan literature across four municipalities in Basilan Province reveals significant findings with implications for linguistic theory and cultural preservation. The research identified three distinct patterns of lexical variation: complete lexical substitution, partial morphological variation (particularly vowel alternation), and semantic divergence with phonological identity. Tuburan consistently exhibited the most distinctive variants, characterized by systematic vowel substitution of "e" for "a" in word onsets, suggesting geographic isolation as a driver of dialectal differentiation.

The study confirms that Yakan oral traditions remain authentic to the original dialect but face imminent endangerment due to reduced intergenerational transmission, diminished performance occasions, and youth prioritization of Western educational paradigms over traditional cultural knowledge. While elder generations maintain comprehensive dialectal competence, younger generations demonstrate limited proficiency, threatening both linguistic diversity and the cultural identity encoded within Yakan literature.

The semantic variations identified serve as geographic identity markers rather than communication barriers, supporting the assertion that structured heterogeneity is functional in complex speech communities (Weinreich et al., 1968). The performance context of Yakan literature demonstrates how oral traditions function as cultural capital, regulating social access and reinforcing communal values through sophisticated literary techniques comparable to written poetic traditions.

This study contributes to sociolinguistic theory by documenting semantic variation in an understudied Austronesian language, demonstrating how geographic, social, and cultural factors interact to produce systematic dialectal differentiation while providing empirical evidence for the urgency of language documentation and revitalization efforts in indigenous communities facing cultural assimilation pressures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study recommends comprehensive intervention across educational, community, technological, and policy domains to preserve Yakan literature and dialect variation.

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