

# Linguistic Units and Cultural Meanings in the Ritual Speech of *Mowindahako* Among the *Tolaki Mekongga* Ethnic Group

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**Abstract**—This study explores the linguistic forms and cultural meanings embedded in the *Mowindahako* ritual speech of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community in Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi. *Mowindahako* is a traditional wedding ceremony that serves as a medium to transmit moral, social, and spiritual values across generations. Adopting a descriptive qualitative method within the framework of cultural linguistics, this study examined how language operates as a reflection and vehicle of cultural knowledge. Data were collected through observation, audio recording, interviews with customary leaders, and transcription of ritual utterances and were analyzed to identify the linguistic units and their cultural functions. The findings reveal that *Mowindahako* speech contains distinctive linguistic structures at the levels of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourses, characterized by repetition, sound parallelism, and the use of archaic forms. Linguistic symbols, such as *kalosara*, *karambau*, and *tawa-tawa*, function as cultural signs that embody the values of unity, harmony, and spirituality within *Tolaki* society. The study concludes that the *Mowindahako* language functions not only as a medium for ritual communication, but also as a semiotic instrument for transmitting social norms, ethical principles, and collective identity. This research contributes to the preservation of local languages and cultural heritage while enriching the broader field of cultural linguistics in Indonesia.

**Index Terms**—ritual language, *Tolaki Mekongga*, cultural linguistics, cultural meaning, semiotic tradition

## I. INTRODUCTION

Various forms of social practices can be easily observed in everyday life, both individually and collectively, because humans are inherently social creatures (Arafah et al., 2023; Manugeran et al., 2023). Among these practices, one of the most fundamental is the habit of using language for communication (Arafah et al., 2023; Karamoy et al., 2024). Language functions as both a tool and medium that enables humans to interact, share experiences, and build relationships within society (Arafah et al., 2025; Misnah et al., 2024).

Language plays an essential role in constructing communication and social interaction systems (Arafah et al., 2022; Hasyim & Arafah, 2023b; Taqdir et al., 2025). In linguistic studies, language is understood not only as a means of conveying messages, but also as a way to document human civilization (Mofu et al., 2024). Through language, people articulate ideas, examine their truths, and accept or reject them based on reason (Alwasilah, 2010; Titus et al., 1979). Hence, language is not merely a channel for expression but also a tool for thought and a foundation for cultural development (Iksora et al., 2022). It is through language that humans construct and sustain their culture, as nearly every human activity depends on its use (Wijana, 2010).

Language also functions as a social bridge and a reflection of cultural structure (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a). Through language, social relationships are established and maintained; linguistic interaction embodies hierarchy, politeness, and social harmony, values that lie at the heart of communal life (Arafah et al., 2023). This principle is particularly evident in ritual discourse such as *Mowindahako*, where the layered and poetic use of language upholds balance, respect, and harmony between families (Takwa et al., 2024).

The relationship between language and culture is reciprocal in nature. Grammatical structures mirror a society's cognitive experience, while even phonology can be considered part of culture (Palmer, 1996). Understanding culture requires exploring how meaning is symbolically produced through representational practices, which are central to the study of semiotics (Barker, 2004). Indeed, no aspect reflects a nation's culture more precisely than its language (Alisjahbana, 1979). Language embodies society's system of values, worldviews, and collective consciousness.

Within the framework of Cultural Linguistics, linguistic structures are deeply rooted in cultural conceptualizations that share mental schemas, experiences, and values within a speech community (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2017). Language not only reflects culture, but also shapes it. This idea aligns with research indicating that linguistic and visual forms in foreign language textbooks often convey underlying cultural ideologies (Taqdir, 2025). Whether in modern education or traditional discourse, language serves as a medium of cultural representation and cognitive expression.

Ritual language represents one of the most profound manifestations of linguistic richness. In many traditional communities, ritual speech expresses moral principles and local wisdom passes down through generations. It is governed by formal conventions and upholds social order and spiritual balance (Fox, 1986). Ritual language does not merely display aesthetic beauty, but also preserves ethical values and cultural sanctity.

The *Tolaki Mekongga* people of Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, are among Indonesia's ethnic communities that continue to uphold traditional rituals. One of their most prominent traditions is *Mowindahako*, a ceremonial practice performed as part of marriage rites (Takwa et al., 2022; Takwa et al., 2024). The community occupies the historical territory of the former *Mekongga* Kingdom, encompassing Kolaka, Kolaka Utara, and Kolaka Timur (Angraini, 2016). Despite living alongside other ethnic groups, such as the Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, and Buton, the *Tolaki Mekongga* preserved their ancestral customs. In *Mowindahako*, two customary spokespersons the *tolea* (representing the groom's family) and the *pabitara* (representing the bride's family) engage in ritual dialogue using refined, poetic, and symbolically layered language.

Previous studies have examined the *Mowindahako* from various cultural perspectives. Ritual speech is known to convey humanistic values, such as togetherness, respect, and collective well-being, often articulated through metaphorical expressions grounded in local wisdom (Takwa et al., 2022). The cultural imagery found in this discourse includes themes of beauty, solidarity, deliberation, and loyalty (Takwa et al., 2024). The ritual also functions as a medium for transmitting ethical values and reinforcing social solidarity within the *Tolaki Mekongga* community (Takwa et al., 2025). However, although these studies shed light on its moral and symbolic dimensions, the linguistic structures and functional aspects of its discourse remain underexplored.

On a broader scale, preserving the *Tolaki Mekongga* language has become increasingly urgent, particularly through educational initiatives aligned with Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum (Halil et al., 2024). Efforts to revitalize local languages are essential, as modernization and interethnic interaction gradually erode linguistic competence among the younger generations (Arafah et al., 2025; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a, 2023b). A similar phenomenon can be observed among the Dayak communities of Borneo, which preserve their sociocultural identity through local narratives and linguistic expressions (Arifin et al., 2022). Therefore, documenting and analyzing ritual speech, such as *Mowindahako*, is crucial not only for linguistic scholarship but also for the preservation of Indonesia's intangible cultural heritage.

In this context, the present study aims to analyze linguistic units, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourse, and to interpret the cultural meanings embedded in the *Mowindahako* ritual speech of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community in Kolaka. Using a Cultural Linguistics approach, this research seeks to reveal how ritual language functions as a medium for transmitting values, strengthening cultural identity, and preserving local wisdom in the face of globalization.

## II. METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach within the framework of Cultural Linguistics, focusing on the role of language in representing a community's worldview, values, and communicative behavior. In this context, this research explores how the ritual speech of the *Tolaki Mekongga* people reflects their cultural conceptualizations and the social functions embedded in their linguistic practices.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in Hymes' (1974) concept of the ethnography of communication, which emphasizes understanding language in its social and cultural context. This framework provides the basis for identifying speech situations, participants, communicative goals, and functional patterns of speech events as meaningful social actions. Through this lens, the *Mowindahako* ritual is examined as an integral part of the *Tolaki Mekongga* cultural system, revealing how linguistic forms express and sustain cultural value.

### A. Data and Data Sources

The primary data consisted of oral utterances delivered by *tolea* (male spokesperson) and *pabitara* (female spokesperson) during the *Mowindahako* ritual ceremony. These utterances were collected directly from naturally occurring speech events in the Kolaka Regency in Southeast Sulawesi. Supporting data were obtained through interviews with traditional leaders, community elders, and native speakers who were familiar with the cultural and linguistic context of the ritual.

### B. Data Collection Techniques

The data were collected using several complementary techniques.

- Participant observation directly observes the *Mowindahako* ceremony, including its social setting and communication dynamics.
- Audio and video recordings to accurately document ritual speech for linguistic analysis.
- Field notes were taken during observations to record nonverbal cues, such as gestures, expressions, and social responses.
- In-depth interviews were conducted with traditional speakers and cultural experts to gain insights into the symbolic meanings and social functions of the utterances.
- Documentation involved the collection of photos, customary manuscripts, and archival materials related to *Mowindahako* as supporting sources for interpretation.

### C. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of three main stages: (1) data reduction, which involves selecting, simplifying, and organizing data from field notes and transcriptions; (2) data display, by categorizing linguistic units—words, phrases, clauses, and sentences—that convey cultural meanings; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, to identify relationships between linguistic forms and cultural values represented in ritual speech. The analysis was conducted inductively, moving from empirical observations to thematic conceptualizations that explain how language and culture are interrelated. This approach allows for a deep understanding of the cultural meanings embedded in the linguistic structures and social contexts of *Mowindahako*.

### D. Data Validation

The credibility of the findings was ensured through triangulation of techniques and sources (Denzin, 1978) by comparing data obtained from observations, recordings, interviews, and documentation. Validation was also carried out through member checking, where interpretations and preliminary findings were confirmed by key informants to ensure that the researcher's analysis accurately reflected the perspectives of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community.

## III. RESULT

### A. General Description of the Data

The data for this study were derived from the ritual speech of *Mowindahako*, a traditional reconciliation ceremony performed as part of the wedding customs of the *Tolaki Mekongga* ethnic group in the Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi. This ritual represents one of the most significant forms of traditional communication within *Tolaki* society, functioning not only as a medium for settling customary affairs and negotiating marriage alliances but also as a means of affirming collective identity, moral order, and cultural continuity.

The *Mowindahako* ritual involves two principal speakers who serve as official representatives of the bride's and groom's families: the *tolea* (male spokesperson) and the *pabitara* (female spokesperson). These individuals are respected community figures who are entrusted by conveying the symbolic and cultural messages embedded in the ritual. The dialogue between them is delivered in *Tolaki* and performed in a highly formal, rhythmic, and poetic manner, characterized by the use of metaphorical expressions, parallel structures, and repetition. Ritual speech functions not only as a communicative act, but also as a linguistic performance that embodies the community's sense of beauty, sacredness, and cultural power.

The primary data consisted of transcribed utterances recorded during the direct observation of several *Mowindahako* ceremonies conducted across Kolaka. Additional data included ethnographic field notes documenting the sociocultural context of the ritual—intonation, gestures, and interactional patterns among participants. In total, the [insert number of utterances] speech units were collected and analyzed according to their linguistic levels, including words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourse structures.

The *Mowindahako* ceremony generally follows four major stages: (1) opening (*pondorambu*) – expressions of greeting and respect; (2) main stage – dialogue and negotiation between the *tolea* and *pabitara*; (3) closing stage – expressions of gratitude and blessing; and (4) sacred oath – the final affirmation of agreement through ritual speech. This sequential structure reflects the *Tolaki Mekongga* cosmological view of social and spiritual balance, beginning with respect, proceeding through deliberation, and culminating in moral and spiritual affirmation.

Through this corpus of ritual utterances, this study aims to identify the linguistic units and cultural meanings embedded in *Mowindahako* and to explain how these linguistic forms reflect the worldview, value system, and social ethics of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community.

### B. Forms of Linguistic Units

#### (a). Word Forms

At the lexical level, *Mowindahako* ritual speech features a set of distinctive words rarely used in everyday communication among the *Tolaki Mekongga* people. These lexical items carry strong symbolic meanings, as they refer

to sacred objects, social roles, and cultural concepts that form the foundation of the customary order. Their presence demonstrates that ritual language operates within a separate semantic system, one that functions not merely communicatively but representatively, mirroring the community's worldview and social structure.

Several key terms frequently appear in the ritual discourse, such as *kalosara*, *tolea*, *pabitara*, *wonua*, and *sorume*. The term *kalosara* refers to a sacred circular object regarded as the highest symbol of the law and moral order in the *Tolaki Mekongga* tradition. Philosophically, it embodies unity, balance, and cosmic order, values that serve as moral guidelines for the community. Its appearance in any ritual event signals its transition into a sacred state and legitimizes the ceremony within the social order.

The words *tolea* and *pabitara* denote the two spokespersons who play central roles in the *Mowindahako* ritual: *tolea* represents the groom's family, while *pabitara* speaks for the bride's family. These titles not only describe social positions but also symbolize the roles of mediators, harmonizers, and preservers of customary order. Through their speech, traditional languages are revitalized in a form marked by eloquence, politeness, and respect for hierarchy.

Other terms such as *wonua* and *sorume* refer to territorial concepts both meaning "land" or "homeland." In ritual contexts, *wonua* signifies the ancestral land that shelters social life, while *sorume* (literally "moon orchid") is an archaic name for the *Mekongga* region. The use of these archaic terms reflects genealogical and spiritual connections between people and places. Expressions such as *peowaino toono nggapa iwonua sorume* ("the duties of the people in the land of the Moon Orchid") evoke attachment to the homeland and reverence of ancestral heritage.

The lexicon of *Mowindahako* is characterized by archaic, sacred, and ritual-specific vocabulary. Socially, such forms distinguish ritual speech from everyday language and establish the formal and respectful tone expected from ceremonial discourse. Culturally, they serve as markers of identity, symbolizing sacredness, hierarchy, and communal unity. Thus, word forms in *Mowindahako* function not only as grammatical elements, but also as cultural symbols embodying moral, spiritual, and social values, illustrating how language operates as a vehicle for cultural representation and intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

#### (b). Phrase Forms

At the phrasal level, the *Mowindahako* discourse exhibits characteristic patterns composed of two-word combinations that form new semantic units. The most common pattern involves nominal phrases structured as N + N (noun + noun) or N + Adj (noun + adjective). Such constructions are typically used to denote customary concepts, territorial identity, and social authority, thereby reinforcing the ritual's formal and sacred tone.

A frequently occurring phrase is *tusa tongano lipu* ("the central pillar of the land"), which metaphorically signifies the core of strength and moral foundation in the social order. The term *tusa* ("pillar") represents stability, while *tongano lipu* ("center of the land" center of land) symbolizes centrality in social life. Together, the phrase refers to a leader or customary elder who upholds justice and order within a community. Thus, the expression conveys not a physical description but a symbolic representation of leadership and moral authority in *Tolaki* culture.

Another phrase, *iwonua sorume* ("land of the Moon Orchid"), combines *wonua* (land, region) and *sorume* (moon orchid), referring to Kolaka's ancestral territory. This phrase carries emotional and historical resonance, signifying people's deep attachment to their homeland and identity. Similarly, expressions like *peutumbuno wonua* ("supporters of the village") and *tongano lipu* ("the center of the land") illustrate how spatial metaphors are used to conceptualize social relations, the leader positioned at the center, and the people as the supporting structure around it.

These examples demonstrate that phrases in *Mowindahako* often use concrete nouns to express abstract ideas, such as leadership, solidarity, and social harmony. The use of spatial metaphors "center," "support," "village" reveals a culturally grounded conceptualization of society as an interconnected moral space. Hence, phrases in the ritual discourse serve not only grammatical but also representational functions, articulating the cultural logic of the *Tolaki* communal life.

#### (c). Clause Forms

At the clausal level, *Mowindahako* utterances exhibit syntactic patterns that are simple in structure, but rich in cultural meaning. Most clauses follow a basic S + P (subject + predicate) order and appear in declarative or requestive forms that reflect politeness, humility, and social harmony.

One common clause, *laa peneotuomami rongga peneune-une mami* (our desire has brought us to convey our purpose), expresses intent and respect. Structurally, it comprises the subject *peneotuomami rongga* (our intention) and the predicate *peneune-une mami* (to come and convey). Pragmatically, this clause marks the opening of negotiation, signaling deference to the counterpart—in this case, the bride's family.

Another example is *takionngo teisiako motipu ako takionngo* (may we be free of sin and disobedience), which is used in prayer or ceremonial affirmation. Its parallel structure and rhythmic repetition strengthen its sacred tone, embodying moral cleansing and humility before the divine and ancestral authority. Similarly, *tudu ipohae kalo saranggu ikomonggoruo* (we come to present the symbols of custom) functions as a performative declaration that accompanies a ritual act, demonstrating that language in this context both describes and enacts reality.

Thus, clauses in *Mowindahako* perform three main functions.

1. Communicative, expressing intentions and purposes;
2. Ritual, reinforcing sacredness through prayers and affirmations; and
3. Performative, enacting social or spiritual actions through speech.

The concise, rhythmic, and meaningful nature of these clauses illustrates how *Tolaki* speakers shape their languages according to the principles of politeness and spirituality, transforming speech into an embodiment of respect, sincerity, and communal harmony.

#### (d). Sentence Forms

At the sentence level, *Mowindahako* ritual speech demonstrates complex, parallel, repetitive, and formulaic structures. These patterns reflect not only linguistic aesthetics, but also the community's cognitive and cultural frameworks. Sentences were carefully crafted to convey respect, sanctity, and legitimacy in the unfolding of the ritual.

Most sentences are complex and composed of multiple interrelated clauses that form a rhythmic flow. The repetition of verbs, nouns, or connectors reinforces meaning and creates a poetic cadence that enhances the ritual's solemnity.

For example:

*"Ie inggomiu toonomotuo okambo puutobuno wonua, tudu ipohae kalosara iMekongga peowai wonua sorume"*

(O revered elders and leaders of this land, we come to present the symbols of *Tolaki Mekongga* tradition.)

This declarative sentence functions as a formal act of validation; its utterance signifies a lawful handover of sacred objects. The parallelism in *toonomotuo okambo – puutobuno wonua* highlights the social hierarchy, while the repetition of *wonua* reinforces the connection between people and their ancestral land.

Performative sentences such as:

*"Mopute oai petune tondo kaluku mate kulando mbauapi kokeno"*

(Should the charcoal turn white, the aged coconut sink, and the firearm float.)

represent sacred oaths whose metaphorical impossibility expresses absolute commitment. Linguistically, these conditional-hyperbolic structures legitimize moral responsibility and seal social contracts through symbolic language.

Overall, the sentences in *Mowindahako* serve three primary functions.

1. Validation, marking formal enactments of ritual acts;
2. Legitimation, confirming social and moral agreements; and
3. Moral expression, articulating honesty, duty, and reverence for ancestors.

Through balanced structures, repetition, and rhythm, these sentences reveal how ritual language acts as both a communicative and spiritual instrument, bridging human and sacred realms.

#### (e). Discourse Forms

*Mowindahako*'s discourse structure follows a systematic, layered organization aligned with a ritual sequence. It comprises three main segments, opening, core, and closing, each with distinct linguistic and functional characteristics. This organization mirrors the *Tolaki Mekongga* cosmological view of the social and spiritual balance.

The opening section contains greetings and salutations to the elders and the bride's family, marking the transition into a sacred sphere. A typical utterance, *"Ie inggomiu toonomotuo okambo puutobuno wonua"* ("O esteemed elders and leaders of this land"), sets a tone of respect and harmony.

The core section is the longest, consisting of exchanges between the *tolea* and *pabitara* in the form of statements, requests, and responses rich in symbolism and metaphors. Repetition and parallelism create rhythm and aesthetic beauty, while maintaining coherence. Phrases such as *"laa peneotuomami rongga peneune-une mami"* ("our wish brings us here to convey our intent") embody humility and politeness within the framework of social and spiritual order.

The closing section expresses gratitude, blessings, and oaths, marking the end of the ceremony. Performatives such as *"Mopute oai petune tondo kaluku mate kulando mbauapi kokeno"* ("Should the charcoal turn white and the coconut sink") function as sacred affirmations binding both families in moral and social contract.

In terms of cohesion, *Mowindahako* discourse employs lexical repetition (e.g., *rongga* "we," *pangga* "respect"), spatial deixis (*wonua* "land," *sorume* "orchid land"), and phonological parallelism that produces rhythmic and sacred resonance.

Thus, the *Mowindahako* discourse is not merely a sequence of sentences, but a complete communicative and symbolic structure. Each part performs a complementary role: opening with reverence, negotiating with politeness, and concluding with affirmation and blessing. Altogether, it encapsulates *Tolaki Mekongga* philosophy, which views language as a bridge connecting humans, the natural world, and the divine.

### C. Linguistic Features of the Ritual

#### (a). Phonological Aspects

At the phonological level, the *Mowindahako* ritual speech exhibits distinctive, orderly, and rhythmic sound patterns. These patterns are not incidental; they are products of a long-standing oral tradition. Recurrent sound structures create a strong poetic effect and sacred atmosphere throughout the ceremony. In this sense, language functions not only as a communicative tool, but also as an aesthetic and spiritual medium that amplifies social meaning and ritual grandeur.

The two features are especially salient: association and alliteration. The assumption of the repetition of vowel sounds across words is used to build harmonic flows and highlight key meanings. A clear example appears in *"pangga sara rongga pangga agama,"* where the recurring /a/ produces soothing musicality while conveying respect. Semantically, *pangga* (honor) and *sara* (custom) are paired with *agama* (religion), a signaling balance between customary order and spiritual values. These repeated sounds deepened the sense of sanctity and unity between the twin pillars of *Tolaki Mekongga* life.

Alliteration, the repetition of initial consonants, also appears frequently. In the oath phrase “*mopute oai petune tondo kaluku mate kulando mbauapi kokeno*,” the recurring /m/ and /k/ generate a distinctive rhythm that heightens the dramatic force of the vow. Regular rhythm and patterned repetition serve not only aesthetic ends but also have a ritual function: helping speakers maintain tempo, recite with feeling, and focus collective attention on the sacred force of the words.

Prosodically, *Mowindahako*'s speech demonstrates a marked use of controlled intonation. Utterances often begin in a lower pitch to signal deference during salutations and then rise at critical points to indicate emphasis or affirmation. Shifts in pitch, tempo, stress, and pausing mark the boundary between formal segments and emotionally charged moments, reinforcing respect for interlocutors, especially elders and the counterpart family.

In combination, assonance, alliteration, and measured prosody make *Mowindahako* not merely a ritual communication but a linguistic performance that conveys beauty and spiritual power. Every sound and contour of the voice carries meaning that is understood semantically and emotionally. Phonology thus serves a dual role: enhancing verbal artistry while affirming the sacred and legitimate status of proceedings.

#### (b). *Morphological Aspects*

Morphologically, *Mowindahako* employs rich and distinctive form-building processes that reinforce both aesthetic qualities and cultural meanings of the *Tolaki* ritual language. Dominant processes include reduplication, the retention of archaic forms, and kinship titles/honorifics that are exclusive to ceremonial contexts, clear markers that separate ritual speech from everyday usage, and index the symbolic system embedded in the *Tolaki Mekongga* language.

Reduplication, either full or partial, was especially prominent. Examples include *une-une* (“to speak/express with decorum”) and *toha-tohano* (“to reiterate/affirm repeatedly”). Reduplication intensifies meaning and signals emotional weight or earnest intention. In *laa peneotuomami ronga peneune-une mami* (“our intention brings us to present our purpose”), *une-une* conveys not simply ‘speaking’ but polite, careful articulation. Likewise, *toha-tohano* is often accompanied by requests or acknowledgements to index sincerity and wholeheartedness.

Archaic forms also stand out in this regard. Words such as *wonua* (land, homeland) and *iMekongga* (*Mekongga*, ancestral territory) rarely appear in modern casual speech yet remain vital in rituals. Their use anchors the present to ancestral time and heightens sacrality. *Wonua* denotes more than “territory”: it invokes the spiritual bond between people and ancestral ground, as in *iwonua sorume* (“the Moon Orchid land”).

In addition, ritual morphology features kinship terms and customary titles that signal status and respect: *puutobu* (customary elder), *sangia* (spiritual leader), *anakia* (noble offspring), *tamalaki* (youth representative/young warrior). Precise naming sustains social structure and ritual hierarchy, allowing norms of respect to be enacted through language.

Taken together, the morphology of *Mowindahako* is a culturally representative system. Reduplication encodes politeness and earnestness; archaic forms connect the present with ancestral tradition; and titles and honorifics stabilize hierarchy and authority. Through morphology, *Tolaki* speakers express a worldview in which language is a vessel of value, respect, and cultural continuity.

#### (c). *Syntactic Aspects*

Syntactically, *Mowindahako* displays complex and varied sentence architecture. The principal patterns include passive, imperative, and declarative forms, each aligned with the social function and the ceremonial stage. The two hallmarks of ritual syntax are inversion and structural repetition, which enhance stylistic elegance and underscore formality, propriety and sacredness.

Passive constructions often foreground an act or principle rather than an actor, indexing humility and reverence. In *ieto anolaa tudu sara mami* (“thus is conveyed under our customary rule”), the agent recedes so that the *sara* (custom) becomes the thematic center. Such a passive position customs above individual agency, enacting respect for collective norms, and avoiding self-assertion are considered improper in ritual settings.

Imperatives abound in prayers, requests, and affirmations. For instance, the *teiseako ronga mopute* (“remain in purity”) functions less as a blunt command than as a benedictive directive, a polite, spiritually inflected guidance toward right conduct. Soft intonation and parallel phrasing enhanced these differences and sacral tone.

Declaratives predominate in the core and closing segments of state intentions and formalize acts. *Tudu ipohae kalosara iMekongga* (“we come to present the *kalosara* of *Mekongga*”) is both informational and performative: uttering it enacts the lawful handover of ritual symbols.

Inversion appears when predicates precede subjects, as in *tudu ipohae kalosara iMekongga*, highlighting ritual action rather than the actor as an emblem of ceremonial style. Repetition of clauses or parallel frames maintains rhythmic balance, aids memorability, and amplifies spiritual gravitas.

In sum, the *Mowindahako* syntax embodies politeness, balance, and social hierarchy. Through calibrated sentence types, orderly constituent placement, inversion, and repetition, ritual language becomes both a formal communication and symbolic legitimation, affirming moral order and sacred authority at each stage of the ceremony.

#### (d). *Semantic Aspects*

Semantically, *Mowindahako* is saturated with symbolic, metaphorical, and euphemistic meanings that reflect the *Tolaki Mekongga* values and worldview. Words and phrases perform a double duty as linguistic signs and cultural symbols,

linking language to belief, social structure, and moral order. Meanings are layered: literal messages coexist with embedded references to customs, spirituality, and collective identity.

The symbolic meanings are pervasive. *Kalosara* a sacred rotan circle symbolizes justice, unity, and equilibrium, the highest legal-moral principle in *Tolaki* customary law. *Bato karambau* (“buffalo stone”) symbolizes livelihood capital and economic strength, foundations for family independence. Thus, named objects carry material functions and have social-spiritual significance.

Synonymy and euphemism maintain decorum and underscore sacrality. *Okambo*, *wonua*, and *sorume* can all denote “homeland,” yet *sorume* (“moon orchid”) elevates the reference with aesthetic and spiritual nuance portraying *Mekongga* as a cherished, sacred place.

Metaphors powerfully bind language to culture. *Tusa tongano* (“central pillar”) is not merely an architectural term; it is a metaphor for a social support the customary leader who sustains communal balance. *Matabubuh mepahlua* (“blood flowing in full force”) metaphorically encodes ancestral vitality and spiritual energy transmitted across generations. Within the ritual, these metaphors articulate solidarity, moral strength, and cultural continuity.

The consistent use of symbols, euphemisms, and metaphors reveals a value oriented semantic system. Meanings do not arise arbitrarily; they are forged into tight relationships among words, objects, actions, and beliefs. Each term carries layered references intertwined with the social and cosmological structures. Thus, at the semantic level, *Mowindahako* serves as a medium of local wisdom, where words mirror morality, spirituality, and the *Tolaki Mekongga* worldview.

*D. Categories and Functions of Ritual Language*

The speech used in the *Mowindahako* ritual functions not only as a formal means of communication between customary spokespersons, but also as a symbolic system that embodies the social structure, moral values, and worldview of the *Tolaki Mekongga* people. Language plays a dual role in regulating social interactions while simultaneously manifesting sacredness and cultural aesthetics through linguistic forms. Based on this analysis, the functions of language in this ritual context can be classified into four major categories: representational, informational, phatic, and aesthetic.

TABLE 1  
CATEGORIES AND FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE IN THE *MOWINDAHAKO* RITUAL DISCOURSE

Function	Linguistic Example	Cultural Meaning
Representational	<i>tolea, pabitara, puutobu</i>	It indicates the naming system for social roles and the hierarchical structure of a customary society. Language identifies each participant’s position and responsibility in the ritual process.
Informational	<i>laa peneotuomami ronga peneune-une mami</i>	It expresses the purpose of the visit or participation, usually related to negotiation or customary handover. It emphasizes the clarity of communication in a context governed by honor and respect.
Phatic	Repetition of <i>ronga, pangga</i>	Maintains social cohesion and harmonious interactions. Repetition reinforces politeness and solidarity, creating emotional continuity between speaker and listener.
Aesthetic	Assonance and sound parallelism	This creates a sacred and melodious atmosphere. This function highlights the artistic dimension of ritual language, enriching the spiritual experiences of the ceremony.

This representational function underscores the social order and moral system of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community. Terms such as *tolea* (male spokesperson), *pabitara* (female spokesperson), and *puutobu* (customary elder) designate social positions as well as moral and spiritual responsibilities. Through these linguistic titles, language operates as an instrument for organizing power relations, defining social roles, and affirming the moral balance within the ritual.

The informational function is evident in utterances like *laa peneotuomami ronga peneune-une mami* (“our intention brings us to convey our purpose”), which clarify the communicative intent behind a party’s participation. Such expressions are delivered with caution and with deference to maintain interpersonal harmony. In this way, ritual communication extends beyond the transmission of messages; it embodies the ethics of respect and collective balance.

The function highlights the role of language as a social bond. Repetitions of words like *ronga* (“we”) and *pangga* (“respect”) symbolize solidarity, humility, and commitment to harmonious relations. This pattern of repetition not only reflects the rhythm of speech but also reinforces the sense of communal unity as an essential cultural value in *Tolaki Mekongga* society. Finally, aesthetic function reveals that the *Mowindahako* discourse possesses a pronounced artistic dimension. Through the use of assonance, parallelism, and rhythmic intonation, ritual speech transforms into a linguistic and spiritual performance. The balance between sound and structure produces an atmosphere of reverence, enhancing the sanctity and solemnity of the event.

In essence, the functions of language in the *Mowindahako* ritual are not merely communicative, but also symbolic, social, and spiritual. Language has become a medium that connects humans with customary values, strengthens social bonds, and expresses deep respect for ancestral traditions and cultural heritage.

IV. DISCUSSION

*A. The Relationship Between Language and Culture in Ritual Context*

The findings of this study reveal an interdependent and mutually constitutive relationship between language and culture in the *Mowindahako* ritual of the *Tolaki Mekongga* people within the framework of Cultural Linguistics, as explained by Palmer (1996) and Sharifian (2017). Language does not operate as a neutral system of signs; rather, it serves as a vessel of cultural conceptualization that encodes the values, knowledge, and worldview of its speech community. In the *Mowindahako* ritual, language functions as the primary medium through which collective knowledge, social norms, and spiritual principles are expressed, affirmed, and transmitted across the generations.

According to Palmer (1996), language reflects shared cultural conceptualizations as a collectively constructed way of perceiving and interpreting reality. This is evident in the lexicon of the *Tolaki* ritual language, where terms such as *kalosara* (symbols of unity and justice), *tolea* and *pabitara* (representations of social and gendered roles), and *wonua* and *sorume* (symbols of ancestral land and communal space) convey deeply embedded social meanings. These words function not merely as linguistic labels but also as ideological signifiers articulating systems of value, hierarchy, and moral order within *Mekongga* society.

Sharifian (2017) further argued that language embodies cultural schemas inherited through communicative and ritual practices. In this sense, the *Mowindahako* ritual speech serves as a repository of ancestral knowledge revived through formal and symbolic utterances. The repetitive and formulaic sentence structures in the ritual not only enhance the aesthetic dimension of speech but also reinforce social norms, such as reverence for elders, loyalty to tradition, and balance among humans, nature, and spiritual forces.

This aligns with Koentjaraningrat's (1984) assertion that language is a primary means of cultural transmission. In *Mowindahako*, language acts as an instrument for conveying moral teachings, customary rules, and ethical principles of harmony that have been passed down through the generations. Each utterance delivered by the customary spokespersons (*tolea* and *pabitara*) constitutes not merely an act of communication but a symbolic reaffirmation of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community's attachment to their ancestral values.

Thus, the *Mowindahako* ritual language represents a living embodiment of the social and spiritual order of *Mekongga*. Its multilayered linguistic structure, from phonology to discourse, reflects social balance, cosmological order, and respect for the traditional hierarchy. Language in this ritual context functions not only as a communicative tool, but also as a vehicle for cultural preservation and identity affirmation, ensuring the continuity of collective wisdom amidst modern transformations.

#### B. Representation of Social and Cultural Values

The *Mowindahako* ritual language mirrors the *Tolaki Mekongga* moral system and cultural philosophy. The linguistic structures identified, ranging from words and phrases to full sentences, encode the values of morality, politeness, solidarity, and social harmony that form the foundation of customary life.

As Kramsch (1998) noted, language embodies cultural reality: it not only expresses cultural reality, but also constructs and symbolizes it through linguistic form. In *Mowindahako*, each utterance of prayer, request, or declaration reflects the moral and spiritual order of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community.

For example, the phrase *tusa tongano lipu* ("the pillar of the land") carries a profound metaphorical meaning, symbolizing social balance and justice. The central pillar represents community leaders who sustain harmony and guide collective life, illustrating how language functions as a symbolic system that visualizes moral principles. Similarly, *kalosara* has deep semantic and cultural significance. While materially it refers to a sacred rattan circle used in every ceremony, culturally it symbolizes unity, justice, and the moral law binding the *Mekongga* people together. In ritual speech, *kalosara* is not merely descriptive; it is a performative act reaffirming a community's spiritual and moral attachment to ancestral law.

Recurrent linguistic forms such as *ronga* ("with"), *pangga* ("respect"), and *wonua* ("village, land") emphasize social solidarity and mutual respect. Their repetition serves a rhetorical and emotional function, reinforcing the collective awareness that social life depends on cooperation and mutual obligation. Declarative and formulaic sentences, often spoken in slow, measured rhythms, reflect deep politeness and reverence, situating elders, guests, and women in positions of honor. This linguistic decorum reinforces both hierarchy and social harmony within ritual interactions.

Thus, the linguistic forms in *Mowindahako* serve not only grammatical but also cultural purposes. They embody the three foundational pillars of *Tolaki Mekongga* philosophy: harmony, hierarchy and respect. Harmony is symbolized in *tusa tongano lipu* (the social balance); hierarchy in the roles of *tolea*, *pabitara*, and *puutobu* (customary structure); and respect in the ritualized language of politeness and unity. Through such expressions, language sustains the interconnection between moral principles and everyday practices.

#### C. Ritual Language as a Medium of Cultural Socialization

The *Mowindahako* ritual language functions as a living medium for cultural and moral education in the *Tolaki Mekongga* community. Every utterance conveys ethical teachings, interactional norms, and behavioral codes, shaping the collective awareness of the social and spiritual order that governs communal life. Language operates as a vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge through symbolic and performative communications.

Hymes' (1974) Ethnography of Speaking provides a relevant framework for understanding the social functions of ritual language. According to Hymes, each speech event is embedded within the contextual components summarized in the SPEAKING model: Setting, Participants, Ends, Act sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre.

In *Mowindahako*:

- Setting and Scene includes the sacred ceremonial space and the solemn atmosphere.
- Participants consisted of *Tolea*, *Pabitara*, Puutobu, family members, and the community.
- Ends refer to communicative goals, such as declaring intentions, affirming alliances, and seeking ancestral blessings.
- The act Sequence follows the ritual structure: opening, negotiation, closing, and oath.
- The key indicates a respectful and sacred tone.
- Instrumentalities refer to the archaic *Tolaki* language, which is used exclusively in rituals.
- Norms reflect politeness, respect, and solidarity.
- Genre classifies *Mowindahako* as a performative and aesthetic ritual discourse.

Through its communicative structure, ritual language functions as a form of cultural pedagogy. Repetition, sound parallelism, and traditional terminology serve as tools for internalizing values, such as respect for elders, honesty, cooperation, and social balance. For instance, the repeated use of *ronga* (“we”) and *pangga* (“respect”) performs a phatic function—maintaining emotional connection and social cohesion between participants.

The previously identified linguistic functions—representational, informational, phatic, and aesthetic—correspond directly to the language’s role in cultural socialization. Representational function reaffirms social hierarchy and roles; informational function ensures clarity of intention; phatic function maintains solidarity and harmony; and aesthetic function heightens the spiritual and emotional experience of the ceremony.

Thus, the *Mowindahako* ritual acts as a living system for cultural socialization. Through each speech act, the *Tolaki Mekongga* community preserved its ancestral language, affirmed its collective identity, and reinforced the social ethics rooted in respect, humility, and equilibrium. In Hymes’ terms, every *Mowindahako* speech event is a manifestation of how language forms, maintains, and transmits culture through meaningful communicative acts.

#### D. Symbolism and Cultural Semiotics

The *Mowindahako* ritual is rich in cultural symbols and semiotic representations that articulate the *Tolaki Mekongga* worldview. Every linguistic element—word, phrase, and metaphor—constructs layered meanings that intertwine physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of life. Within the framework of cultural semiotics, as proposed by Hall (1997), language functions as a system of signs through which cultural representations are created, negotiated and sustained.

Linguistic symbols, such as *kalosara*, *karambau*, *tawa-tawa*, and *matabubuh mepahalua*, serve as cultural signs that mediate the relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual forces. *Kalosara*—the sacred rattan circle at the center of every ritual—represents the cosmic order, justice, and moral balance guiding the *Mekongga* worldview. Its circular form symbolizes the unbroken continuity of social relationships, whereas its flexible yet enduring texture signifies adaptability and resilience in upholding communal harmony.

Similarly, *bato karambau* (“buffalo stone”) symbolizes collective strength and livelihoods. Referred to in ritual speech as *opoko toroaha* (“foundation of life”), it stands for hard work, responsibility, and sacrifice for the family and community. Within Hall’s (1997) framework, these representations demonstrate how linguistic signs encode moral and social relations, articulating the interplay between power, economy, and solidarity.

*Tawa-tawa* (“gong”) functions as a sonic symbol of communal unity. Its resonant sound is not merely ceremonial; it acts as a bridge between worlds, linking humans, ancestors, and spiritual entities. As Barker (2004) noted in his concept of collective imagery, cultural symbols such as these create shared meanings that sustain communal identity. The gong’s vibration encapsulates the spiritual rhythm of *Mekongga* life, an audible proof of cultural continuity.

Finally, the metaphor *matabubuh mepahalua* (“flowing life-force”) represents spiritual energy that sustains harmony between humans and the natural world. In cultural semiotics, metaphors function as metasigns—secondary layers of meaning that merge natural and cultural experiences into unified cosmological concepts. Through them, *Mowindahako* narrates the *Tolaki Mekongga* philosophy of balance between the physical and spiritual, the individual, and the collective.

Taken together, the metaphors and symbols in *Mowindahako* form the collective imagery of a harmonious, hierarchical, and sacred world. These linguistic signs embody the moral and spiritual essence of the *Mekongga* culture, reaffirming that true life lies in the balance between customary law, social harmony, and cosmic spirituality.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

Among the *Tolaki Mekongga* people, the ritual language of *Mowindahako* is not merely a means of customary communication but also a cultural sign system that embodies the community’s values, norms, and spirituality. An analysis of its linguistic forms—words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourse—reveals that the structure of this ritual language reflects fundamental cultural concepts such as social balance, hierarchical respect, and cosmological harmony.

Within the framework of Cultural Linguistics (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2017), ritual language represents the cultural conceptualizations embedded in the collective consciousness of the *Tolaki Mekongga* community. Through its representational, informational, phatic, and aesthetic functions, language operates as a medium for transmitting moral values and reinforcing cultural identities.

Linguistic symbols, such as *kalosara*, *karambau*, and *tawa-tawa*, act as cultural signs that affirm the *Tolaki* worldview of unity, justice, and the sacredness of life. Thus, *Mowindahako* is not only a linguistic performance, but also an

ideological and semiotic manifestation of the value system that sustains the social and spiritual life of the *Tolaki Mekongga* people.

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