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An Analysis of Meaning in Alor Folklore (Sulkupei): A Systemic Functional Linguistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the structure of meaning in the Sulkupei folktale from Alor, East Nusa Tenggara, using the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach developed by Halliday. The Sulkupei story contains various moral messages, cultural values, and the social structures of the Alor community, which are manifested through language use. The analysis focuses on the three metafunctions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The findings reveal that the ideational function represents the characters' experiences through material, relational, and mental processes, reflecting actions, identities, and internal conflicts. The interpersonal function highlights power relations and communicative roles among the characters, while the textual function demonstrates cohesive and culturally embedded discourse organization. The story also conveys values such as female purity, family loyalty, spiritual strength, and geographic relations between islands within Alor culture. This study shows that the SFL approach is effective in uncovering the depth of meaning and local value systems in folktales, and it contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage through linguistic analysis.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Folklore is an essential part of oral cultural heritage, rich in meaning, life values, and the identity of a community (Turyani et al., 2024). It reflects social norms, worldviews, and philosophies that have developed within the society from which the stories originate. A notable example of such local cultural richness is Sulkupei, a folktale from Alor, East Nusa Tenggara. This story has lived and evolved within the collective memory of the Alor people and has been passed down from generation to generation through oral tradition. As part of local culture, Sulkupei does not merely present an engaging narrative but also conveys moral, social, and cultural messages that reflect the noble values and

worldview of the local community. Therefore, it is important to examine folktales like Sulkupei more deeply, especially in terms of how meaning is constructed and conveyed through the language used in the text.

In this context, language plays a central role as a carrier and constructor of cultural meaning. In folktales such as Sulkupei, (SK & Putri, 2025) state that language is not merely a tool for delivering the storyline or events in the narrative, but also a medium that represents community ideologies, collective emotions, and prevailing social relationships. Sugiarti et al. (2021) explain that through word choice, sentence structure, and narrative style, folktales can reflect the ways of thinking and living of the Alor people. Therefore, a

linguistic approach is crucial to uncover how meaning is built, constructed, and communicated through language in the text. Linguistic studies enable a deeper reading of the text not only in terms of content but also in terms of the social and cultural functions of the language used (Ubaidillah, 2021). Thus, understanding the language in folktales does not only mean understanding what is told, but also revealing the cultural values embedded within the language structure itself (Kamaruzzaman & Purba, 2025).

To reveal the meanings hidden within the language structure of folktales, one relevant and comprehensive approach is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M.A.K. Halliday (1994). This approach views language as a system of meaning that functions within social and cultural contexts, rather than merely as a neutral tool for communication. SFL emphasizes that every use of language always serves a particular purpose and involves three main metafunctions: ideational (to represent experiences and the external world), interpersonal (to build social relationships and express attitudes), and textual (to organize and structure information cohesively within discourse). Wiratno (2014) further states that these three metafunctions allow for in-depth linguistic analysis to examine how meaning is constructed not only through the content of the story but also through its linguistic structures and choices. In the context of the Sulkupei folktale from Alor, the SFL approach is highly relevant as it can illustrate how traditional narratives represent local cultural realities, establish relationships between the narrator and the audience, and convey cultural values in a socially meaningful and coherent structure.

Although the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach offers a strong framework for analyzing meaning in texts, its application in the study of local folktales—particularly those from Alor—remains very limited. Most previous studies, such as those by Saputri (2016), Anafiah (2015), and Dari & Dermawan (2018), have focused more on the content of the stories, the moral or cultural values conveyed, and the general narrative structure, without thoroughly investigating how the language itself operates in forming and conveying meaning. In fact, analyzing the linguistic structure of the text can offer new insights into how the Alor community constructs their social reality and cultural identity through language. To date, few studies have specifically applied the SFL approach to examine Alor folktales, including Sulkupei. This research gap forms a strong basis for the urgency of this

study, aimed at filling the void in the study of local oral literature through a more directed and systematic functional linguistic perspective.

Based on this gap, the present study becomes crucial as an effort to explore how systemic language structures shape cultural meaning in local folktale texts, specifically Sulkupei from Alor. Using the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach, this research not only aims to uncover the content or values embedded in the story but also to trace how language works in constructing experiences, social relations, and discourse structures that shape the narrative. By focusing on the three metafunctions ideational, interpersonal, and textual this study is expected to contribute meaningfully to the scientific and contextual preservation of local culture. Furthermore, this research also opens up the possibility for applying linguistic approaches in regional literary studies, an area that has so far been underutilized. Thus, this study is not only beneficial for the development of linguistics and literary science but also supports the documentation and revitalization of Indonesia's oral cultural heritage.

In light of the urgency of preserving local culture and the need for more in-depth linguistic analysis, this study focuses on examining the meaning structures in Alor folktales particularly Sulkupei through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The research aims to answer the central question: How can the meaning structures in the Alor folktale Sulkupei be analyzed through the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach? This research question serves as the foundation for exploring the three language metafunctions ideational, interpersonal, and textual in the narrative text, so that it can be revealed how the story not only delivers a narrative message but also constructs and reflects the socio-cultural values of the Alor community. The answers to this question are expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how language functions in constructing meaning within the context of local oral traditions, while also demonstrating how modern linguistic approaches can be employed to explore and preserve cultural heritage passed down through generations.

II. METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a focus on discourse analysis based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as developed by Halliday (1994). The primary data of this research consists of the Sulkupei folktale text, which originates from the oral tradition of the Alor community and was subsequently transcribed into

written form. Data collection was carried out through documentation and literature review, supported by informal interviews with local informants to ensure the authenticity of meaning and cultural context in the story.

The data analysis involved identifying and examining the three metafunctions of language in the text: (1) the ideational function, to explore how experiences and events are represented in the story; (2) the interpersonal function, to understand the relationships and attitudes constructed between the speaker and the listener; and (3) the textual function, to analyze how information is cohesively and coherently organized in the text. Each element in the story was analyzed based on the grammatical and lexical choices used, such as verbal processes, participants, circumstances, modality, and discourse markers.

The aim of this method is to reveal how the structure of language constructs cultural meaning within the folktale text and to demonstrate the relationship between linguistic structure and the socio-cultural context of the Alor community. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation and repeated verification of the local cultural context, ensuring that the analysis results remain accurate and relevant.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Within the framework of the ideational function, the Sulkupei folklore from Alor represents the real-life experiences and social realities of the community through the strong dominance of material processes. Concrete actions such as “planting a stick,” “slaughtering a goat,” “swearing an oath,” and “the sea drying up” illustrate events that shape the storyline and create a dramatic and magical impression typical of traditional oral narratives. These processes not only record physical activities but also construct socio-cultural meanings of sacrifice, struggle, and supernatural powers believed by the people of Alor. Additionally, relational processes are evident in the descriptions of characters, such as the phrase “Puitang is the most beautiful and fragrant girl,” which signifies the identity of the main character as a representation of purity, honor, and the value of women in the local culture. The emphasis on physical attributes and fragrant scent serves not only an aesthetic but also a symbolic function, reinforcing the social meaning of women in Alor’s social relations.

Furthermore, mental processes appear when Puitang becomes aware of her pregnancy and experiences anxiety. Expressions like “thinking,”

“restless,” or “Puitang asked in her heart” indicate that the narrative allows space for the character’s affective aspects and self-awareness, signaling inner conflict and moral dilemmas. This adds psychological depth to the story and shows that the character’s experience is both external and internal. Existential processes are also found in the structure of the story, such as when “the princess was no longer on the tree,” implying the disappearance of an important figure and creating narrative tension. Puitang’s absence triggers a search and redemption effort by her father, thus strengthening the dramatic structure of the story.

Beyond these linguistic processes, the story also presents unique representations of local values. Belief in the dog Lik Lak as a reliable tracker, the power of a parent’s oath capable of splitting the sea, and the offering of moko (Sulkupei) as a bride price in marriage are forms of cultural experiences transformed through language. All these elements form a distinct social reality and demonstrate how language in folklore functions not only to convey events but also to frame belief structures, norms, and the cultural identity of the Alor community.

In terms of the interpersonal function, the Sulkupei story reflects social relationships and communicative positions among characters through language choices, speech forms, and social roles built in dialogue and narrative. One of the clearest examples appears in the dialogue between King Pandai and Puitang, which shows male dominance over women. Utterances such as “My dear Puitang, please come down from the tree because I want to marry you” and “take off your clothes and look” are imperative and invitational forms that leave no room for negotiation, indicating a relational structure that places women as objects of male desire. These word choices reinforce the image of the king’s power as an authoritative figure and highlight the patriarchal system within the cultural construction of the local society. Puitang, who initially refuses but later complies after realizing her pregnancy, reflects the presence of social pressure and the conflict between personal will and binding norms, particularly concerning female honor and dignity.

The interpersonal function is also evident in the actions of Tangei Barei, Puitang’s father, who takes on the role of protector and a figure of both spiritual and social authority within the family. Upon realizing that his daughter is missing, he not only expresses sadness but also performs the symbolic act of “swearing an oath” as an expression of moral power and belief in influencing the universe. This action indicates that

in Alor's social system, authority is not only determined by physical strength or political status but also by spiritual relationships believed to possess magical power. The interpersonal dimension of the oath action shows that language has illocutionary power to change real-world conditions, as seen in the sea drying up as a result of the oath.

Moreover, the presence of the dog Lik Lak as a symbolic character also plays a role in building unique interpersonal relationships between humans and nature, as well as between characters and fate. Although it does not speak, the dog's gestures and actions convey effective non-verbal communication and play a major role in resolving the story's conflict. The dog serves not only as a link between father and daughter but also as an agent of justice and truth, thereby reinforcing relational meaning and collective belief in animal symbols within their lives. Overall, the interpersonal function in the Sulkupei story demonstrates that social relationships are reflected not only in dialogue but also through actions, gestures, and symbolic values that accompany character interactions. The word choices, sentence structures, and communication strategies used in the story reflect dynamics of power, empathy, hope, and social tension inherent in Alor's local culture.

In terms of textual function, the Sulkupei folklore demonstrates cohesive and coherent discourse organization, following a narrative structure commonly found in traditional texts: character introduction, conflict, climax, resolution. The story begins with an explicit orientation of time and place, such as "Long ago in South Alor District, specifically in Siberla Village," which not only provides background information but also helps the reader place the storyline chronologically and geographically. Place markers like "on Pantar Island," "on a kapok tree," and "at the spring near King Pandai's house" support the sequential movement of characters and events.

The use of discourse markers and sentence structure repetition strengthens textual continuity. For example, phrases describing the main character's actions like "swearing an oath," "blood was spilled," "the sea dried up," and "the dog immediately searched for tracks" are used repeatedly and consistently to build the plot and add dramatic emphasis to significant events. This repetition functions not only as textual cohesion but also as a stylistic reinforcement, creating visual and imaginative strength in the reader's or listener's mind.

The story also features parallel structures in the depiction of conflict and resolution. For instance, the conflict that begins in Siberla Village ends with the return of the characters to the same place, forming a complete narrative cycle. Moreover, the sequence of actions—discovery of tracks, revelation of secrets, reunion with the parent, followed by marriage and the giving of belis—demonstrates a logical and directed text organization. Cohesion between sentences is marked by the use of implicit temporal and causal conjunctions, allowing a smooth transition from one event to the next.

Equally important, the presence of local cultural elements such as the dog Lik Lak, the moko as belis, and the sea receding due to an oath enriches the textual structure with cultural content. These symbols not only strengthen the theme and values of the story but also establish a connection between the narrative content and the belief system and social practices of the Alor community. This construction renders the text not merely a sequence of events but a cohesive representation of culture, values, and the symbolic world of the people involved. Thus, the textual function in the Sulkupei story ensures the text is not only easy to follow but also conveys its messages and meanings in a profound and layered manner, reinforcing the position of this folklore as a medium for transmitting cultural and social values through a well-structured and meaningful discourse.

The Sulkupei story is not merely a traditional tale but serves as a medium for representing the rich local culture of the Alor community. Through its structure and use of language, it becomes evident that this narrative conveys the significant role of the family institution in society—as illustrated by the figure of Tangei Barei, the father, who tries to protect his daughter from social threats in a unique way, namely by hiding her atop a thorny kapok tree. This reflects the values of protection, family honor, and social control over female purity. Female purity is also emphasized when Puitang becomes anxious after discovering her pregnancy, indicating that the condition is viewed as a shame to be hidden or redeemed.

Additionally, the narrative strategies in this story reflect the spiritual power believed by the Alor people. Tangei Barei's act of swearing an oath that causes the sea to dry up represents a belief in the power of sacred words and the human relationship with the universe. This shows that the local belief system is not only implicitly present but also structured within the storyline. The presence of the dog Lik Lak as a symbol of search, loyalty, and intermediary of fate further enriches

the symbolic meaning of the story.

The inter-island relationship between Siberla Village in South Alor and Pantar Island illustrates the geographical structure that influences how people interact. This story also promotes social values such as honesty, family loyalty, and respect for tradition, as shown through the offering of moko (Sulkupei) as a bride price, which signifies the validation of social bonds in traditional marriage. When analyzed through the metafunctions of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)—ideational, interpersonal, and textual it is clear that the Sulkupei story is not merely a form of entertainment but also contains a complex system of socio-cultural values. The ideational function builds collective experiences through characters' actions, the interpersonal function reveals power relations and emotions in character dialogue, and the textual function organizes information systematically and coherently so it can be understood within a broader cultural context. Thus, the meaning strategies in this story show that language is not only a tool for storytelling but also a medium for representing a living, rooted culture that shapes the identity of the Alor community through narratives passed down across generations.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Through the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, the Sulkupei folktale from Alor reveals a complex structure of meaning rich in cultural values. The analysis of language metafunctions shows that the ideational function represents the characters' experiences and social realities through material, relational, and mental processes, which depict actions, identities, and emotions. The interpersonal function highlights power relations, social norms, and emotional dynamics among the characters, particularly in the interactions between King Pandai, Puitang, and Tangei Barei. Meanwhile, the textual function organizes the storyline cohesively and coherently, supported by temporal markers, structural repetition, and the use of local cultural symbols such as the moko drum, Lik Lak dog, and the sea that dries up due to an oath. This folktale not only serves as entertainment but also as a means of preserving values such as purity, loyalty, spiritual authority, and interregional relationships within Alor society. Thus, the SFL approach helps reveal that the language in folktales is a living system of cultural representation, shaping the identity and social structure of the local community in a profound and meaningful way.

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