

Linguistic Taboos in the Rungus Culture

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Abstract

In this era of globalisation where intercultural communication occurs on a day-to-day basis, knowledge of linguistic taboos is crucial to avoid miscommunication and culture shocks. The purpose of this study is to investigate the categories and cultural context of the Rungus community's linguistic taboos in relation to their indigenous worldview. This qualitative descriptive study involved interviews with 15 Rungus respondents from Kudat, Sabah. This study revealed five types of linguistic taboos namely morality-related, veneration-related, decorum-related, religion-related, and fear-related linguistic taboos. The cultural context of these linguistic taboos is based on the belief system where everything revolves around keeping the peace with fellow humans as well as the spirits. The cultural context can also be described using common elements in indigenous worldviews such as dynamic balance, kinships extending beyond the human realm, community, and reciprocity.

Keywords: *Linguistic taboos, Rungus, Indigenous worldview, Culture, Language.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Taboos arise from societal restrictions on behaviour that can cause discomfort, harm, or injury (Allan & Burridge, 2006). They are often matters that are avoided and forbidden to be talked about or even carried out. Trudgill (2000), defines taboo as:

Taboo can be characterized as being concerned with behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behaviour which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner. In language, taboo is associated with things which are not said, and with words and expressions which are not used (p.18).

Linguistic taboos refer to words, phrases, or topics that are prohibited from being spoken because they may evoke feelings of discomfort, shame, or embarrassment (Aziz et al., 2020). Fakuade et al. (2013) stated that linguistic taboos are lexical items that are considered obscene, offensive and shocking. They may also include sacred language elements, which are to be avoided outside the context of sacred rituals. Barus et al. (2018) state that linguistic taboos are words, expressions, or utterances that are prohibited in order to maintain politeness and social harmony, as well as to prevent any potential harm to the speaker. In some cultures, linguistic taboos are also believed to bring other worldly consequences which includes sickness, bad luck and even death brought upon them by the spirits (Fakuade et al., 2013).

According to Niraula et al. (2022) every culture limits the use of certain words or parts of a language in public conversation due to social norms that deem them obscene or disruptive to the

social, religious, and ethical values of the community. Various factors such as socio–physical setting, speaker-listener relationship, word choices, and the culture of origin determine what is regarded as offensive (Niraula et al., 2022). Besides that, the beliefs and norms of a society may also influence the function, usage and prohibitions of the language (Niraula et al., 2022). A lexical item becomes a linguistic taboo within the specific context assigned to it by members of a community. These contexts are often shaped by the community’s belief system and indigenous worldview (Gould et al., 2019).

In this era of globalisation where intercultural communication occurs on a day-to-day basis, knowledge of linguistic taboos is crucial (Martinez, 2022). It is important to be aware of the linguistic taboos of different communities to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts, especially now that technology has extended global communication.

Although there are many studies done on the topic of linguistic taboos, the linguistic taboos of the indigenous groups in Borneo are still less understood, including that of the Rungus community in Sabah, Malaysia. For instance, the works of Altabaa and Fadzir (2022) on Malay linguistic taboos, Morni et al. (2009) on the Linguistic Taboos of the Malay and Ibans of Sarawak, and Suhami et al (2009) on the Linguistic Taboos of the Jakun tribe provide valuable insights into different cultural contexts. While previous studies has examined certain aspects of the Rungus culture and language (Low, 2013; Low & Majumah, 2014; Appell, 1986; Appell & Appell, 2003; King, 1984), little is known about linguistic taboos in the Rungus community. To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first study to investigate linguistic taboos among the Rungus of Borneo, thereby addressing a significant gap in regional and cross-cultural studies of language and culture. Thus, this study aimed to explore the linguistic taboos of the Rungus culture by analysing the categories and cultural context of its linguistic taboos in relation to their indigenous worldview.

1.1. Types of Linguistics Taboos

Studies on linguistic taboos revealed several reoccurring themes, whereby most cultures around the world prohibits its speakers from directly mentioning words or topics related to: (1) body parts, bodily functions and body effluvia, (2) words related to sex or any other sexual related behaviours, and (3) religion and belief related words (Aliakbari & Raeesi, 2015; Barus et al., 2018; Dilaimy & Omar, 2018; Fakuade et al., 2013; Jaelani et al., 2021; Lei, 2016; Qanbar, 2011; Sari, 2020; Waenawae & Huda, 2016; Yang, 2020). In addition to the three categories, there is also the kinship category which is found in the studies by Khan and Parvaiz (2010), Barus et al. (2018) and Qanbar (2011).

Besides taboos related to bodily part, sex and religion, as well as kinship, there are also taboos related to curses, and taboos on matters related to disease or sickness and death (Lei, 2016). Taboos related to curses refer to vulgar words that are considered inappropriate for public use, as they may create unpleasant or offensive imagery (Lei, 2016) while taboos related to diseases or sickness and death exist because speaking of death and illness may be uncomfortable and at times, impolite (Lei, 2016). In Sudanese, this is known as a taboo of delicacy, representing a linguistic attempt to avoid direct mention of distressing topics like illness and death (Jaelani et al., 2021).

Although such taboos are common across many cultures, some are culturally specific—recognized only by members of particular communities and closely linked to their cultural identity. For instance, in Yemen and Iran, (1) mentioning the first name of a female family member in public or to an outsider, and (2) giving items to the poor, the needy, or friends during social occasions are considered taboos (Aliakbari & Raees, 2015; Qanbar, 2011). This is because both Yemeni and Iranian societies are patrilineal and patriarchal, with Islamic teachings and values deeply embedded within their social systems. The taboo against uttering a female family member’s first name remains dominant in Iranian society, reflecting the continued perception of male social superiority. Another example is among the Karonese of Indonesia, whereby certain members of two families connected by marriage are prohibited from addressing or interacting with each other (Barus et al., 2018). Unlike the Yemeni, and Iranian contexts, this taboo does not stem from Islamic traditions but represents a distinctive feature of indigenous cultural practice—one that may also be relevant to the present study.

Some words may not be taboo words in their original forms and meaning and are neutral, but due to the context when it is being used, it may be considered tabooed. Non-taboo words are described as words which are neutral in meaning in everyday speech but gain taboo status due to certain contexts. In the context of the Yemeni, religion played a role in making these words taboo. For

example, animals which are associated with impurity and uncleanness such as dogs and pigs are considered swear words (Khan & Parvais, 2010). This was also discovered in Iraqi Arabic linguistic taboos whereby; some non- taboo words became taboo due to the connotations attributed to them due to social views and frequent usage in swearing.

Different cultures may perceive linguistic taboos differently. What is considered taboos in one society, may not be so in another. For instance, in English-speaking countries, to ask private questions such as someone's age, family income, properties and religious beliefs are considered as impolite behaviour but not so in the Chinese community (Lei, 2016). Taboos of names exist in the Chinese language because calling the name of elders directly is considered impolite. It is also forbidden to name a child with the same names as an elder, emperor or president. In contrast, these two things are seen as a sign of intimacy in English-speaking countries. Another example is the number 13 which is considered as a taboo number in English communities, while in Chinese communities, the number four is considered as a taboo number due to the similar pronunciation with the word "death" and the social connotation connected to the number (Lei, 2016). Finally, taboos of colours and animals are different because they symbolize different things in the respective cultures. For example, red is a lucky colour in Chinese but is seen as the colour of blood and threatened lives in English. Owls are a bad sign in Chinese culture but are a sign of wisdom in English speaking countries (Lei, 2016).

Fakuade et al. (2013) and Barus et al. (2018) divided linguistic taboos based on their themes which are (i) morality-related, (ii) decorum-related, (iii) veneration-related, (iv) religion- related and (v) fear-related. The five types or themes of linguistic taboos can also be re-grouped into 2 broader categories which are (i) linguistic taboos with euphemisms and (ii) linguistic taboos without euphemisms, based on their study of linguistic taboos in Igbo society (Barus et al., 2018; Fakuade et al., 2013).

1.2. Worldview

Worldview may be defined as:

...a collection of attitudes, values, stories and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. Worldview is expressed in ethics, religion, philosophy, scientific beliefs and so on (Sire, 2004 in Gray, 2011).

The major themes surrounding indigenous worldviews are (1) the idea of dynamic balance; (2) sentience, consciousness and kinships extending beyond the human world; (3) radical individualism and community-ism; and (4) reciprocity, gratitude, and an attitude of giving and receiving gifts (Gould et al., 2019).

The concept of dynamic balance emphasizes holistic harmony and balance as the ultimate goal of human efforts (Tinker, 2015 in Gould et al., 2019). This balance encompasses both human and non-human entities. Additionally, sentience, consciousness, and kinship are seen as extending beyond the human realm. According to King (1990), many indigenous cultures regard other beings as part of their family. The idea of community-ism suggests that personal balance is inherently connected to the relational context of the broader community (Tinker, 2015 in Gould et al., 2019). Reciprocity, gratitude, and the practice of giving and receiving gifts underscore the importance of mutual exchange and appreciation in relationships with non-human entities (Kimmerer, 2013; Tinker, 2015 in Gould et al., 2019). Whyte et al. (2015) introduced the concept of "renewing relatives," which integrates the ideas of reciprocity and kinship while highlighting the importance of mending broken relationships (Whyte et al., 2015).

2. THE RUNGUS COMMUNITY OF SABAH

The majority of the Rungus ethnic resides in the Kudat, Kota Marudu and Pitas districts of Sabah, Malaysia. The Rungus prefer to be known as the Momogun ethnic group to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups in Sabah. In the Momogun ethnic group, there are ethnic groups such as the Rungus, Lingkabau, Nulluw, Gonsomon, Sindapak, Garo, Marigang and more. The Rungus is the largest ethnic within the Momogun ethnic group (Appell, 1963) and there are five

language groups within the Rungus language itself, which are the Nulluw, Gonsomon, Rungus, Pilapazan and Gandahon (Low, 2013). This study focused on the Kudat district because it has the highest density of Rungus community compared to Pitas and Kota Marudu (Majumah, 2015).



Figure 1. The map of Sabah and the location of the Kudat district

According to Low and Majumah (2014), the Rungus ethnic believe that the world is inhabited by both good and bad spirits. The daily lives of the Rungus are always tied to a relationship between the human world and the supernatural world in which they strive to keep the balance and harmony between the inhabitants of the human realm and spirit realm. Thus, their linguistic taboos and way of life are tied to this belief. The traditional belief system of the Rungus ethnic, before the arrival of Christianity and Islam in North Borneo, is called Bbiruhui (Low & Majumah, 2014). Appell and Appell (2003) stated that the Rungus community value peace in their community. On top of their belief in the supernatural, the Rungus community also ensure that their community, led by the village chief and elders, uphold a standard of traditional values and morality in which some warrants punishment if transgressed.

The Rungus culture is based on their belief system that on top of maintaining the harmony in their human community, they must also maintain the harmony with the spirits around them. Thus, certain utterances are deemed taboo by traditional values and beliefs which guide the community's interactions and way of life.

Based on their study on the relationship between the Rungus Bbahul (a type of folk poetry) and the existence of the folk religion Bbiruhui, Low and Majumah (2018) discovered that the Rungus believed in the existence of a creator and the many ranks of spirits that roam the Earth which are recorded in their oral traditions such as Bbahul. These beliefs then contributed to their many taboos, including linguistic taboos. For example, certain Bbahul cannot be recited by normal people and can only be recited by the female shaman during healing ceremonies (Low & Majumah, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design with qualitative research method to explore the linguistic taboos in the Rungus language by studying the types and cultural context of linguistic taboos in the Rungus language.

Interviews were conducted with 15 informants, eight females and seven males, from the Rungus community of Kudat, Sabah from August to September 2023. The informants were aged above 50 years old, lived in the Kudat district of Sabah and their first language must be Rungus. This was necessary because the informants' first language is the language which they were most exposed to, thus, developing a deeper contextual knowledge of the language (Sulpizio et al., 2019). It is mainly because they have lived through the lens of the language for a long period of time thus, they are more familiar with its nuances. All of the respondents have traditional Rungus upbringing thus, having firsthand experience of the Rungus cultural norms, practices and beliefs.

Besides that, they were also knowledgeable about the Rungus culture. Each of them is knowledgeable in the Rungus culture either due to traditional upbringing, research, involvement in the native court, *bbolizan* training, or translation works. The names of the respondents were kept anonymous for the sake of this study. Table 1 is a summary of the informants:

Table 1. Summary of informants

No	Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation/Community role
1.	Respondent 1	Female	64	Linguist/Researcher
2.	Respondent 2	Female	53	Teacher/Translator
3.	Respondent 3	Male	50	Teacher/Translator
4.	Respondent 4	Female	73	Farmer/Former <i>Bbolizan</i>
5.	Respondent 5	Female	74	Farmer
6.	Respondent 6	Female	53	Farmer
7.	Respondent 7	Male	78	Farmer
8.	Respondent 8	Male	66	Vice President of the Sabah Momogun Rungus Association (SAMORA); Former Representative in the Matunggong Native Court
9.	Respondent 9	Female	59	Farmer
10.	Respondent 10	Male	65	Representative in the Matunggong Native Court
11.	Respondent 11	Female	57	Teacher/Translator
12.	Respondent 12	Female	87	Former <i>Bbolizan</i>
13.	Respondent 13	Male	65	Farmer
14.	Respondent 14	Male	57	Researcher
15.	Respondent 15	Male	60	Researcher

In collecting the data for this study, a list of linguistic taboos based on Fakuade et al. (2013) and Barus et al. (2018) was created to be used as a guide when interviewing the informants. A series of interviews were conducted in Rungus with the informants to gain information regarding these taboo words. The informants were asked questions such as: What do you call this word in Rungus? What are words/phrases that cannot be uttered in Rungus? Since we cannot say the word/phrase, what do we need to say when we need to address it? Why are they considered taboo? What are the consequences if these words/phrases are uttered? Follow up questions were asked according to the responses of the respondents to get more in-depth explanations. Each interview session was about one to two hours in duration.

The linguistic taboos were then categorised based on the division suggested by Fakuade et al. (2013) and Barus et al. (2018) as shown in Figure 2:

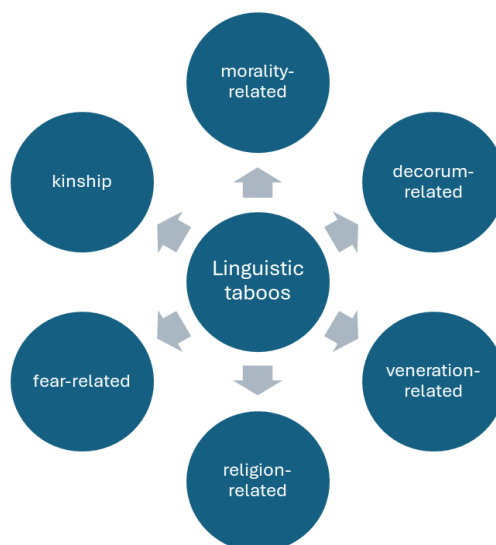


Figure 2. Categorization of linguistic taboos (Fakuade et al., 2013; Barus et al., 2018)

1. morality-related; words and phrases that are deemed as immoral or bringing shame if uttered
2. decorum-related; words and phrases that are avoided to maintain politeness
3. veneration-related; words and phrases that are taboo because the utterance will show disrespect towards the hearer
4. religion-related; words and phrases that are taboo due to the culture's belief system
5. fear-related; words and phrases that are taboo because of the fear of the consequences that follow after its utterance
6. kinship; words and phrases related to family.

4. RESULTS

The Rungus linguistic taboos from this study are categorised and discussed based on the categories of linguistic taboos by Fakuade et al. (2013) and Barus et al. (2018).

4.1. Morality-related Linguistic Taboos

Linguistic taboos that fall under this category are considered not suitable to be uttered in public because it is impolite or causes discomfort towards others (Fakuade et al., 2013). Words under this category are also seen as vulgar, dirty and insulting thus, euphemisms are often used to allude to the words and phrases or people often avoid saying them completely. Table 2 shows linguistic taboos in Rungus which could be categorized as morality-related because all the respondents stated these words to be “dirty” and inappropriate to be said in public.

Table 2. Morality-related Rungus linguistic taboos

No.	Rungus Word / Phrases	English Translation
1.	<i>Sobbu</i>	Pee
2.	<i>Bbusul</i>	Buttock
3.	<i>Tumai</i>	To defecate
4.	<i>Taii</i>	Feces
5.	<i>Turoi</i>	Female reproductive organ
6.	<i>Tolli</i>	Male reproductive organ
7.	<i>Susu</i>	Breasts
8.	<i>"Gurasan!"</i>	"Fuck you!" (Contextual)
9.	<i>"Turoi nu!"</i>	"Your pussy!"
10.	<i>"Tolli nu!"</i>	"Your dick!"
11.	<i>"Bbusul nu!"</i>	"Your ass!"
12.	<i>Miizut</i>	Sexing
13.	<i>Luvang bbusul</i>	Anus
14.	<i>Togitung</i>	Pubic hair

According to Respondent 5, certain words relating to bodily fluids such as *sobbu* (urine) and *taii* (feces) are still excusable if said directly due to emergency cases or for clarity. However, it is rude and immoral to say it in the presence of food because those hearing it will associate the food with those dirty images of bodily fluids. In the Rungus language, the act of saying dirty words in front of food is called *manasakau*.

However, there are morality-related linguistic taboos that must never be uttered, such as *Gurasan*, *Turoi nu*, *Tolli nu*, and *Bbusul nu*, as these expressions are used to insult others. Respondent 7 and Respondent 8 mentioned that these terms are forbidden because saying them is seen as 'unclothing' the person the words are spoken to. For example, the phrases *Turoi nu* and *Toli nu* literally means "Your pussy!" and "Your dick!" respectively. However, it could be contextually translated as "Fuck you!" or "Fuck yourself!" which in this case are curse words. In the Rungus culture, it is both insulting and tainting to mention the private parts in this context i.e swearing. In the Rungus language, this is known as *mongimbuh*.

According to Respondent 10, the use of morality-related linguistic taboos in the Rungus language could even be punishable by the native law of the community. The punishments vary according to the offence, and the age difference between the offender and offended. Typically, the offence is weighed heavier if the person being offended is older than the offender. Punishments are often in the form of a fine given by the offender to the offended which could be in the form of precious brass materials such as *gadul* (brass container), and *sumbul* (brass betel leaf container).

4.2. Decorum-related Linguistic Taboos

Another category of linguistic taboos in the Rungus language are those which are decorum-related. Decorum-related linguistic taboos are sometimes confused with morality-related linguistic taboos. However, the main difference are decorum-related linguistic taboos are words that hurt others' feelings because they devalue the thing being referred to (Fakuade et al., 2018) while morality-related linguistic taboos are words which are considered vulgar, dirty and insulting to the cultural norm of the community. Table 3 shows these types of words. Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 stated that in the Rungus language, this type of linguistic taboos is often present in the form of name calling, mocking or insults (non-vulgar). However, there are also decorum-related linguistic taboos which are related to the listener's flaws. In some cases, the speaker may not have intended to insult or mock the listener, but the listener may still be offended by the words. Thus, euphemisms are often used to avoid saying the words directly. For example, *nosimban* (he/she was change (mentally) or *amu osihat* (not well) is in place of the word crazy.

Table 3. Decorum-related Rungus linguistic taboos

No.	Rungus word / phrases	English Translation
1.	<i>Lovong</i>	Stupid
2.	<i>Mulau</i>	Crazy
3.	<i>Golomu / Olomu</i>	Fat person / Fat
4.	<i>Obbul</i>	Lazy
5.	<i>Asamod oku dikau</i>	I love you
6.	<i>Bollou</i>	Blind
7.	<i>Kakung</i>	Lame
8.	<i>Pukung</i>	Crippled
9.	<i>Napatai</i>	Dead

Decorum-related linguistic taboos exist so as to not offend the listener. In the Rungus culture, this type of linguistic taboo mainly consists of name-calling and descriptions said as a way of mocking someone. For example, as stated by Respondent 1 and Respondent 2, one should not call someone with a curvy body type *Golomu* which roughly translates to “Fatty” because it is rude and disrespectful.

Respondent 1 stated that the people of the Rungus community are taught and disciplined from a young age to speak politely so as to not offend others. The Rungus community is very tight knit and all works such as harvesting, building houses and wedding reception management are done as a collective group in a particular village so, maintaining the harmony among members of the community is of utmost importance.

Other than being considered as impolite, calling someone as *Mulau*, which translates to “Crazy” is considered cursing the listener to become mad despite their mental state being sound. Respondent 4 and Respondent 6 stated that spirits, especially the rogon that dwells close among humans, can hear every word the members of the community say. The Rungus community avoids calling others *mulau* (crazy) or *lovong* (stupid) because evil spirits like the rogon might hear it and do something to make either the speaker or the listener or both become the words they said or hear.

In Western cultures, decorum-related linguistic taboos are also words that could possibly offend another person because the word is related to their flaws or negative attributes despite it not being said to them directly. The Rungus language does not forbid its people from saying words such as ‘bald’ in the presence of a bald person or ‘blind’ in the presence of a blind person so long as there is no intention of mocking and insulting present. However, if the speaker is made aware that saying such words is a sensitive topic to the listener, it would be best to not say them.

A unique result found in the data collected is how saying “I love you” directly is seen as impolite and taboo in the Rungus language. According to Respondent 2, Respondent 3, and Respondent 8, the phrase “I love you” does exist in the Rungus language which is *Asamod oku dikau*. There is also a more modern version which is *Ozi oku dikau* which means “I like you”. However, the respondents also stated that directly declaring your love for someone with words such as those towards a lover, spouse or family member, is deemed arrogant. In the olden days, one would never say they love someone because they show it through action. Therefore, it is taboo to say “I love you” because if those words have no proof thus it rings hollow. In the Rungus culture, love is best shown through lifelong acts of service and actions. Respondent 4 added to the above points by stating that perhaps another reason the Rungus community does not say ‘I love you’ is that, in the olden days, most of them did not marry for love but through arranged marriage and with a sense of responsibility. Thus, the words ‘I love you’ never developed until much later when arranged marriage became uncommon but due to the long history, the words are still not said directly.

4.3. Veneration-related Linguistic Taboos

Veneration-related linguistic taboo is another category found in the Rungus language. According to Msuya (2017), veneration-related linguistic taboos exist to give respect to certain classes of people. Veneration-related linguistic taboos are forbidden to be uttered because the community respects the

person or spirits whose name cannot be mentioned directly. Table 4 shows the types of veneration-related linguistic taboos.

Table 4. Veneration-related Rungus linguistic taboos

	Rungus word / phrase	English Translation
1.	<i>Ngaran tivanon</i>	Name of father-in-law
2.		Name of mother-in-law
3.		Name of father-in-law's siblings
4.		Name of mother-in-law's siblings
5.		Name of the parents of the in-laws
6.		Name of the first cousins of the in-laws
7.		Name of the second cousins of the in-laws
8.		Name of the third cousins of the in-laws
9.	<i>Sombila</i>	The <i>rogon</i> of homes
10.	<i>Bintingavan</i>	The <i>rogon</i> above
11.	<i>Rinumindob</i>	An earth <i>rogon</i>
12.	<i>Rumana</i>	Another type of earth <i>rogon</i>
13.	<i>Pampang</i>	The <i>rogon</i> of large rocks
14.	<i>Sorumbou</i>	The <i>rogon</i> of rain
15.	<i>Sinakampang</i>	Male <i>rogon</i> / <i>Rogon</i> of fathers
16.	<i>Sinimbullang</i>	Female <i>rogon</i> / <i>Rogon</i> of mothers
17.	<i>Tutumollong</i>	A type of river <i>rogon</i>
18.	<i>Rusod</i>	<i>Rogon</i> of houses
19.	<i>Masanggong</i>	<i>Rogon</i> of the kitchen
20.	<i>Kinoringan</i>	God of Creation
21.	<i>Monontog / Monsusupu</i>	Deities of Birth and Protection
22.	<i>Magolungung / Moginadapu</i>	Deities of Luck and Prosperity
23.	<i>Yobituon / Oburindang</i>	Deities of Agriculture
24.	<i>Ponizung / Garaumandak</i>	Deities of Marriage
25.	<i>Bbambarazon</i>	The Paddy Spirit
26.	<i>Bbuhazo</i>	Crocodile

The Rungus community is not divided by class, but certain members of the community are honored and respected, thus uttering their names is considered taboos. These groups of people usually consist of elders, in-laws and leaders in the community. The Rungus community consists of very tight knit family relations thus, in-laws do not only apply to the mothers- and fathers-in-law but also the siblings and cousins of the in-laws. Respondent 9 mentioned that in the olden days, this rule was so strict to the point that words even remotely similar to the in-laws' name were also forbidden. For example, the name of the in-law is Ahau, therefore words such as *magahau* (to celebrate) and *momuhau* (to sweep the floor) were forbidden.

According to Respondent 4, in the Rungus culture, one must never utter the real name of their mother- and father-in-law because it is *kovusung*. Basically, *kovusung* means it causes them to be punished by the spirits for being disrespectful. *Kovusung* usually manifests in the stomach of the disrespectful person to expand then explode. When the respondents were asked as to why saying the name of the in-laws is disrespectful, most of them did not have the answer. It has been a practice and belief for as long as they can remember. However, Respondent 10 mentioned that it is possibly because the prohibition serves as a constant reminder to not talk badly or mock one's in-laws so, when one does say the name of their in-laws directly, it gives the impression that they already talked bad about the in-laws and thus, it is considered disrespectful.

In addition, the Rungus community also respects the name of spirits and kinship that transcends the human world. According to Respondent 8, the Rungus believed that all things in the world are

inhabited by a spirit or are spirits in itself. There are different types of spirits based on their ranking, duty and dwellings in the Rungus traditional belief system (Majumah, 2015). In the Rungus belief system, the five main god and deities believed to rule over the realms are namely:

- *Kinoringan* (also known as *Minamangun*); the God of Creation
- *Monontog / Monsusupu*; Deities of Birth and Protection
- *Magolungung / Moginadapu*; the Deities of Luck and Prosperity
- *Yobituon / Oburindang*; the Deities of Agriculture
- *Ponizung / Guraumandak*; the Deities of Marriage

The deities' names come in pairs because in some stories, it is said that they are married couples. The deities or spirits that work under *Kinoringan* are known as the *Sambavon*. These deities are also referred to with different names according to their respective area of work such as the *Bbambarazon* (Paddy Spirit) as well as the other four main deities stated above. A rank lower than the *Sambavon* are the *Llumaag* who communicates directly with their chosen *Bbolizan* (female shaman). Other than that, there are also spirits that reside in everything in nature and even parts of the Rungus longhouse, known as *rogon*. Each type of *rogon* has its own name. Majumah (2015) stated that *rogon* are malicious spirits and easily angered.

Majumah (2015) stated that when analyzing the cultural context behind Rungus linguistic taboos it is important to remember that the Rungus people believe in the existence of spirits thus, all their daily conducts revolve around keeping the peace not only among their human community but also to the spirits of the realm; both in the human world and the spirit world. One of the daily conducts that revolve around this belief is the Rungus linguistic taboos.

Other than that, there are also names of powerful spirits that must not be uttered casually. Spirits such as *Sombila* and *Bintingavan* were known as two of the most powerful *rogon* thus, their names were to be respected. If one were to say them casually to brag or mock, bad things will fall upon them. The name of the Paddy Spirit is also something to be respected thus, instead of calling the spirit by their true name, which is *Bbambarazon*, the Rungus people tend to call them *Odu-Odu*. *Odu* in English means 'grandmother' or 'ancestor'. *Odu-Odu* is thus, a nickname for the *Bbambarazon* to acknowledge them as respected elders of the community.

Last but not least, the Rungus community also respects the name of kinship that transcends the human world. For example, in some parts of the Matunggong area of Kudat, there are families with an inherited legend of an ancestor named Gundari. Respondent 2, Respondent 5 and Respondent 10 are some of those who inherited the legend. They said that, in the legend, Gundari was the daughter of a human mother and a spirit father. Her father was able to shape shift into both human and crocodile thus, Gundari was born with skin covered in scales. Therefore, her descendants are forbidden to mention the word *bbuhazo* which means crocodile because it is deemed disrespectful to Gundari's relatives from the other realm. It is disrespectful to say the word *bbuhazo* directly because they are considered elders by the community. Thus, someone who is of lower familial rank cannot say their name casually much like how most Asian culture do not call their elders by name (Lei, 2016). Instead, the descendants call them *Odu-Odu*.

4.4. Religion-related Linguistic Taboos

Rungus Linguistic Taboos. Figure 3 shows the religion-related linguistic taboos in the Rungus culture. These linguistic taboos are forbidden according to the belief system of the Rungus people. Since the traditional Rungus believes that spirits inhabit all things in the world which includes forests, rivers, and even the longhouse where they lived, members of the community are careful so that their words do not provoke or upset the spirits around them. The mention, utterance or execution of any of the linguistic taboos in Table 4 is feared to cause misfortune and disasters.

While morality-related and decorum-related linguistic taboos mainly deal with consequences from the human community, religion-related linguistic taboos deal with the consequences from the spirits that hear their words. Similar to the Igbo religion, the Rungus also believe that everything that say have their power and consequences (Fakuade et al., 2013). Respondent 12 and Respondent 13 mentioned that the consequences of religion-related linguistic taboos include bad luck, illness and even death.



Figure 3. Religion-related Rungus linguistic taboos

Linguistic taboos under this category are very context specific because there are rules, discipline and traditions for all aspects of life including, eating, hunting, harvesting, healing rituals and more. For example, saying no to offered food causes one to get a stomachache because it is believed to offend the spirits. Respondent 11 stated that one's refusal shows ungratefulness to the person who prepared the food and that in itself upsets the spirits. If one must leave in a hurry without eating, then they must at least touch the food or take one bite of rice. Other than that, mentioning how delicious the food looks, or taste will also cause stomachaches because the *rogon* around them can hear it and start questioning why they are not given any as offerings. If this happened, Respondent 10 stated that the way to cure it would be to say, *Agazo dikau, opodok dohon* (The bigger piece is yours, the smaller one is mine) as a way of offering some food to the spirits. This helps appease them thus healing the stomachache.

Another example is whistling at night. According to Respondent 13, whistling is considered a linguistic taboo because whistling is believed to be the language of *rogon* (or a variation of it) thus, whistling at night will cause the spirits to think someone is calling them. Once they find out they were called for no reason, they become angry and cause harm to the person who whistled.

Respondent 4, Respondent 6 and Respondent 7 stated that bragging before a hunting or fishing trip will cause one to not have any catch for the day or an accident will happen during the trip. This is a form of a jinx in Rungus called *osulang*. Respondent 7 explained that the spirits are always listening in on humans thus, there is a constant possibility that a few spirits hear the brag, decide they do not like the person then, jinx them. Often times, it is the *rogon* type of spirit that is believed to enjoy doing this to humans.

There are also seasonal, occasional and location-based religion-related linguistic taboos given by the respondents. Respondent 8 explained that the Rungus community forbids the people from talking about death during the harvest season because it scares the Paddy Spirit, *Bbambarazon*. The people are

also not allowed to ask riddles, known as *sundait*, outside of harvest season displeases the Paddy Spirit, *Bbambarazon*. They believed that the Paddy Spirit, are very sensitive and they are simply particular about certain things (Respondent 8 and Respondent 10).

One unique discovery from the results is how saying the real name of a child during or after a healing ritual might cause complications. The real name of the child is not taboo to begin with, but it becomes taboo after a specific healing ritual is done. Respondent 4 and Respondent 7 recalled how some children were prone to getting sick back in the day and it was believed it was because spirits, specifically rogon, were trying to claim them as their own. Therefore, the Bbobolizan will heal them by telling the parents and everyone around them to never call the child by their real name ever again then, convince the spirits that is not the child they wanted. For example, the child could be a girl named Konduruhan so the extreme way of convincing the spirits to not take their child is by naming her a name that makes the spirits think she is a boy like, Tollion. It is extreme because the name Tollion has the words for the male genital in it.

Words and phrases under religion-related linguistic taboos are forbidden so that the people can stay in harmony with the spirits. If the spirits are treated with respect, they will not bother the people and perhaps even offer help.

4.5. Fear-related Rungus Linguistic Taboos.

Last but not least are fear-related linguistic taboos in the Rungus language. The linguistic taboos in Figure 4 are categorized as fear-related because people fear even saying these words due to the fatal consequences (Fakuade et al., 2013). Thus, they are hardly spoken freely in the Rungus culture. According to all of the respondents, even the mere act of acknowledging something then attempting to create euphemisms for fear-related linguistic taboos are already enough to trigger the consequences.



Figure 4. Fear-related Rungus linguistic taboos

These fear-related linguistic taboos are often closely connected to religion-related linguistic taboos since both involve the possible consequences by an otherworldly power. While religion-related linguistic taboos are taboo as a way to respect spirits, fear-related ones are taboo because it is believed to bring disaster and deadly consequences. In fact, most of the fear-related linguistic taboos can belong

in both fear-related and religion-related types of linguistic taboos. Spirits were believed to be everywhere thus; the people do not know whether the ones listening are good or evil spirits. Respondent 8 stated that the fear stems from the fact that mentioning something bad will cause it to happen because an evil spirit heard it.

For example, saying the name of spirits or ghosts is forbidden because it is believed that the spirits can hear every time their name is uttered thus, there is a possibility that they will answer the assumed summon. Once the spirit realizes that they have been summoned without reason, their anger will cause disease and disaster to the person that uttered their name.

An example given by Respondent 8 is that telling someone to die during a fit of anger is taboo because although perhaps one did not actually want the person to die, a spirit may have heard it and will make it happen. Thus, the person who said it is considered the murderer. Another example is acknowledging seeing or smelling something weird while being out at sea or in the forest. Respondent 6 explained that these anomalies are usually signs of the presence of spirits. Therefore, acknowledging the oddities by informing the spirits that people know they are there thus, they become more motivated to bother or even cause harm. Meanwhile, mentioning the sound of animals or worse, imitating the sound of animals actually motivates the spirits related to animals to make them truly appear.

Based on the results, there is one linguistic taboo that has not been found in previous literatures. In the Rungus culture, people are not allowed to mention the black birthmark on someone's tongue because that will cause bad luck, which often times end in death, to the person with the birthmark. Respondent 5 said during the interview that people born with the black mark on the tongue are known as *Hagavo*. She stated that *Hagavo* are special people favoured by the forest spirits. Each has their own special attribute. For example, animals such as deers, squirrels and monkeys would willingly offer themselves to the *Hagavo* during hunting. Another instance is when you bring a *Hagavo* to fish at the river, your fishing net will catch so many fish that it becomes difficult for you to pull it up due to the weight. However, *Hagavo* are rare nowadays because they are short lived. It is said that once someone mentions their birthmark, it would not be long before they pass away due to unfortunate circumstances.

5. DISCUSSION

This study revealed that there are five main types of linguistic taboos in the Rungus language which are morality-related, veneration-related, decorum-related, religion-related and fear-related linguistic taboos based on the types of linguistic taboos stated by Fakuade et al. (2013) and Barus et al. (2018).

Fakuade et al. (2023) found that the categories with euphemisms are morality-related, veneration-related and fear-related linguistic taboos while decorum-related and religion-related linguistic taboos are those without euphemisms. However, the types of Rungus linguistic taboos without euphemisms are religion-related and fear-related linguistic taboos because in the views of the Rungus, it is better to not say them at all to be safe.

Words under morality-related are seen as vulgar, dirty and insulting thus, euphemisms are often used to allude to the words and phrases or people often avoid saying them completely. Punishments are given to those who use some of the more severe linguistic taboos in this category. Decorum-related linguistic taboos are often present in the form of name calling, mocking or insults (non-vulgar). Veneration-related linguistic taboos exist to give respect to certain classes of people. The Rungus are not divided by class but, certain members of the community are honored and respected thus the utterance of their names are considered taboos.

Religion-related and fear-related linguistic taboos revolve around the Rungus traditional belief system. The Rungus believe that spirits inhabit all things in the world which includes forests, rivers, and even the longhouse where they lived. Thus, members of the community are careful so that their words do not provoke or upset the spirits around them. If the spirits are offended, they will cause harm that range from stomach aches to death.

All things considered, the cultural context of the Rungus linguistic taboos can all be related to their belief system and social norms. Morality, decorum, veneration and fear related linguistic taboos can be explained through their belief that harmony should be maintained with all beings which

includes humans, spirits and the kinship that transcends the human realm. It was found that the overarching elements of the cultural context of linguistic taboos in Rungus culture involves their indigenous worldviews and emphasis on community peace.

Based on the results, there are several themes of indigenous worldview that was brought to the forefront which includes dynamic balance, kinship extends beyond the human world, community-ism, and reciprocity. Dynamic balance refers to how the Rungus community are constantly careful with their words to ensure that the harmony in the community and with the spirits are maintained at all times. Kinship extends beyond the human realm because some spirits are acknowledged as elders of the community. Spirits such as the Paddy Spirit, Bbambarazon and the spirits of the river related to *Gundari* are called *Odu-Odu* which translates to ‘grandmother’, ‘ancestor’ and in this case, ‘elder’.

Other than that, the result from the current study has one similarity with the study by Barus et al. (2018) which is the kinship category. In the current study, the veneration-related linguistic taboos consist mostly of saying the name of in-laws and the name of kin that transcend the human world. However, the difference lies in the fact that the Karonese forbids certain members of the family to communicate directly. Meanwhile, the Rungus still allow all family members to communicate directly with each other, but they are strictly forbidden from saying their in-laws names. The Rungus does not, however, forbid members of their community from calling spouse and members of the opposite gender by their first name.

The indigenous worldviews found in the results are similar to the study done by Gould et al. (2019) in which they described the major themes found in most indigenous worldviews. The overarching elements of the cultural context of linguistic taboos in Rungus culture involves their indigenous worldviews and emphasis on community peace. According to the results, there are several themes of indigenous worldview that was brought to the forefront which includes dynamic balance, kinship extends beyond the human world, community-ism, and reciprocity. All five types of linguistic taboos reflected the indigenous worldviews of the Rungus community in Kudat.

Based on this current study, Rungus linguistic taboos also have the above themes. For example, morality-related and decorum-related linguistic taboos fall under the theme of dynamic balance because while both categories are primarily keeping the harmony between human and other humans, there are also underlying balancing act with the spirits. Kinships extending beyond the human world can be used to describe veneration-related linguistic taboos. Lastly, religion-related and fear-related linguistic taboos can be explained through the indigenous worldviews of radical community-ism and reciprocity. Each action has its connections to both humans, community, and the spirits thus, the people in the community take care not to do or say anything that is forbidden because it will not affect them alone, it will also affect the entire community.

Rungus linguistic taboos are context specific, similar to the Igbo as stated in the study by Fakuade et al. (2013). Context specific linguistic taboos refer to words and phrases which become taboo due the usage, intention and situation of when the words are spoken (Aliakbari & Raeesi, 2015). This means that the linguistic taboos of the Rungus culture are based on the situation, location and circumstances in which they are used.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to explore the linguistic taboos of the Rungus culture by analysing the categories and cultural context of these taboos. The result showed that the Rungus linguistic taboos are similar to the studies of Asian and Indigenous linguistic taboos as shown in the categorization based on Fakuade et al. (2013) and the belief in supernatural beings (Fakuade et al., 2013; Jaelani et al., 2021).

The study of linguistic taboos is important because it gives insight on how culture and language are connected as well as reflect the indigenous worldview of the community. Other than that, it helps raise awareness on cultural diversity to people from outside of the culture while also reminding members of the culture itself to maintain their values and beliefs. This is because, in some parts of the world, linguistic taboos are diminishing at a faster rate especially among the younger generation (Khan & Parvaiz, 2010).

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of linguistic taboos by situating the phenomenon within a Bornean context—an area largely overlooked in previous research that has

focused mainly on other Asian settings. By analysing taboo expressions through the lens of indigenous belief systems and cultural worldviews, the study provides evidence of how local epistemologies shape the formation and function of linguistic taboos. The findings broaden current understandings of the relationship between language, culture, and social structure, offering a culturally grounded perspective.

Specifically, this study enhances understanding of the Rungus community's culture through its linguistic taboos—one of the lesser-researched indigenous groups in Borneo. However, it is worth noting that the information in this paper may not be the same among the five Rungus sub-groups since most of this information was passed down verbally from one generation to another, thus there may be different variations and versions of these information. This study could also serve as a guideline for intercultural communication. In the current world where travelling and interactions through the internet is normal in day-to-day life, the findings of the current study help to reduce – or even potentially eliminate – miscommunications and cultural shock when other cultures encounter people from the Rungus community. Moreover, people from Western cultures or English-speaking countries, whose worldview is vastly different from indigenous worldviews, could gain more understanding on indigenous worldview from the Rungus community through the results of this current studies.

Future research may want to expand to other areas of Northern Sabah to include respondents from all five Rungus language groups namely Nulluw, Gonsomon, Rungus, Pilapazan, and Gandahon as well as focus specifically on euphemisms in the Rungus language.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare no conflict regarding the publication of the study.

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