

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Language is not merely a means of communication but also a symbolic system through which people express ideas, beliefs, values, and cultural experiences. According to Langer (1957), human beings understand and interpret reality through symbols because symbols enable abstract ideas to be represented and communicated. Likewise, Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2020) explain that language functions as a symbolic system that allows people to transmit knowledge, beliefs, and cultural values across generations. Therefore, language plays an important role in preserving the cultural identity of a speech community.

One important manifestation of language as a symbolic system is ritual speech. Ritual speech is characterized by symbolic expressions that convey meanings beyond their literal interpretations. According to Duranti (1997), ritual language is a cultural practice through which communities preserve traditions, beliefs, and collective knowledge. Similarly, Geertz (1973) argues that symbols are vehicles of culture because they communicate a community's worldview, values, and religious beliefs. Therefore, understanding ritual speech requires not only linguistic analysis but also cultural interpretation.

The meanings contained in ritual speech can be understood through the concept of symbolism. According to Peirce (1931–1958), a symbol is a sign whose meaning is established through social and cultural conventions rather than physical resemblance. In ritual contexts, symbolic expressions represent beliefs, social values, and cultural experiences shared by members of a community. Furthermore, Turner (1967) explains that ritual symbols are multivocal because they simultaneously convey spiritual, social, and cultural meanings. Consequently, symbols become an essential element in understanding the relationship between language, culture, and ritual practices.

Indonesia is well known for its cultural and linguistic diversity, where many communities preserve their traditions through oral literature and ritual language. One of these traditions is the *Toit Uran* ceremony practiced by the

Amarasi community in South Amarasi, East Nusa Tenggara. The ceremony is performed during prolonged drought as a collective prayer for rain and agricultural fertility. During the ritual, the traditional leader delivers ritual speech containing symbolic expressions that reflect the community's beliefs, dependence on nature, and relationship with God. These symbolic expressions also preserve the Amarasi people's local wisdom and cultural identity.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of ritual language and symbolism from different perspectives. Bucholtz and Hall (2021) explain that language is a social practice through which people construct identity and maintain social relationships. Matradewi et al. (2025) found that ritual language in the Korolele ceremony functions as a medium for expressing spiritual values and transmitting cultural knowledge. Likewise, Selan et al. (2022) reported that the *Toit Uran* ceremony represents local wisdom that maintains harmony between humans, nature, and spiritual beliefs. These studies demonstrate that ritual language contains rich symbolic meanings and plays an important role in preserving cultural heritage.

However, although previous studies have discussed ritual language, symbolism, and local wisdom, limited attention has been given to the symbolic expressions found specifically in the ritual speech of the *Toit Uran* ceremony. Most previous studies focus on the socio-cultural functions of the ceremony without providing a systematic analysis of the symbols used in the ritual speech and the meanings they represent. Consequently, the symbolic dimensions of the *Toit Uran* ritual remain underexplored from sociolinguistic and ethnolinguistic perspectives.

Based on this research gap, the present study aims to identify the symbols used in the ritual speech of the *Toit Uran* ceremony and interpret their meanings within the cultural context of the Amarasi community. Using Symbol Theory, Sociolinguistic Theory, and Ethnolinguistic Theory, this study is expected to contribute to the understanding of language as a symbolic system while supporting the preservation of the Amarasi community's oral tradition and cultural heritage.

1.2. Research Problem(s)

Based on the Background, the Research Questions are:

1. What symbols are used in the ritual speech of the Toit Uran ceremony?
2. What are the meaning of the symbols used in the Ritual Speech of the Toit Uran ceremony?

1.3. Aim (s) of Study

Based on the Research Problems, The main aim of this study is

1. To identify and describe the symbols used in the ritual speech of the Toit Uran ceremony in South Amarasi.
2. To analyze and interpret the meanings of the symbols used in the ritual speech of the Toit Uran ceremony within the cultural and spiritual context of the Amarasi community.

In addition, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the fields of sociolinguistics and ethnolinguistics by providing an analysis of symbolic language in ritual speech. Practically, the study also contributes to the documentation and preservation of local oral traditions, particularly the cultural heritage of the Amarasi community in South Amarasi.

1.4. Significance of Study

1.4.1. Implication

Theoretically, this study contributes to the fields of Symbol Theory, Sociolinguistics, and Ethnolinguistics by providing empirical evidence of how language functions as a symbolic system in ritual speech. According to Langer (1957), language enables people to represent ideas, beliefs, and cultural experiences through symbols. The findings of this study support this perspective by demonstrating that the symbols used in the *Toit Uran* ritual speech convey meanings beyond their literal forms and reflect the Amarasi community's spiritual beliefs, ecological awareness, and social values.

Furthermore, this study strengthens Peirce's (1931–1958) concept that symbols derive their meanings from shared cultural conventions. The identified symbols illustrate how linguistic expressions become

meaningful within the cultural context of the Amarasi community. The study also supports Turner's (1967) view that ritual symbols are multivocal because they simultaneously express spiritual, ecological, sacrificial, and social meanings.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the findings support Bucholtz and Hall (2021), who argue that language is a social practice through which communities construct identity and maintain social cohesion. In addition, the study reinforces Duranti's (1997) ethnolinguistic perspective by showing that ritual speech functions as a cultural practice through which local knowledge, beliefs, and traditions are preserved and transmitted across generations. Therefore, this study enriches the understanding of symbolic language in ritual discourse, particularly within the oral traditions of the Amarasi community.

1.4.2. Application

Practically, this study contributes to the documentation and preservation of the *Toit Uran* ritual as part of the cultural heritage of the Amarasi community. By identifying and interpreting the symbols contained in the ritual speech, this study provides a written record that may support future efforts to preserve local oral traditions and indigenous knowledge.

For educational institutions, the findings may serve as reference material for teaching sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics, cultural studies, and local wisdom. They may also encourage the integration of local cultural heritage into educational activities, enabling students to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and identity. For the Amarasi community and cultural institutions, this study provides information that may strengthen awareness of the cultural values embedded in the *Toit Uran* ceremony and encourage the preservation of ritual speech as an important part of community identity.

Finally, this study is expected to serve as a useful reference for future researchers interested in symbolism, ritual language, oral traditions, sociolinguistics, and ethnolinguistics. The findings may also provide a

foundation for further studies on symbolic meaning, discourse, and cultural practices in other traditional communities in Indonesia.