



Buffalo in Traditional Javanese Expressions

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Abstract

Buffalo are one of the animals that are easily found in agrarian societies. Buffalo is often used in society to represent something in communication. This research aims to interpret the buffalo animal in traditional Javanese expressions. The research method used is qualitative with Riffaterre's semiotic approach. The research data source is written/library sources containing information about traditional Javanese expressions, particularly those using the word buffalo. Data collection was carried out using the read-and-note method with purposive sampling technique. Researchers are the key instrument in this study. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative analysis techniques with Riffaterre's semiotic approach. Data validity was ensured through semantic validity and theoretical triangulation. Based on the research findings, it was found that the word *kebo* (buffalo) is quite frequently used in traditional expressions. At least 17 traditional expressions using the word buffalo were found. The word buffalo in traditional Javanese expressions represents cleverness, bad deeds, foolishness, and familiarity. Javanese society, when composing traditional expressions, consistently uses diction that is close to the lives of its people. The chosen diction represents a Javanese human nature, behavior, and character, symbolized by the surrounding environment.

Keywords: *Buffalo; Representation; Traditional Javanese Expression*

Introduction

Javanese society is one of the groups that uses symbols in communication. The symbols used are often words that implicitly have implied meanings. The use of these symbols in communication represents that humans are animal symbolicum (Cassier, 1987). Symbolic communication methods become a way of conveying thoughts and feelings that are carefully intended to be shared with the speaker's conversational partner (Kurnia, 2016). The delivery of the intended meaning is done implicitly to maintain harmony with the interlocutor or the person addressed, serving as a form of euphemism in conveying the message (Prihatmini, Th, Basuki, Yusuf, and Slamet, 2003). Euphemisms in Javanese communication are used with the aim of softening speech so that no one else feels offended (Sutana, 2012). This is in line with the character of Javanese society, which upholds the principles of harmony and concord. Therefore, Javanese people often use special expressions that have a specific or indirect meaning. These specific expressions are classified as traditional expressions.

Traditional expressions can reveal the characteristics of the society that uses them. This is also a characteristic of Javanese society, where in Javanese culture, expressions are used in communication with specific keywords that contain moral teachings as a process of emulation and character formation for Javanese people (Prihatmini, Th et al., 2003; Setyanto, 1993). Traditional expressions used by Javanese society have keywords as message carriers (Danandjaja, 1984). The keywords used are quite varied, such as using animal diction, plants, wayang characters, natural objects, and so on. Animal diction in traditional Javanese expressions, which are quite widely used in communication, is one of them, namely buffalo diction.

The water buffalo is an animal closely associated with the lives of people in rural areas. This refers to the agrarian lifestyle of the community (Triyono, Wedhawati, Widati, Indrani, and Arifin, 2015). In some cultures, buffalo are a representation of wealth and social status, as seen in the Toraja culture of South Sulawesi (Hikmawati, 2024). This demonstrates the influence and cultural perspective of society towards water buffalo. In Javanese cultural life, buffalo are often found in various Javanese rituals. This indicates that buffalo have cultural value. In other cultures, buffalo have socio-cultural value that is preserved, as is done by the Sumbawa people (Ardiansa, 2021). Buffalo in Javanese culture is included in the *rajakaya* animal group, which are animals that can support the community's economy and are commonly raised by rural communities (Hikmawati, 2024). Besides being a pillar of the community's economy, buffalo are also often used by farmers to help plow rice fields. The close relationship between Javanese society and the buffalo animal is what subsequently became one of the factors contributing to the abundance of buffalo-related words used in traditional expressions. The use of the word "buffalo" in traditional Javanese expressions can be a depiction of Javanese human character, behavior, and traits.

Research on traditional Javanese expressions is not new. There have been several previous studies examining traditional expressions. Research on traditional Javanese expressions was conducted by Rahaya (2021), who wrote about Javanese Proverbs as a Principle of Modern Society's Life in Kuntowijoyo's Novel "American Dream." This research specifically captures the lives of Javanese people in modern society who still adhere to the principles of Javanese cultural life. The principles of life referred to are those of Javanese society, expressed through Javanese proverbs. This research focuses on the portrayal of modern society's life as depicted in a novel. The main difference from this research is the data source used, as well as the focus of the data, which is Javanese proverbs or traditional expressions. This research focuses on Javanese expressions that use the word "buffalo."

Another relevant study to this research was conducted by Kasnadi (2023) on the Representation of Life Guidance in Traditional Javanese Expressions. Based on this study, life guidance was found regarding divinity, family, society or social life, seeking knowledge, and guidance in earning a living. The difference with this research is its focus of study. The research focuses on the guidance of people's lives through traditional expressions, while this research focuses on the representation of the buffalo animal used in traditional expressions. In short, this research aims to identify traditional expressions that use the buffalo animal's diction and its representation.

Method

The research method used is a qualitative research method with Riffaterre's semiotic approach. The approach used aims to understand a phenomenon directly and in-depth through contextual analysis. Qualitative research is conducted with strong and continuous contact in a natural state to find answers to a phenomenon present in society (Miles et. al, 2014). Therefore, the researcher will attempt to provide a heuristic overview of the context to be studied. The main objective of this research is to interpret matters related to the representation of fish diction in traditional Javanese expressions. The data source for this research is written sources containing traditional Javanese expressions that include traditional Javanese expressions. Furthermore, secondary data sources for the research are taken from various sources such as books, scientific journals, the internet, archives, and other documents as supporting materials. The

research data consists of traditional expressions in the form of linguistic units, particularly clauses, sentences, or discourses, that use buffalo vocabulary.

The data collection method used in this research is Riffaterre's semiotic reading method, which is a heuristic and hermeneutic reading. Heuristic reading is a level of mimesis-based reading that relies on the system and conventions of language. In this case, heuristic reading is the first stage of reading related to referential meaning as the capture of meaning. Heuristic reading produces the overall meaning. Next is hermeneutic reading, or the second stage of reading. Hermeneutic reading is also called retroactive reading, where the process of true interpretation begins to occur (Lutfi, 2022). Data consisting of fish-related diction in traditional expressions were collected through note-taking. Research data were obtained using a purposive sampling technique, which involves setting specific characteristics, in this case, focusing on fish-related diction found in traditional Javanese expressions. The research instruments used in this study are all instruments used to collect research data. The key instrument in this research is the human instrument, in this case, the researcher who serves as the main instrument. The data analysis technique used in this study is qualitative analysis with Riffaterre's semiotic approach. This analysis technique is used to analyze fish elements sourced from traditional Javanese expressions. The data found is analyzed and then interpreted contextually, socially, and culturally. Data validity was assessed using semantic validity and theoretical triangulation.

Result and Discussion

Result

Based on research conducted on available data sources, it was found that there are quite a few traditional Javanese expressions that specifically use the word "buffalo." This represents the close relationship between the buffalo animal and Javanese society. Javanese society, which is considered an agrarian society, extensively involves buffalo in social and cultural life, both to assist with daily work and as material for ritual activities. Here are some traditional Javanese expressions that use the word "buffalo."

Table 1. The Research Data Source

No.	Traditional Javanese Expressions
1.	<i>Kebo bule mati setra</i>
2.	<i>Kebo ilang tombok kandhang</i>
3.	<i>Kebo kabotan sungu</i>
4.	<i>Kebo lumaku dipasangi</i>
5.	<i>Kebo lumumpat ing palang</i>
6.	<i>Kebo mulih ing kandhange</i>
7.	<i>Kebo mutung ing pasangan</i>
8.	<i>Kebo nusu gudel</i>
9.	<i>Sandhing kebo gupak</i>
10.	<i>Cedhak kebo gupak</i>
11.	<i>Dikebo siji</i>
12.	<i>Dikebo ranggah</i>
13.	<i>Pisah kebo</i>
14.	<i>Londho-londho walang sangit anggendhong kebo</i>
15.	<i>Tepung kebo</i>
16.	<i>Kebo rompon</i>
17.	<i>Kumpul kebo</i>

Sources: (Adiwimarta, Suratman, Kuntamadi, Sulistiati, and Basiroh, 1990; Mardiwarsito, 1980; Prihatmini, Th et al., 2003; Triyono et al., 2015)

Discussion

Buffalo in Javanese culture has a special connection with its people. Buffalo is widely used by the community in daily life. Buffalo is often used for traditional rice field plowing by the Javanese people and is believed to have diligent, strong, and hardworking qualities (Megawati and Ihsanuddin, 2021). Although it is known for its diligence and is a symbol of strength, some perspectives say that the buffalo is synonymous with the lower strata of Javanese society because the buffalo has an image of familiarity and stupidity (Triyono et al., 2015). Although buffalo are more often associated with foolishness or stupidity, as in the expression "*bodho longa-longo kaya kebo*" (as stupid as a buffalo), the word "buffalo" in traditional expressions is not always a representation of stupidity. This can be confirmed through the interpretation of traditional expressions that use the word "buffalo" as follows.

Intelligence

Cleverness is the opposite of stupidity, which is associated with the word "buffalo" in traditional Javanese expressions. This creates a contradiction in the symbolism. Additionally, buffalo also have positive attributes when used by farmers to plow rice fields and as a symbol of prosperity for fishermen (Falah, 2020). This indicates that buffalo are not always associated with negative things. Here is a traditional Javanese saying that uses the word "buffalo" with the symbol of intelligence:

Kebo bule mati setra 'The white buffalo died in the cemetery'

Meaning: He was a smart person, but no one utilized his intelligence until he passed away.

That traditional expression represents that the buffalo is a symbol of cleverness. The main diction used for representation is "kebo bule" (white buffalo). White buffalo hold a special position in the culture of the Surakarta Palace. The white buffalo becomes a symbol of safety and spirituality. The presence of the white buffalo is always associated with the ceremonial traditions found in the Surakarta Palace, which can then be identified from historical and spiritual aspects (Abdullah, 2016). Nevertheless, the white buffalo, which represents wise people in traditional Javanese expressions, seems useless because it is not utilized. This is evident in the phrase *mati setra*, which means 'died at the cemetery.' In its entirety, the expression *kebo bule mati setra* represents intelligence that was not utilized as it should have been. This is the same as the meaning of the expression "*wastra lungset ing sampiran*," which means "a person with skill is eventually forgotten because it is not used" (Adiwimarta et al., 1990). This shows that intelligence is wasted if it doesn't get opportunities and isn't used. Based on this information, it can be concluded that the buffalo also represents intelligence, although optimal utilization is needed to prevent the intelligence possessed from being wasted.

Bad Actions

The buffalo animal is sometimes also used in expressions that represent bad deeds or evil. This is one of the advantages of using traditional expressions, which is to convey something in the form of a euphemism with the aim of delivering a message symbolically. Things that are not good or contain negative meanings or evil actions are conveyed implicitly to maintain ethics in communication. Such a storytelling culture reflects the culture of Javanese society through its language (Sartini, 2009). Here are some traditional Javanese expressions that contain negative meanings using the word "buffalo."

Kebo lumumpat ing palang 'the buffalo jumped over the fence.'

Meaning: the prosecutor handling his brother's case/judging the case without applying the law correctly

The expression indicates bad behavior or evil, where someone uses their position for personal gain and benefit. The buffalo in that expression is associated with a prosecutor, while its action of *lumumpat ing palang* 'jumping over the barrier' represents its bad deeds. The bad actions referred to are

violating the applicable rules or norms. In the legal realm, such actions are classified as an abuse of power. That is, the abuse of authority by public officials for the benefit of individuals or specific groups. Abuse of power will lead to corruption, collusion, and nepotism (Hafis and Yogia, 2017). Cases of abuse of power are never justified in the legal realm, even though they occur quite frequently, such as in the case of the North Korean embassy secretary who smuggled goods into Bangladesh (Yanti and Putri, 2019). The buffalo animal in the traditional expression "*kebo lumumpat ing palang*" represents the perpetrator of the abuse of power, and their actions are not justified in Javanese culture or legal terms. Another traditional expression using the word "buffalo" is as follows.

Sandhing kebo gupak 'next to the buffalo playing in the mud'

Meaning: approaching someone who is angry so that you can be affected by their anger
kebo gupak 'approaching the buffalo playing in the mud'

Meaning: if you befriend evil people, you will become evil

The buffalo in both expressions represents something bad, using the same diction "kebo gupak." The phrase "kebo gupak" (muddy buffalo) is a symbol of bad deeds, where "gupak" for a buffalo is the activity of being in muddy or dirty water. It is the mud that makes the buffalo dirty, serving as a reminder that one is forbidden from approaching a muddy buffalo. That expression represents the idea that one's living environment can influence a person's character. The environment is an important factor in shaping a person's character. Individual development is greatly influenced by environmental factors such as family, school, and the social community (Nerizka and Munawwir, 2021). *Kebo gupak*, representing bad actions, should ideally be avoided. We should not approach bad things or someone who is angry, as this will have a negative impact on us. Another traditional expression using the word "buffalo" is as follows.

Kumpul kebo 'gathering of buffalo'

Meaning: men and women live together without getting married.

Pisah kebo 'parting of buffalo'

Meaning: husband and wife are separated but not officially divorced.

The buffalo in both expressions represents something negative, namely stating a situation that is not in accordance with the norms and ethics in Indonesia, including Javanese society. Cohabitation is a form of social deviation where a couple lives together without being married. Cohabitation is included in the category of complaints that fall under the category of adultery and is specifically regulated in Criminal Code Articles 411 and 412, and there is a fixed legal basis in Article 421 of the Criminal Code of Law Number 1 of 2023 (Multazam and Mujab, 2023; Rara Aura Audya and Tajul Arifin, 2025; Sholikah, Hidayati, Parmono, Muhibbin, and Ilmania, 2023). The term *kumpul kebo* is used by Javanese people as an anecdote where the buffalo is an animal that acts on its own whim (Danardana and Setyawan, 2022). Similarly, there's the activity of *pisah kebo*, where a married couple who have separated but are not yet legally divorced. This clearly could have a negative impact on his family because they are not legally separated. These activities include deviations from social norms, where living with a partner without the bond of marriage and separating before divorce reflect self-serving behavior, thus being equated with animalistic behavior. These expressions represent the buffalo as something or an action that is bad and does not conform to Javanese norms. Additionally, they reflect actions that are not in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

Stupidity/Foolish Action

Buffalo sometimes also represent something considered foolish. This can be equated with the life of a buffalo, which is easy to manage and seems to just go along with things. Nevertheless, the representation does not directly refer to his buffalo, but to the actions or cultural context associated with it. Here are some traditional expressions that use the word "buffalo" and convey meanings or things that are synonymous with inappropriate or foolish actions.

Kebo ilang tombok kandhang 'lost buffalo adds to the cost of the barn.'

Meaning: something that was lost was not found, and instead, more costs were incurred to search for it.

This expression represents something that is not quite right or has a negative impact, where something that is lost is not found and still requires additional cost to search for the 'buffalo' object. This is clearly not a smart move, but it leads to even greater losses. This expression is similar to the saying *amburu uceng kelangan dheleg*, which means "chasing something small and losing something big" (Adiwimarta et al., 1990). Contextually, the meaning is indeed different, but the core point experienced is the same: experiencing a loss due to an action. Therefore, we should always act wisely so that our actions don't end up causing us even greater losses. Other expressions using the word "buffalo" are as follows.

Kebo kabotan sungu 'the buffalo is burdened by its horns'

Meaning: someone who is burdened by life because of their family.

The expression "a buffalo burdened by its horns" describes the situation of someone who finds the cost of living too heavy to bear because they have too many children. Generally, this expression is used to give advice in Javanese society (Fatmawati and Surana, 2022). Don't be like a water buffalo burdened by its horns; you must be wise in determining your life's path. The expression *Kebo kabotan sungu* represents foolish or unwise actions. In this case, the buffalo is once again identified with a difficult situation, namely having horns that are too heavy, where the horns represent the burden that must be borne. One should not act foolishly and unwisely, making decisions without first considering the risks. Another traditional expression describing a foolish action is as follows.

Kebo mutung ing pasangan 'the buffalo refused to work for the couple.'

Meaning: someone who doesn't finish the work they're handling

That traditional expression represents a person's lack of responsibility. The buffalo represents someone who is unwilling to finish the work they have undertaken or that is their responsibility. Javanese people must have a sense of responsibility for their obligations, which is a representation of the *hamangku* character for Javanese people (Sartini, 2009). It is a foolish act when someone is unwilling to fulfill their responsibilities. One must fulfill their responsibilities and obligations, which will foster trust in the person who assigned those responsibilities. The traditional expression *kebo mutung ing pasangan* (a buffalo getting angry with its partner) represents someone's bad behavior, depicted like a buffalo getting angry with its partner. The pair of buffalo in this case is a responsibility. Javanese people are always bound by responsibility in their work.

Familiarity

The use of the word "buffalo" in traditional expressions can also be a representation of the closeness of relationships. Familiarity in Javanese culture reflects the closeness of a relationship, which generally means that the closer someone is, the more they can use various terms in communication without causing conflict between the speaker and their conversational partner. In Javanese culture, speakers also often use greetings that are in the form of teasing directed towards their interlocutors (Widianingsih, Mijianti, and Amilia, 2025). There are several traditional expressions that can be used to describe familiarity, one of which is using the word "buffalo" as follows.

Tepung kebo 'known like a buffalo'

Meaning: we've already greeted each other but don't know each other's names.

The expression "flour for the buffalo 'knows the buffalo'" is used to describe how someone can be friendly or greet each other even though they don't actually know each other. Just like buffalo that live freely and when they meet other buffalo, they will immediately join their group. The culture of greeting

each other without prior acquaintance is a form of *sapa aruh* in Javanese culture. The Javanese people's habit of *sapa aruh* has been used in their daily lives as a way of showing respect for others. Javanese people will get used to greeting each other, even if they don't know each other yet (Sutarsih, 2010).

Conclusion

Traditional Javanese expressions are used to communicate implicitly in order to uphold the principle of harmonious living in their society. Traditional Javanese expressions are a form of euphemism in communication. Euphemistic communication through traditional expressions generally uses specific diction drawn from the Javanese community's surroundings, such as the word *kebo* (water buffalo). Water buffalo are quite frequently used in Javanese traditional expressions. The buffalo's diction is considered capable of representing the lives of lower-class people by depicting their character, behavior, and traits. Traditional expressions with specific diction can represent the thoughts and ideas of society. Where the meaning of traditional expressions cannot be immediately justified directly, contextual interpretation is needed so that the meaning found is the true meaning.

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