

## Communicative Functions of *Umpasa* in Toba Batak Traditional Ceremonies

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### Abstract

*Umpasa* is a fundamental oral tradition in Toba Batak culture, functioning as a medium for conveying blessings and spiritual messages. However, the functional shift between different ritual contexts, such as joyful weddings and solemn funerals, remains under-documented. This study aims to identify the types of communicative functions, determine their shifting dominance, and describe their linguistic realizations within *Ulaon Unjuk* and *Ulaon Saur Matua*. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method. The data consists of 20 selected *umpasa* utterances, analyzed using Roman Jakobson's theory of communicative functions. The results reveal that only four of Jakobson's six functions are present: poetic, conative, referential, and emotive. Phatic and metalingual functions are entirely absent, suggesting that *umpasa* is a fixed ritual text. Furthermore, function dominance is context-dependent. In *Ulaon Unjuk*, the poetic function is superior, as it prioritizes the aesthetic delivery of blessings and ancestral values through rhythmic metaphors. Conversely, in *Ulaon Saur Matua*, the conative function dominates, emphasizing the delivery of spiritual guidance, instructions, and social expectations for the bereaved family. These functions are realized through specific markers, such as nature-based metaphors and parallelism for the poetic function, and the optative particle "Sai" and address form "Hamu" for the conative function. In conclusion, *umpasa* serves as a sophisticated cultural vehicle that strategically adjusts its functional priority to reinforce cultural identity during major life transitions.

### INTRODUCTION

The communicative functions of language constitute a fundamental aspect of linguistic inquiry, explaining how utterances operate within social interactions to perform complex communicative acts rather than merely transmitting information (Gao & Webster, 2020). In traditional societies, these functions are inseparable from ritual practices where linguistic expressions are embedded within rigid social structures. The Toba Batak people of North Sumatra maintain this through *umpasa*—traditional poetic utterances performed during ceremonies to convey blessings, prayers, and cultural mandates. The objective of this investigation is to identify the types of communicative functions, determine their shifting dominance, and describe their linguistic realizations within *umpasa* across two distinct ritual contexts. This study is necessitated by a

significant gap in current literature; while previous research has extensively explored the semantic meanings and cultural symbolism of *umpasa* (Pangaribuan et al., 2024), there is a dearth of pragmatic analysis regarding how its functional priority adapts to specific ceremonial goals.

Pertinent literature has established the importance of functional models, particularly Jakobson's (1960) framework, which links communicative intent to six fundamental components: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. Empirical studies have applied this model across various domains, such as Kanaza (2020) and Santika et al. (2022), who identified the dominance of conative and directive functions in political and daily discourse. In literary contexts, Hou & Elt (2020) argued for the inherent superiority of the poetic function in creative texts. Furthermore, studies on ritual discourse, such as Aurlani & Idaman's (2025) analysis of the *Basarang* ritual, have begun to explore functional interactions in sacred spaces. However, existing studies on *umpasa* often treat the tradition as a monolithic entity, failing to address how the functional weight shifts when the social context changes from a celebratory union to a final ancestral rite. This study fills this void by analyzing the functional adaptability of *umpasa* as a pragmatic tool rather than a static literary form.

This research hypothesizes that the communicative priority of *umpasa* is context-dependent, fluctuating according to the ritual's social and spiritual purpose. To test this, a qualitative descriptive-interpretative method was employed, analyzing 20 selected *umpasa* utterances categorized into two variables: *Ulaon Unjuk* (traditional wedding ceremonies) and *Ulaon Saur Matua* (funeral ceremonies for those who have achieved the highest ancestral status). The findings of this study provide a nuanced contrast to the "big picture" of literary analysis. The major findings demonstrate that only four functions—poetic, conative, referential, and emotive—are present, with functional dominance shifting between contexts: *Ulaon Unjuk* is dominated by the poetic function to prioritize aesthetic blessings, whereas *Ulaon Saur Matua* is dominated by the conative function to emphasize spiritual guidance for the bereaved.

Furthermore, the linguistic realization of these functions is marked by specific indicators, such as nature-based metaphors for the poetic function and the optative particle 'Sai' for the conative function. The principal conclusion derived from these results is that the total absence of phatic and metalingual functions confirms *umpasa* as a fixed, sacred ritual text that bypasses conversational maintenance in favor of spiritual authority. These findings contribute to the broader field of sociolinguistics by proving that ritual oral traditions strategically adjust their functional utility to meet cultural needs. While this study clarifies functional distribution in major life transitions, it leaves unanswered how these functions are preserved in modern, abbreviated urban ceremonies, presenting a significant question for future longitudinal research.

## METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative design to provide a systematic and factual account of linguistic phenomena within their natural cultural context. The study focuses on the communicative functions of language as the formal object, while the material object consists of *umpasa* performed during Toba Batak ritual discourse.

### Participants / subject / population and sample

The population of this study encompasses all ritual utterances used in Toba Batak traditional ceremonies. The subject of the research is *umpasa*, specifically those performed during two significant life-cycle rituals: *Ulaon Unjuk* (wedding ceremonies) and *Ulaon Saur Matua* (funeral ceremonies for those who have attained the highest ancestral status). A purposive sampling technique was applied to select 20 *umpasa* utterances (10 from each ceremony type). The samples were chosen

based on specific criteria: linguistic clarity, authenticity of the ritual performance, and their direct relevance to the core ritual process.

### Instruments

In this qualitative inquiry, the researcher serves as the primary instrument, acting as the data collector and analyst. To support the primary instrument, several auxiliary instruments were utilized:

1. **Observation Sheets:** Used to record the context of the ritual, the identity of the speakers, and the situational dynamics of the performance.
2. **Transcription Protocols:** Used to convert oral *umpasa* from video documentation into written Toba Batak text with English translations.

**Interview Guides:** Conducted with a *Raja Parhata* (traditional ceremonial speaker) to validate the cultural interpretations and functional nuances of the selected *umpasa*.

### Data analysis procedures

Data were analyzed following a systematic qualitative procedure to ensure the appropriateness and depth of the findings. The analysis followed these five stages:

1. **Transcription and Translation:** Converting oral recordings into written form and translating them into English while preserving the original metaphorical nuances.
2. **Data Reduction:** Identifying and isolating specific units of analysis within the transcriptions that constitute *umpasa*.
3. **Functional Classification:** Categorizing each utterance based on Roman Jakobson's (1960) six communicative functions: emotive, conative, referential, poetic, phatic, and metalingual.
4. **Contextual Interpretation:** Determining the dominant function by triangulating the linguistic data with the *Dalihan Na Tolu* social philosophy and the specific goals of the ceremony.
5. **Descriptive Synthesis:** Systematically presenting the findings to illustrate how these functions are linguistically realized and how their dominance shifts across different ritual contexts.

## FINDINGS

The analysis of 20 *umpasa* utterances identifies a multi-layered functional structure within Toba Batak ritual discourse. The data indicates that a single *umpasa* typically performs several communicative functions simultaneously, creating a functional overlap where aesthetic, instructional, and informational elements coexist in a single utterance.

The frequency of communicative functions across the 20 sampled utterances reveals a consistent pattern of multifunctionality. Table 1 summarizes the presence of these functions within the two ceremonial contexts.

**Table: 1 Distribution of Communicative Functions in Toba Batak Rituals**

| Communicative Functions | <i>Ulaon Unjuk</i><br>(n=10) | <i>Ulaon Saur Matua</i><br>(n=10) |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Poetic Function         | 10                           | 10                                |
| Conative Function       | 10                           | 10                                |
| Referential Function    | 10                           | 10                                |
| Emotive Function        | 0                            | 2                                 |
| Phatic Function         | 0                            | 0                                 |
| Metalingual Function    | 0                            | 0                                 |

As illustrated in Table 1, the Poetic, Conative, and Referential functions are present in 100% of the sampled data from both *Ulaon Unjuk* and *Ulaon Saur Matua*. This suggests that every *umpasa*

analyzed operates as an aesthetic expression (poetic), a carrier of cultural or genealogical information (referential), and a social or spiritual mandate (conative).

The Emotive function appears exclusively in two instances within the *Ulaon Saur Matua* context, expressing collective mourning and spiritual hope. Notably, the Phatic and Metalingual functions recorded a 0% presence across all 20 samples, confirming that *umpasa* is a highly ritualized, fixed text that bypasses conversational maintenance in favor of established spiritual authority.

### The Most Dominant Functions

While the previous distribution shows the presence of multiple functions within each *umpasa*, a deeper analysis reveals a clear shift in the most dominant function depending on the ritual context. This phenomenon reflects Jakobson's (1960) principle that although a message can fulfill several functions simultaneously, they are always organized in a hierarchy where one function is "dominant" or primary, while others are secondary. According to Jakobson, it is this dominant function that determines the verbal structure and the overall character of the message.

In this study, dominance is determined by the linguistic emphasis, the primary intent of the speaker, and the functional weight of the markers used in each utterance. In *Ulaon Unjuk*, although poetic, conative, and referential functions are all present, the poetic function serves as the primary driver to emphasize the sacred beauty of the blessing. Conversely, in *Ulaon Saur Matua*, the focus shifts significantly toward the conative function (in terms of guidance for the living) or the emotive function in specific instances of consolation. The following table illustrates the shifting dominance of these functions across the two ceremonies, highlighting which communicative intent takes precedence in the ritual discourse.

**Table: 2 Dominant Communicative Functions in Both Ceremonies**

| <b>Communicative Functions</b> | <b><i>Ulaon Unjuk</i><br/>(n=10)</b> | <b>Percentage<br/>(%)</b> | <b><i>Ulaon Saur Matua</i> (n=10)</b> | <b>Percentage<br/>(%)</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Poetic Function                | 6                                    | 60%                       | 2                                     | 20%                       |
| Conative Function              | 4                                    | 40%                       | 6                                     | 60%                       |
| Referential Function           | 0                                    | 0%                        | 0                                     | 0%                        |
| Emotive Function               | 0                                    | 0%                        | 2                                     | 20%                       |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>10</b>                            | <b>100%</b>               | <b>10</b>                             | <b>100%</b>               |

While Table 1 demonstrates that the poetic, conative, and referential functions are present across all 20 sampled utterances due to the multi-layered nature of ritual discourse, Table 2 illuminates how these functions are hierarchically prioritized based on the ceremonial context. According to Jakobson (1960), a verbal message rarely fulfills only one function; rather, it involves a co-presence of multiple functions structured in a strict hierarchy where one "dominant" function determines the overall character and verbal structure of the message.

In *Ulaon Unjuk*, although the poetic function appears in 100% of the samples as the structural and aesthetic framework (e.g., through formal parallelism and nature imagery), it serves as the dominant function in 60% of the cases (6 out of 10). In these six utterances, the primary communicative intent shifts away from directing actions and moves towards celebrating the sacred beauty and cosmic balance of the marital union. The remaining 40% of the *Ulaon Unjuk* samples are dominated by the conative function, where the structural aesthetics (poetic function) recede into the background, acting merely as a vehicle to deliver explicit, imperative prayers and social mandates for the newlyweds (optative prayers).

Conversely, in *Ulaon Saur Matua*, the hierarchy undergoes a significant inversion. While the poetic shell remains present in all 10 samples to maintain the ritual's formal dignity, its dominance

drops to 20%. The discourse is heavily overtaken by the conative function (60%) and emotive function (20%). This shift occurs because a funeral ceremony prioritizing the highest ancestral status (Saur Matua) demands practical spiritual guidance, strict social expectations, and collective emotional consolation for the bereaved family, rather than a primary focus on poetic ornamentation. Therefore, the frequency of appearance (Table 1) reflects the structural composition of *umpasa*, whereas the percentage of dominance (Table 2) reflects the shifting pragmatic weight driven by the ceremony's ultimate social purpose.

### Realization of Communicative Functions in Toba Batak Traditional Ceremonies

The communicative functions in *umpasa* are manifested through specific linguistic markers and structural patterns, as summarized below:

1. **Poetic:** Realized through formal parallelism (internal and end-rhymes) and nature-based metaphors (e.g., hariara tree, stars). These elements ensure the message is delivered in a rhythmic, sacred, and aesthetically structured manner.
2. **Conative:** Manifested through direct address forms—specifically the second-person plural *Hamu*—and the optative particle *Sai*. These markers transform the speech into a "prayer-like command," invoking blessings such as prosperity or health upon the audience.
3. **Referential:** Anchored in cultural reality through terms related to *Dalihan Na Tolu* and specific ritual artifacts. This function grounds the speech in the social status of the participants and the traditional values of the Toba Batak community.
4. **Emotive:** Identified through the speaker's internal state of pangkirimion (sincere hope) and a solemn, authoritative tone. This function transforms the recitation into a heartfelt blessing, particularly during critical ritual transitions.

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that *umpasa* in Toba Batak rituals is a sophisticated linguistic phenomenon characterized by functional multifunctionality. As shown in the frequency distribution, every analyzed utterance (100%) consistently performs poetic, conative, and referential functions simultaneously. This complex overlap confirms that *umpasa* is not a singular linguistic act but a multi-dimensional discourse that serves aesthetic, instructional, and social purposes at once. This phenomenon reflects Roman Jakobson's (1960) principle that although a message can fulfill several functions simultaneously, they are always organized in a hierarchy where one function is "dominant" or primary, while others are secondary. In the context of *umpasa*, the poetic function provides the aesthetic "shell," the referential function anchors the message to the *Dalihan Na Tolu* social structure, and the conative function delivers the spiritual mandate or blessing. However, as the ritual context shifts, the "weight" of these functions rearranges to meet the specific objectives of the ceremony.

### Functional Integration in *Ulaon Unjuk* (Wedding Ceremony)

In the context of wedding ceremonies (*Ulaon Unjuk*), the analysis reveals that the communicative acts are primarily structured through three integrated functions, with the poetic function emerging as the most dominant element. This dominance ensures that expressions are elevated into a sacred and aesthetic blessing. A representative example is found in the following data:

*"Pinatingkon Hujur di tepi ni Tapian, tudia pe Hamu mangalangka, Tusi ma Hamu dapotan Parsaulian"*

(A spear is planted on the edge of the spring; wherever you step, there you shall find good fortune).

The poetic function is the most prominent here through the use of structural parallelism and nature-based imagery. The first clause ("*Pinatingkon Hujur...*") acts as a *sampiran* (prologue) that sets a rhythmic balance for the second clause. This aesthetic symmetry symbolizes a balanced and beautiful life for the new couple. Simultaneously, the referential function is realized through the mention of cultural artifacts like "*Hujur*" (spear), anchoring the blessing in Toba Batak tradition. Meanwhile, the conative function functions as an optative prayer, actively "shaping" the future of the couple through the phrase "*Tusi ma Hamu dapotan Parsaulian.*"

From a sociocultural perspective, the priority of the poetic function in *Ulaon Unjuk* is deeply rooted in the communal purpose of Toba Batak weddings, which celebrate life, continuity, and the cosmic union of two clans within the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system. In Batak culture, a wedding is an auspicious transition that requires the invocation of *Sahala* (spiritual authority) and blessings. The poetic structure of *umpasa*—characterized by its rhythmic symmetry and nature-based metaphors—is not merely ornamental; it serves as a crucial cultural vehicle to elevate human speech into a sacred, harmonious frequency. By framing the blessings in beautiful, balanced parallelism, the speaker aligns the social union of the newlyweds with the harmonious order of nature and the ancestors. Aesthetic refinement in *Ulaon Unjuk* is mandatory because harsh or direct language is considered culturally inappropriate (*subang*) for a celebratory event that aims to attract good fortune, fertility, and peace.

### Functional Integration in *Ulaon Saur Matua* (Funeral Ceremony)

In contrast, in the context of funeral ceremonies (*Ulaon Saur Matua*), the hierarchy of functions shifts to prioritize the spiritual and social impact on the bereaved family. A representative data of this shift is observed in the following *umpasa*:

*"Bagot na madungdung tu pilo-pilo na marajar, tujoloan ni ari on salpu ma dihamu nalungun sai ro ma akka na jagar"*

(The enau palm tree stands tall with its leaves neatly arranged; in the days to come, may sadness pass and happiness come to you).

In this ritual context, the conative function emerges as the absolute dominant element. While the poetic function remains present through the formal metaphorical nature imagery of the "*Bagot*" (enau palm) tree, and the referential function anchors the utterance to the shared ecological and cultural reality of the community, the primary communicative intent shifts heavily toward directing the psychological and social state of the listeners.

The explicit linguistic realization of this dominance is marked by the second-person plural pronoun "*dihamu*" (to you) and the optative particle "*sai*", which directly project the speaker's mandate onto the bereaved family. The pragmatic weight concentrates on the mandate of consolation ("*sai ro ma akka na jagar*"), actively functioning to transition the listeners from a paralyzing state of mourning (*lungun*) toward collective strength, resilience, and unity.

From a sociocultural lens, this conative dominance satisfies a critical tribal necessity: because a *Saur Matua* death represents the highest ancestral transition, the ceremony marks a major reshuffling of family leadership and responsibilities within the *Dalihan Na Tolu* structure. Therefore, rather than prioritizing delicate aesthetic ornamentation (poetic function), the ritual discourse demands authoritative, clear, and direct guidance to ensure the living descendants maintain social solidarity (*hasadaon*) and successfully step into their new roles.

### The Absence of Phatic and Metalingual Functions

A notable finding in this study is the total absence (0%) of phatic and metalingual functions across all samples. This absence suggests that *umpasa* operates as a fixed ritual text rather than a spontaneous conversational exchange. In Toba Batak ceremonies, the communication channel is already pre-established by the sacredness of the ritual, making phatic markers unnecessary. Furthermore, the linguistic code of *umpasa* is deeply internalized; the metaphors are understood as a shared cultural heritage, thus requiring no metalingual clarification. This phenomenon profoundly reflects four dimensions of Toba Batak ritual discourse:

1. **Ritual Rigidity:** Ceremonies are governed by strict customary protocols (*adat*). Because the communication channel is already pre-established by the sacred setting, conversational check-ins (phatic) are entirely redundant.
2. **Formulaic Discourse:** *Umpasa* consists of prefabricated, immutable text passed down through generations. Since speakers do not create new linguistic codes during the performance, metalingual clarification is unneeded.
3. **Shared Cultural Knowledge:** The complex metaphors and parallelism are deeply internalized by the community. Both speaker and audience share a unified cognitive framework, requiring no real-time explanations.
4. **Sacred Communication:** *Umpasa* transcends ordinary horizontal conversation to function as a vertical, sacred bridge to ancestral blessings. In this domain, the text assumes absolute spiritual authority, bypassing mundane conversational maintenance.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical analysis of communicative functions within Toba Batak *umpasa*, this study draws three interrelated conclusions that yield significant theoretical and practical implications. First, this inquiry identifies four distinct communicative functions operating within the ritual discourse: poetic, conative, referential, and emotive. While the poetic, conative, and referential functions form the consistent linguistic core of every analyzed *umpasa*, the emotive function is highly context-specific, appearing exclusively within *Ulaon Saur Matua*. Conversely, the absolute absence of phatic and metalingual functions confirms that *umpasa* operates as a highly stable, sacred, and formulaic tradition. In this domain, both the speaker and the audience share a deep, pre-existing cultural understanding that completely bypasses mundane conversational maintenance in favor of transmitting cosmic alignment and spiritual authority.

Second, the study reveals a clear shift in functional dominance that is dynamically driven by the ritual context. In the celebratory union of *Ulaon Unjuk* (weddings), the poetic function reigns dominant to prioritize the aesthetic beauty and *kesakralan* of marital blessings through rhythmic metaphors and balanced parallelism. In stark contrast, during the structural lifecycle transition of *Ulaon Saur Matua* (funerals), the hierarchy undergoes a pragmatic inversion where the conative function takes precedence. This shift reflects a strategic linguistic redirection toward providing firm spiritual guidance, consolation, and explicit social expectations for the bereaved family. These findings enrich the broader field of pragmatics by demonstrating that the dominance of language functions is not fixed within a genre, but shifts dynamically based on situational and sociocultural needs. It illustrates the complex anatomy of sacred discourse, proving that *umpasa* is a purposeful communicative system that masterfully balances artistic symbolism with practical ritual objectives.

Third, these functions are systematically realized through explicit linguistic markers that are vital to the preservation of oral traditions. The poetic function is anchored in formal structural parallelism and nature-based imagery, while the conative function is realized through the optative

particle 'Sai' and the second-person plural address form 'Hamu'. Concurrently, the referential function integrates ancestral kinship terms, and the emotive function employs lexicons of sincere hope (*pangkirimion*). Pragmatically, this rigid adherence to specific linguistic formulas acts as a cognitive safeguarding mechanism that minimizes individual variation and cultural erosion over generations. Ultimately, these precise linguistic realizations confirm that *umpasa* is a highly structured discourse designed to preserve Toba Batak cultural identity and ensure spiritual continuity by aligning precise linguistic forms with concrete ritual purposes. By documenting these mechanisms, this study provides a vital framework for modern cultural continuity amidst the challenges of urbanization.

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