

Cultural Review of Indonesian Proverbs: Valuable Insights into Character Education through their Philosophical and Semantic Structures

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the philosophical value and semantic power in interpreting Indonesian proverbs in their relationship and relevance in children's character education. The objectives of this study are formulated as follows; 1) to reveal the philosophical meaning contained in Indonesian proverbs, and 2) to describe the complex meaning structure that reflects moral and cultural values. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and semantic analysis, five proverbs are analyzed in detail and studied based on their lexical, contextual, and connotative meanings. This study cannot separate itself from the perspective of linguistic and cultural stylistics. The results of the study show that each proverb contains a complex meaning structure that reflects moral and cultural values. From a semantic perspective, proverbs present meaning relationships that strengthen the philosophical messages they want to convey, such as the importance of awareness of reality, determination, appreciation of effort, vigilance against risk, and openness to knowledge. In the context of character education, the use of proverbs as teaching materials is considered capable of internalizing noble values symbolically and contextually. Therefore, integrating proverbs into learning not only strengthens understanding of cultural meanings and strengthens self-identity but also enriches character-building strategies based on local wisdom.

Keywords: Proverbs, Semantics, Philosophical Values, Character Education, Local Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs are part of the oral cultural heritage, rich in moral, social, and spiritual values, which have long been used by Indonesian society to convey advice, criticism, and life wisdom in concise and meaningful forms. In the context of education, especially children's character education, proverbs play a crucial role as a medium for instilling values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and perseverance (Yaumi et al., 2024; Sachiya et al., 2025; Fasial et al., 2025). As cultural expressions, proverbs are not merely a collection of ancient sayings but reflect a society's worldview and its interpersonal relationships (Yusof & Hashim, 2020; Mustofa & Rahmah, 2022; Ariyanti, 2021).

Language and culture are deeply interconnected. Through language, culture is transmitted and inherited; through culture, language gains meaning. Proverbs serve as a representation of both. When children are introduced to proverbs, they are not only exposed to distinctive forms of language, but they also absorb life values that have been time-tested (Kramersch, 2021; Suastra, 2019; Al-Khulaifi & Dewaele, 2020; Tahir et al., 2018). Proverbs shape a society's collective way of thinking, teach people to perceive life through symbols and metaphors, and build awareness of the importance of virtue in social life.

Beyond their linguistic function, proverbs serve as informal educational tools that strengthen a nation's identity (Rahman, 2018; Weda et al., 2021). In traditional communities, proverbs are often used by parents or teachers to educate children about the consequences of their behavior. Expressions like *bagai telur di ujung tanduk* teach the importance of caution, while *bagai air di daun talas* criticize inconsistency. These examples demonstrate how proverbs can be used as meaningful instruments to convey character values in contextually relevant ways.

In the realm of modern education, which often emphasizes cognitive skills and technology, cultural values embedded in proverbs are frequently neglected. However, strong character education cannot be separated from cultural understanding, which includes language and traditional expressions. When children are introduced to proverbs from an early age, they not only acquire language skills but also internalize the nation's noble values indirectly. Thus, a linguistic approach to proverbs—particularly through semantic and philosophical analysis—becomes essential in supporting character education grounded in local culture. At the same time, one must also recognize the limitations of such approaches: semantic and philosophical readings often focus on symbolic meaning but may overlook issues of changing interpretations across generations, gender roles embedded in cultural expressions, or the influence of socio-economic context.

This article aims to explore five popular proverbs in Indonesian culture—*bagai pungguk merindukan bulan*, *bagai air di daun talas*, *seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi*, *bak telur di ujung tanduk*, and *seperti katak dalam tempurung*—using semantic and philosophical approaches. This analysis seeks to uncover not only the linguistic meanings of these proverbs but also the character values and life perspectives they represent. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of semantic analysis, philosophical reflection, and its relevance to character education for children based on local cultural values. Furthermore, this paper situates the discussion in contemporary educational contexts, addressing challenges such as globalization, digitalization, and shifts in cultural appreciation. Therefore, this article contributes to both the preservation of language and culture and the development of educational strategies that can be applied in formal, informal, and policy-level learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Semantic Approach to Proverbs

Semantics is a branch of linguistics that studies meaning. Leech (1981) divides meaning into denotative meaning (literal meaning) and connotative meaning (associative or cultural meaning). In the context of proverbs, connotative meaning becomes dominant because proverbs function as figurative expressions that convey indirect meaning. Palmer (1981) emphasizes that understanding figurative or idiomatic meaning requires awareness of cultural and social context. Therefore, a semantic analysis of proverbs involves examining both their linguistic forms and the symbolic meanings that relate to the collective experiences of a society. This is essential so that the meaning of a proverb is not only understood textually, but also contextually.

In pragmatic semantics, proverbs cannot be separated from the situational context and shared knowledge between speaker and listener. As Yule (1996) points out, meaning in language is not solely dependent on linguistic forms but also on the context of use. A proverb like *seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi* (like pouring water on a taro leaf) can only be fully understood if the listener knows that a taro leaf symbolizes something that cannot absorb water, which metaphorically refers to someone who is unable to accept advice. Therefore, the ability to understand proverbs requires interpretive skills and cultural awareness, making them a powerful tool for training critical thinking and social sensitivity in language education. Recent studies (e.g., Ahmad & Fauzi, 2023; Lim & Suhadi, 2024) also highlight how proverbs serve as cross-cultural bridges, showing their continuing relevance in modern education.

B. Philosophical Values in Proverbs Proverbs are also rich in philosophical values that shape a community's worldview. According to Ricoeur (1976), metaphorical language—such as that found in proverbs—has a hermeneutic function, meaning it reveals existential truths through symbols and metaphors. Proverbs do not merely describe events; they also teach how humans should respond to life. For example, the proverb *bak telur di ujung tanduk* conveys the philosophy of being cautious in precarious situations, while *seperti katak dalam tempurung* offers a critique of limited knowledge. In other words, proverbs reflect a life philosophy rooted in the real experiences of society.

However, a critical engagement is needed: many proverbs also contain embedded social hierarchies, gender expectations, or class assumptions. For instance, some proverbs indirectly reinforce patriarchal values or expectations about women's obedience, which may not align with contemporary ideals of equality. Addressing such limitations provides a more intersectional understanding of how proverbs shape and are shaped by social

identity. Scholars such as Hidayat (2022) and Kartikasari (2023) argue that reinterpreting proverbs in light of gender and class perspectives enriches both their philosophical and educational value.

C. Character Education and Local Wisdom Character education is an essential part of the national education curriculum. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud, 2017), the goal of character education is to shape students to possess strong moral, social, and spiritual values. One proposed approach is to use local wisdom—such as proverbs—as a medium for teaching character. Local wisdom is considered capable of bridging cultural values with educational practices in schools (Sutrisno, 2014). In this context, proverbs can serve as relevant and contextual teaching materials for instilling values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy. Instilling these values from an early age not only strengthens cultural identity but also helps shape children's character rooted in local values.

Recent research (Wibowo, 2022; Putra & Sari, 2023) emphasizes that proverb-based pedagogy should not only highlight moral content but also engage students in critical reflection on how such sayings align—or conflict—with modern realities. For instance, while *bagai pungguk merindukan bulan* teaches acceptance of limitations, educators can also frame it as an entry point to discuss perseverance, aspiration, and constructive coping strategies. Such integration ensures that proverbs are not preserved merely as heritage but actively reinterpreted in the light of current educational needs.

METHODS

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at analyzing the semantic meanings and philosophical values embedded in Indonesian proverbs, as well as their relevance to character education for children based on local wisdom. This approach was chosen because proverbs, as the object of study, possess layers of meaning that are not only literal but also connotative and symbolic, thus requiring interpretative analysis.

The data in this research consist of five proverbs selected purposively: *bagai pungguk merindukan bulan*, *bagai air di daun talas*, *seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi*, *bak telur di ujung tanduk*, and *seperti katak dalam tempurung*. These proverbs were chosen based on the diversity of themes and character values they represent, such as hope, instability, futility, caution, and limited knowledge.

Data collection was conducted through library research, by reviewing various written sources such as proverb dictionaries, linguistic books, previous scholarly works, and character education curriculum documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud). The data were analyzed using Leech's semantic theory (1981) to identify denotative and connotative meanings, and Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach (1976) to uncover the implied philosophical values. To address potential limitations, the analysis also considered contemporary perspectives on gender and educational relevance.

RESULTS

Proverbs are a unique form of linguistic expression that encapsulate cultural wisdom, moral teachings, and shared values within a community. In the Indonesian context, proverbs serve not only as tools for communication but also as powerful instruments for character development and moral reflection. This study explores the semantic dimensions of several widely known Indonesian proverbs and how their meanings contribute to the cultivation of character values in educational settings. By analyzing these expressions from lexical, contextual, and connotative perspectives, the research uncovers deeper layers of meaning that are often overlooked. The following findings highlight the philosophical and educational significance embedded in these traditional sayings.

The findings reveal that Indonesian proverbs hold profound semantic and philosophical dimensions that are relevant to contemporary education, particularly in shaping children's character. Semantically, the proverbs convey layered meanings that often go beyond their literal sense, using metaphorical expressions to embed moral lessons and social norms. Philosophically, they encapsulate indigenous wisdom that emphasizes balance, communal values, respect for elders, perseverance, and responsibility. These values remain pertinent to character education in modern contexts, offering culturally rooted alternatives to imported frameworks of moral instruction.

Additionally, the stylistic elements of proverbs—such as metaphor, parallelism, and rhythmic conciseness—emerge as significant factors in their effectiveness. These literary features not only enhance memorability and aesthetic appeal but also play a crucial role in identity formation, cultural continuity, and the transmission of values across generations. The findings also highlight that proverbs often reflect implicit perspectives on gender and social roles. While some proverbs reinforce traditional expectations of women and men, others encourage balance, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. This suggests that proverbs can serve as both mirrors of cultural norms and tools for rethinking them in light of contemporary understandings of gender equality.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that the use of proverbs in education can bridge intergenerational gaps by connecting children with the wisdom of their ancestors. In the context of globalization and digital communication, where oral traditions face the risk of marginalization, proverbs provide a pathway for sustaining cultural identity while simultaneously fostering critical thinking and moral reasoning.

Semantic Meaning in Proverbs

Data 1

Bagai pungguk merindukan bulan
Chasing rainbows

The proverb “Bagai pungguk merindukan bulan” (Like an owl longing for the moon) lexically refers to the pungguk, a type of nocturnal owl, yearning for the moon—an object of beauty that is distant and unattainable. In semantic analysis, this proverb carries a strong connotative meaning. According to Leech (1981), connotative meaning includes the emotional and cultural associations attached to a word or expression, differing from denotative meaning, which is literal. In this context, the pungguk symbolizes a person who is full of longing but powerless, while the moon represents an unreachable hope or love. Palmer (1981) emphasizes that idiomatic meanings like this cannot be separated from the cultural context and the collective experiences of a society. The emotional connotation of this proverb reflects sadness, regret, and unreciprocated yearning—a representation of unrequited love or empty dreams.

In the context of children’s character education, this proverb can serve as a reflective and narrative tool to instill life values. Thomas Lickona (1991) states that character education aims to develop individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also morally and emotionally strong. By understanding this proverb, children are encouraged to learn about acceptance, sincerity, and emotional maturity—that not everything one desires can be attained, and that such limitations do not mark the end of everything. On the other hand, a semantic understanding of this expression also enriches critical thinking skills and sensitivity to symbolic meaning in language, which is important in shaping emotionally resilient children who are rooted in local culture. This proverb can be a starting point to discuss values such as self-awareness, the limits of reality, and perseverance, making it part of a learning process that is not only linguistic, but also humanistic.

Data 2

Bagai air di daun talas
Blowing hot and cold

This proverb literally describes the condition of water that never stays on the surface of a taro leaf because its surface is slippery, causing the water to slide off easily. Contextually, the proverb symbolizes a person who lacks conviction, is easily influenced, and is inconsistent in attitude or thought. The connotative meaning of this proverb carries a critique of immaturity of character, particularly regarding firmness of heart and consistency of values. In semantic studies, Leech (1981) states that connotative meaning reflects the social and cultural values internalized in language expressions. Therefore, this proverb conveys not only a literal meaning but also a moral message about the importance of integrity and stability in thinking and acting.

In the context of children’s character education, the values contained in this proverb are highly relevant to be taught from an early age. Firm principles and steady attitudes are part of the strong character that the national education curriculum aims to cultivate (Kemendikbud, 2017). According to Lickona (1991), character education must include the dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, which can only grow when children learn not to be indecisive in facing life’s choices. Using proverbs as a teaching medium

can be an effective approach because they convey values through symbols that are easy to understand and closely tied to local culture. By encouraging children to understand and reflect on proverbs like "*Bagai air di daun talas*" (*Like water on a taro leaf*), teachers and parents can help them develop steadfastness, responsibility, and resilience against external influences.

Data 3

Seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi
Like water off a duck's back

"Seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi" describes a situation in which advice, kindness, or efforts leave no lasting impact on the person receiving them. Lexically, a *daun keladi* has a slippery surface, so water poured onto it will immediately roll off and not be absorbed. In contextual meaning, this symbolizes that any form of goodness, education, or guidance given to someone becomes meaningless because it is not accepted or internalized. Semantically, this proverb conveys associations with the concepts of futility and indifference, which, according to Leech (1981), fall under connotative meaning that expresses cultural values and collective emotions. Its semantic effect evokes negative emotions such as frustration, disappointment, and regret, especially from those who have made efforts to offer guidance or kindness.

In the context of children's character education, this proverb serves as a reminder to educators and parents that moral values instilled from an early age will not be effective unless accompanied by the right approach and a supportive environment. According to Thomas Lickona (1991), character education is not merely about teaching values, but also about internalizing them through habituation and role modeling. If children only receive advice as information, without genuine examples or positive reinforcement, then those values will "*roll off*" *without a trace*—just like mencurahkan air ke daun keladi. Therefore, character education strategies must consider emotional and contextual approaches, to ensure that these values are deeply rooted and do not disappear easily.

Data 4

Bak telur di ujung tanduk
On a knife's edge

Lexically, this proverb depicts a highly fragile and precarious condition, where an egg—a delicate and easily broken object—is placed on the tip of a horn, which is sharp and unstable. Contextually, the proverb is used to describe a situation or someone's position that is extremely critical, requiring caution and full awareness, as every move or decision could lead to destruction. In semantic analysis, this meaning is hyperbolic, referring to the use of exaggerated expressions to emphasize the intensity of tension (Cruse, 2000). Words such as "*fragile*," "*critical*," and "*hidden danger*" reinforce the connotative meaning to create a psychological effect on the listener or reader—namely a sense of alertness and anxiety about possible adverse outcomes.

In the context of character education, this proverb is relevant as a symbol of the importance of caution, responsibility, and prudence in decision-making, especially among children and adolescents who are still shaping their identity. According to Lickona (1991), character education should develop students' ability to think morally and act wisely when facing challenges. Teaching the meaning of this proverb to learners can strengthen moral awareness that life sometimes presents critical situations, requiring self-control, reflection, and wisdom in taking action. Thus, this proverb serves not only as a language lesson, but also as an educational tool for shaping children's character to become resilient and vigilant in navigating life.

Data 5

Seperti katak dalam tempurung
To live in a bubble

"Seperti katak dalam tempurung" is a strong semantic and cultural image illustrating the limitation of perspective caused by a lack of openness to external information and knowledge. Lexically, this proverb describes a frog living inside a coconut shell, believing that the narrow space is the whole world. Contextually, it criticizes individuals who isolate themselves from progress, are unwilling to learn new things, or are unaware of the vast world beyond their confined surroundings. This aligns with Geoffrey Leech's (1981) idea that connotative meaning reflects the social and cultural values embedded in linguistic expressions. In this case, the proverb conveys a critique of stagnation and narrow-mindedness.

From the perspective of character education, this proverb emphasizes the importance of openness, curiosity, and the willingness to learn. Thomas Lickona (1991) asserts that character education should foster values like curiosity and open-mindedness in children from an early age. *Seperti katak dalam tempurung* can serve as a pedagogical tool to teach children that living with limited information hinders personal and social growth. Therefore, the use of proverbs in educational contexts not only enhances children's linguistic competence but also instills moral and social values, contributing to the development of strong character that is adaptable to change.

The Philosophy Behind Proverbs: Local Wisdom in Language

The proverb “*bagai pungguk merindukan bulan*” teaches the importance of accepting the reality of life. It describes a deep longing or desire that is unlikely to be fulfilled, becoming a symbol of unreciprocated love or unattainable hopes. This philosophy is essential to be instilled in children's character education so they learn to accept reality, manage expectations, and avoid getting trapped in burdensome fantasies. Children who understand this will grow into resilient and wise individuals when facing disappointment.

The proverb “*bagai air di daun talas*” highlights the need to have firmness of heart and clear principles in life. A person who lacks conviction will be easily swayed and difficult to trust. In character education, this philosophy emphasizes the importance of consistency, integrity, and clarity of stance. A child who is taught to uphold principles will be more capable of making responsible decisions and less likely to be influenced by peer pressure or external forces.

The expression “*seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi*” serves as a reminder that not all good deeds will be accepted, and not all advice will be heeded. This philosophy is crucial in shaping empathy and wisdom. Children need to learn that kindness must be accompanied by sincerity, but also that wisdom is needed to assess others' readiness to receive it. It also teaches the importance of appreciating others' efforts and being open to advice and learning.

The proverb “*bak telur di ujung tanduk*” illustrates the importance of caution in dealing with critical and risky situations. This philosophy emphasizes the values of carefulness, patience, and precision in taking action. In character education, it serves as a foundation for teaching children not to act recklessly, to think before acting, and to manage pressure wisely. A child who learns to remain calm during crucial moments will be better prepared to face life's challenges.

The proverb “*seperti katak dalam tempurung*” is a reminder not to limit ourselves to the narrow space we are familiar with. Its philosophy underscores the importance of openness to knowledge, new experiences, and developments in the outside world. In the context of character education, it encourages children to become lifelong learners, to never be easily satisfied, and to maintain a strong sense of curiosity. Open-minded children will find it easier to grow and adapt to changing times.

The proverb “*bagai api dalam sekam*” conveys the idea that unresolved anger, hidden resentment, or suppressed problems can erupt unexpectedly and cause greater harm. This wisdom is vital in character education, as it teaches children to manage emotions openly and healthily. Suppressing negative feelings without resolution can lead to conflict and emotional distress. Educating children to express feelings constructively and resolve disagreements peacefully builds emotional intelligence and fosters healthier relationships with others.

Another meaningful proverb, “*sambil menyelam minum air*”, emphasizes the value of efficiency and the ability to seize multiple benefits from a single effort. This philosophy supports the development of strategic thinking and wise time management in children. Teaching this concept encourages learners to be resourceful, make the most of every opportunity, and integrate learning with real-life experiences. Such a mindset helps children grow into productive individuals who value initiative and purposeful action.

Proverbs contain a philosophy of life born from the collective experiences of society and passed down through generations. The values contained in proverbs are not only aesthetic or literary, but also profound morally and ethically. The philosophy in proverbs often reflects principles such as patience, honesty, hard work,

determination, and acceptance of life's realities. Therefore, proverbs are an effective medium for conveying moral teachings in a subtle yet powerful way, conveyed through memorable and meaningful expressions.

In the context of character education, the philosophy of proverbs can be used as a tool to instill noble values from an early age. These wise expressions help children understand life situations in a more reflective and meaningful way. Children learn that life is full of challenges and choices, and the importance of having principles, empathy, and wisdom in their actions. By understanding the philosophy of proverbs, children not only gain cultural knowledge but are also guided to become resilient, open, and moral individuals in facing the realities of life.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Indonesian proverbs not only contain profound philosophical values but also possess semantic power that plays a crucial role in shaping meaning and conveying moral messages. Through an analysis of the proverbs *bagai pungguk merindukan bulan*, *bagai air di daun talas*, *seperti mencurahkan air ke daun keladi*, *bak telur di ujung tanduk*, and *seperti katak dalam tempurung*, it was found that the lexical, contextual, and connotative meanings embedded within them imply character values such as self-awareness, firmness, appreciation of effort, vigilance, and openness to knowledge.

From a semantic perspective, proverbs demonstrate the relationship between language and cultural values, in which the meanings formed reflect society's perspectives on life and morality. In the context of character education, proverbs can be used as an effective medium for instilling noble values through a symbolic and deeply meaningful linguistic approach. Therefore, proverbs can serve as a bridge between the richness of local culture and the development of children's character rooted in moral, social, and emotional values.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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