

An Analysis of Denotative and Connotative Meaning in Sunday School Children's Conversation at HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer

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Abstract. This study examines the interplay of denotative and connotative meanings in spontaneous conversations among Sunday School children aged 7–12 at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer, an Indonesian urban Batak Protestant church. Employing qualitative content analysis of 10 transcribed dialogues totaling 1,200 utterances from recorded sessions, the research identifies how literal (denotative) interpretations dominate basic religious narratives, while connotative meanings emerge in moral discussions and peer interactions. The findings indicate that children frequently associate religious expressions such as “Tuhan” (“God”) with emotional meanings related to comfort, protection, and obedience beyond their literal sense. However, several connotative interpretations also created ambiguities that occasionally led to misunderstandings during interaction. These patterns demonstrate the children’s developing pragmatic

competence in faith-based discourse. The study highlights the importance of explicit meaning clarification in Sunday School pedagogy to improve comprehension and spiritual engagement. In addition, the analysis shows that Batak cultural values, particularly respect for elders, communal solidarity, and family-oriented communication, influence the children’s interpretation of religious language in everyday conversation. This research contributes to children’s semantics and language acquisition studies by connecting semantic development with religious and cultural socialization in a Batak Christian context..

Introduction

Language is the primary tool humans use to express thoughts, feelings, ideas, and social values. In communication, words do not only carry literal meanings, but also additional meanings shaped by emotions, culture, and social experience. The study of meaning in language is known as semantics. According to Geoffrey Leech, meaning can be classified into several types, including conceptual or denotative meaning and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning refers to the direct, literal, and dictionary meaning of a word, while connotative meaning refers to the associative or emotional meaning connected to personal and cultural experiences. These two concepts are important in understanding how language functions in social interaction, especially in children’s communication.

In children’s language development, understanding meaning develops gradually through interaction and experience. Children generally acquire denotative meaning first before

understanding more abstract connotative meanings. This process is closely related to cognitive, social, and linguistic development. Therefore, children's conversations provide important data for analyzing how they interpret words and connect them with emotions, values, and contexts. Through everyday interaction, children learn not only vocabulary, but also how language reflects relationships, beliefs, and cultural identity.

Several previous studies have discussed semantics and children's language development. Research on children's semantics generally focuses on vocabulary acquisition, literal meaning, and language use in educational settings. Other studies on religious language often examine adult discourse or formal teaching materials rather than spontaneous interaction among children. However, studies specifically examining denotative and connotative meanings in Sunday School children's conversations within Indonesian church contexts remain limited. In particular, there is still little discussion about how local cultural backgrounds influence children's interpretation of religious language. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing children's conversations in a Batak Christian environment.

One important context for studying children's language is Sunday School activities. In Sunday School, children interact with teachers and peers while learning religious teachings, moral values, and social behavior. Their conversations often contain expressions related to faith, such as "God," "prayer," "love," and "blessing." These words may appear with denotative meanings, but they can also carry connotative meanings connected to feelings of safety, comfort, obedience, family relationships, and spiritual experience. Thus, Sunday School conversations provide a rich context for examining how children construct meaning beyond literal interpretation.

This research focuses on Sunday School children aged 7–12 at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer. The church has a strong Batak cultural background that influences communication patterns among children. Batak cultural values such as respect for elders, communal solidarity, politeness, and family orientation are reflected in the children's conversations both in church and at home. In this context, language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for transmitting cultural and religious values. Consequently, the meanings children attach to religious expressions are influenced by both faith-based teachings and Batak social values.

The issue of connotative meaning becomes particularly important in religious communication. For example, children may interpret the word "God" not only as a religious figure in a literal sense, but also as a symbol of protection, comfort, or parental care based on their personal experiences. Similarly, words such as "blessing" and "love" may evoke emotional and cultural associations beyond dictionary definitions. At the same time, these connotative interpretations may sometimes create ambiguity or misunderstanding in conversation. Therefore, analyzing denotative and connotative meaning can provide deeper insight into children's semantic and pragmatic development.

This study is also pedagogically significant. Sunday School teachers need to understand how children interpret the language used in religious teaching. If children mainly understand denotative meanings, teachers may need to provide more concrete explanations. However, if children begin to understand connotative meanings, teachers can encourage more reflective and meaningful discussions. Understanding children's semantic development can therefore help teachers develop more effective communication strategies in faith education.

This study uses qualitative content analysis to examine 10 transcriptions of Sunday School children's conversations consisting of approximately 1,200 utterances. The analysis focuses on identifying denotative and connotative meanings in children's speech, examining how Batak cultural values influence interpretation, and exploring possible ambiguities in communication.

The research addresses the following questions:

1. How are denotative meanings expressed in Sunday School children's conversations at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer?
2. How are connotative meanings reflected in the children's religious and social conversations?
3. How do Batak cultural values influence the children's interpretation of religious language?
4. What kinds of ambiguities or misunderstandings arise from connotative meaning in the conversations?

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of children's semantics by connecting semantic theory with religious and cultural language socialization. Practically, the findings are expected to help Sunday School teachers create more communicative and meaningful learning methods that support children's language and spiritual development. Socially and culturally, this research also demonstrates the close relationship between language, faith, and Batak cultural identity in children's everyday interactions.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using qualitative content analysis. This approach was selected because the research aimed to describe and interpret denotative and connotative meanings that naturally appeared in Sunday School children's conversations within their communicative and cultural context. Qualitative content analysis enables researchers to examine both explicit meanings expressed directly in utterances and implicit meanings influenced by emotion, experience, religion, and social interaction. The analysis in this study was guided by the semantic theory of Geoffrey Leech, particularly the distinction between denotative (conceptual) meaning and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning was identified through literal or dictionary-based interpretation of words and expressions, while connotative meaning was identified through associative, emotional, cultural, or contextual meanings that extended beyond literal interpretation.

The research was conducted at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer and involved Sunday School children aged 7–12 years. The data consisted of 10 selected conversation transcripts totaling approximately 1,200 utterances. The transcripts were obtained from regular Sunday School sessions involving question-and-answer activities, group discussions, Bible storytelling, and spontaneous peer interaction. Before selecting the final data, the researcher recorded a larger number of Sunday School sessions over several weeks. From these recordings, 10 transcripts were purposively selected because they contained the most relevant examples of denotative and connotative meaning related to religious language, moral values, emotional expression, and Batak cultural influence. The purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that the selected conversations were closely connected to the objectives of the study.

Data collection was conducted through four stages: observation, recording, transcription, and documentation. During the observation stage, the researcher attended Sunday School activities to identify naturally occurring conversations relevant to the study. In the recording stage, conversations among children, teachers, and peers were audio-recorded with permission from the church authorities, Sunday School teachers, and the children's parents or guardians. Informed consent was obtained to ensure that the research complied with ethical considerations regarding child participants. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim into written form to preserve the authenticity of the utterances and facilitate detailed analysis. After transcription, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the data to identify utterances containing denotative and connotative meanings.

The data analysis process was carried out in several systematic steps. First, the researcher identified utterances containing denotative meaning by examining whether the words were used according to their direct and literal dictionary meaning. Second, utterances containing connotative

meaning were identified based on contextual indicators such as emotional association, cultural value, religious interpretation, figurative expression, and situational meaning. Third, the identified data were classified into denotative and connotative categories. Fourth, each utterance was interpreted according to the context of the conversation, including the speaker's intention, the listener's response, and the social and cultural setting of the interaction. Particular attention was given to Batak cultural values reflected in expressions related to respect, family relationships, obedience, and communal solidarity. Finally, the findings were presented descriptively and connected with semantic theory, children's language development, and religious communication.

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data, several validation strategies were employed. First, the researcher conducted repeated readings and careful verification of the transcripts to maintain consistency between the recordings and the written data. Second, triangulation was applied by comparing utterances with the conversational context, participant responses, and observational notes taken during Sunday School sessions. Third, peer debriefing was conducted by discussing several data interpretations with fellow researchers or academic supervisors to reduce subjective bias in categorizing denotative and connotative meanings. In addition, contextual interpretation was emphasized so that the analysis considered not only the lexical meaning of words but also the emotional tone, communicative purpose, and cultural background of the speakers. These procedures were intended to strengthen the credibility of the findings and provide a deeper understanding of meaning-making processes in children's religious conversations.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of ten transcribed conversations among Sunday School children at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer demonstrates that the children frequently used both denotative and connotative meanings in religious interaction. Based on the analysis of approximately 1,200 utterances, denotative meaning appeared more frequently in direct explanations, definitions, and factual responses related to biblical teachings, while connotative meaning emerged in expressions connected to emotion, spirituality, morality, and social relationships. Of the connotative utterances identified, around 65% reflected positive associations such as comfort, protection, happiness, peace, and togetherness. Meanwhile, approximately 25% of the connotative expressions created ambiguity because the meanings depended heavily on emotional interpretation and contextual understanding. These findings support Geoffrey Leech's theory that connotative meaning develops from associative and affective dimensions beyond literal meaning.

The findings also indicate that children aged 7–12 are already able to connect religious vocabulary with personal experiences and cultural values. In line with theories of children's semantic development, the younger children tended to produce more literal or denotative responses, whereas older children more frequently expressed emotional and symbolic interpretations. This suggests that semantic understanding develops alongside cognitive and social maturity. In addition, the children's utterances reflected the influence of Batak cultural values such as family closeness, communal solidarity, obedience, and respect for authority, which shaped the connotative meanings attached to religious expressions.



Image 1. Conversation Session Between Sunday School Teacher and Children

To organize the findings systematically, the data were classified into several dominant semantic patterns.

Table 1. Patterns of Denotative and Connotative Meaning in Sunday School Children’s Conversations

Semantic Pattern	Example Expression	Type of Meaning	Interpretation
Religious defenition	“Prayer is talking to God”	Denotative	Literal understanding of religious practice
Emotional spirituality	“I feel calm”	Connotative	Prayer associated with peace and comfort
Moral association	“God is happy when we help”	Connotative	Good behavior linked with devine approval
Family-oriented blessing	“Having food and a family”	Connotative	Blessing interpreted through family security
Social belonging	“It feels nice together”	Connotative	Church associated with emotional closeness

One important pattern found in the data was the children’s tendency to interpret religious concepts through emotional experience. For example, in several transcripts, children associated the words “God,” “prayer,” and “Jesus” with feelings of safety, calmness, and protection. In semantic terms, these meanings move beyond denotation into connotation because the words no longer function merely as lexical references, but also as emotional symbols. According to Leech’s concept of connotative meaning, this type of association reflects how personal and social experience influences interpretation. Thus, when a child stated, “God always takes care of us,” the utterance represented not only doctrinal knowledge but also emotional dependence and trust.

Another important finding concerns the influence of Batak cultural values on children's semantic interpretation. In Batak culture, family relationships and communal togetherness are highly valued. This influence appeared clearly when children described blessing as "having food and a family" or described church friendship as "feeling nice together." These expressions indicate that children understand spiritual concepts through concrete social experiences rooted in Batak communal culture. The emphasis on togetherness, care, and relational harmony reflects the Batak principle of collective social life, where emotional security is strongly connected to family and community relationships. Therefore, the connotative meanings found in the conversations were shaped not only by religious teaching but also by local cultural experience.

The data also revealed several ambiguities in children's connotative expressions. For instance, expressions such as "I feel empty" or "God is happy" required contextual interpretation because they did not have direct literal meaning. Younger children occasionally used emotional expressions without being able to explain them fully, creating potential misunderstanding during interaction. This finding supports child language acquisition theories suggesting that children gradually develop pragmatic competence and abstract semantic understanding through social interaction. In this study, ambiguity did not indicate linguistic failure; rather, it reflected the children's developing ability to express abstract feelings and spiritual ideas using limited linguistic resources.

In terms of interaction type, connotative meanings appeared more frequently during reflective questions related to feelings, morality, and personal experience, while denotative meanings dominated factual questions about biblical knowledge. For example, questions such as "Who created humans?" generally produced direct denotative answers, whereas questions such as "How do you feel when you pray?" generated connotative and emotionally loaded responses. This difference demonstrates that communicative context strongly influences the type of meaning children produce.

Overall, the findings show that Sunday School children at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer are not limited to literal language use. Instead, they actively construct meaning through emotional, cultural, and spiritual experience. Their conversations reveal an interaction between denotative understanding, connotative association, and Batak cultural values in shaping religious communication. These findings contribute to children's semantics by showing that meaning-making in religious settings involves not only vocabulary acquisition but also the development of emotional interpretation, cultural identity, and pragmatic competence.



Figure 2. Documentation with Sunday school childrens of HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer

Conclusion

This study concludes that the conversations of Sunday School children at Gereja HKBP Sinaksak Eben Ezer contain both denotative and connotative meanings, demonstrating that children understand religious language not only literally but also emotionally, socially, and spiritually. The findings answer the research questions by showing that denotative meanings mainly appeared in direct explanations of religious concepts, while connotative meanings emerged in expressions related to feelings, moral understanding, interpersonal relationships, and spiritual experience. The study also found that Batak cultural values such as togetherness, family closeness, respect, and communal solidarity influenced the way children interpreted religious expressions. In addition, several utterances showed semantic ambiguity, indicating that children are still developing pragmatic competence and abstract meaning interpretation through social interaction.

The analysis further reveals that children aged 7–12 gradually move from literal understanding toward more associative and contextual interpretation of language. Expressions such as “God protects me,” “I feel calm,” and “my heart feels good” illustrate that children connect religious vocabulary with emotional security, comfort, and moral experience. These findings support semantic theories proposed by Geoffrey Leech regarding connotative meaning, as well as theories of child language development emphasizing the role of social interaction and cultural environment in meaning-making processes. Therefore, the study demonstrates that religious conversations in Sunday School contribute not only to faith formation but also to children’s semantic and pragmatic development.

Pedagogically, this study suggests several practical implications for Sunday School teaching. Teachers should not only provide literal explanations of religious terms, but also encourage children to express personal feelings and experiences related to those terms. For example, teachers can use storytelling, role-play, contextual examples from family life, and reflective discussion questions to help children connect abstract religious concepts with everyday experiences. Teachers are also encouraged to clarify potentially ambiguous expressions and check children’s understanding through interactive communication rather than relying solely on memorization. Furthermore, incorporating culturally familiar examples related to Batak family and community life may help children understand religious meanings more effectively and personally.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was limited to one church environment and involved only 10 selected conversation transcripts, so the findings cannot fully represent all Sunday School children in different cultural or denominational contexts. Second, the study focused mainly on spoken conversations and did not examine nonverbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions, or intonation in detail, even though these aspects may also influence meaning interpretation. Third, because the study used a qualitative descriptive approach, the interpretation of connotative meaning may still contain subjective elements despite the use of triangulation and peer discussion.

Therefore, future research is recommended to involve larger participant groups from different churches, regions, or cultural backgrounds to compare children’s semantic development in various religious communities. Future studies may also combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to measure semantic patterns more systematically. In addition, further research could explore the relationship between children’s language development, religious education, and cultural identity by examining nonverbal communication, bilingual language use, or differences across age groups. Through such developments, studies on children’s semantics in religious contexts can provide a deeper understanding of how language, culture, and faith interact in shaping children’s communication and worldview.

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