

Denotative and Connotative Meaning in Bugis: Undergraduate Semantic Competence in a Multilingual Teacher Education Context

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Abstract

This study investigates how undergraduate students conceptualise and articulate denotative and connotative meanings in Bugis, a major regional language in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Framed within semantic theory, cognitive linguistics, and Cultural Linguistics, the research responds to a gap in the literature that has largely focused on Bahasa Indonesia while overlooking regional languages as sites of semantic and cultural competence. Using a qualitative descriptive design supported by descriptive statistics, data were collected from written assignments completed by 11 first-year students in a language and literature education programme. Each student produced one denotative and one connotative Bugis sentence and provided written explanations of meaning. Responses were scored separately for denotative and connotative accuracy and analysed through thematic coding. Findings show that students exhibit near-perfect mastery of denotative meaning ($M = 48.6/50$), with highly consistent performance across participants. By contrast, connotative meaning ($M = 46.8/50$) reveals greater variability in depth, clarity, and cultural precision. Qualitative analysis identifies four interpretive patterns: reliance on familiar metaphors, emotional and relational focus, limited metalinguistic vocabulary, and strong influence of cultural familiarity. These results suggest that while literal semantic competence is well established, figurative competence remains uneven and deeply tied to cultural experience. The study argues that semantics teaching in teacher education should explicitly incorporate regional languages such as Bugis as rich semantic and cultural resources, foregrounding figurative language, metalanguage, and multilingual repertoires to strengthen future teachers' ability to guide learners across literal and figurative levels of meaning.

Keywords: denotation; connotation; Bugis language; figurative language

Introduction

Understanding how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated is central to the study of linguistics. In semantic theory, meaning is not simply a matter of assigning labels to objects or events; rather, it encompasses a complex system of conceptual relations that enable speakers to communicate thoughts, emotions, intentions, and cultural values. One of the most enduring distinctions in semantic studies is the differentiation between denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning refers to the literal, dictionary-based, and referential aspect of meaning what a linguistic expression directly points to in the real world (Lyons, 2022). Connotative meaning, by contrast, involves associative, affective, evaluative, and culturally shaped dimensions of meaning that extend beyond the literal interpretation (Cruse, 2021; Saeed, 2023). These

layers of meaning interact dynamically, demanding both linguistic and cultural competence from speakers.

The distinction between denotation and connotation becomes particularly salient in multilingual and multicultural societies such as Indonesia. As a nation with more than 700 regional languages, Indonesia provides a rich landscape for examining how speakers interpret different layers of meaning. While Bahasa Indonesia serves as the national language, regional languages such as Javanese, Sundanese, Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, and others remain deeply embedded in daily social interactions and cultural identity. These languages carry unique metaphors, idioms, symbolic referents, and culturally specific imagery that require more than a literal semantic understanding. They require contextual sensitivity, cultural literacy, and interpretive skills shaped by sociocultural experience.

The Bugis language, one of the major regional languages of South Sulawesi, is embedded in a long-standing literary and oral tradition, ranging from the epic *La Galigo* to proverbs and ritual narratives that encode agrarian life, seafaring heritage, kinship ethics, and cosmological beliefs (Pelras, 1996). Figurative language in Bugis reflects worldview, social norms, and relational values, making it a fertile ground for examining semantic competence. For example, expressions such as *iyaro bosie terri ri langie* ("hopes as high as the sky") or *matammu na mataku* (an intimate expression of closeness) require understanding beyond literal meaning. A learner may understand the denotative elements sky, eyes, body parts yet still fail to grasp the intended figurative, affective, or symbolic meaning unless they possess sufficient cultural familiarity.

Such linguistic richness presents both opportunities and challenges for students enrolled in teacher education programs. Students in Indonesian Language and Literature Education (PBSI) are expected not only to understand meaning but also to teach meaning, analyze texts, and guide younger learners in interpreting both literal and figurative expressions. Their role as prospective educators requires them to master semantic distinctions, including the ability to explain denotative meaning accurately and interpret connotative meaning comprehensively. This includes recognizing the socio-cultural underpinnings of figurative language and being able to articulate those meanings clearly in pedagogical contexts.

However, empirical observations from classroom interactions reveal that novice university students often struggle with figurative or connotative meaning. They tend to understand literal meanings more quickly because these meanings can be mapped directly onto observable reality. Literal meaning requires minimal cultural inference and is processed more quickly as it is cognitively straightforward (Saeed, 2023). In contrast, connotative meaning requires inferential reasoning: learners must activate cultural scripts, metaphorical associations, and socio-emotional schemata that may not be explicitly taught in formal education. Such competence is not automatic; it must be nurtured through exposure, practice, and metalinguistic reflection.

Previous research on semantic competence among Indonesian learners typically focuses on Bahasa Indonesia especially figurative language in literature, poetry, public discourse, or media texts (Rohmadi, 2021; Ramadani, 2022). While such research has contributed significantly to semantic pedagogy, it has tended to overlook the role of regional languages in shaping students' broader linguistic repertoires. In multilingual contexts like South Sulawesi, ignoring regional languages means ignoring a key component of students' linguistic and cultural identity. Consequently, there remains a notable gap in the literature: little is known about how undergraduate students understand, interpret, and explain denotative and connotative meanings using regional languages such as Bugis.

This gap is important because semantic competence is not merely linguistic competence; it is also cultural competence. Regional languages such as Bugis are rich with metaphors that encapsulate localized values, emotional universes, and socio-cultural practices. Students who fail to grasp these figurative forms often struggle when engaging with culturally embedded texts, including oral traditions, proverbs, chronicles, and everyday expressions. This limitation may later affect their performance as teachers, as they are expected to guide learners in navigating meaning across Indonesian and regional cultural landscapes.

In addition to this pedagogical urgency, cognitive and linguistic theories also underscore the value of studying meaning in multilingual environments. Research in cognitive linguistics has shown that figurative meaning arises from conceptual metaphors that are shaped by culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 2021). Cultural linguistics similarly argues that meaning is never universal; it is mediated by cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors that speakers internalize from their socio-cultural environment (Sharifian, 2020). Therefore, studying Bugis-language connotations offers insight not only into semantic competence but also into how students internalize cultural knowledge.

The Indonesian educational context further reinforces the significance of this study. The Kurikulum Merdeka and the Profil Pelajar Pancasila emphasize cultural rootedness, local wisdom, critical thinking, and linguistic awareness. Students must be trained to interpret meaning at multiple levels, including denotative and connotative dimensions, to meet these competency standards. For teacher education programs, this requires integrating more robust semantic training grounded in regional linguistic resources. Without such integration, semantic instruction risks becoming decontextualized and disconnected from students' linguistic realities.

Within this pedagogical and sociolinguistic context, the present study aims to analyze how undergraduate students conceptualize and articulate denotative and connotative meanings using Bugis expressions. The dataset consists of written assignments from first-year students who were asked to produce one denotative and one connotative Bugis sentence and provide explanations of meaning. This method allows an examination not only of whether students can identify meaning but also how they rationalize, explain, and interpret meaning an essential aspect of teacher education.

The preliminary findings from these written assignments reveal an interesting pattern: students show strong performance in identifying denotative meaning, with most scoring close to perfect. They are able to provide literal interpretations of Bugis expressions, such as statements about observable actions or physical conditions. However, performance in connotative meaning is more varied. While some students demonstrate sophisticated cultural interpretation, others provide incomplete or overly literal explanations of figurative expressions. These variations highlight differing levels of cultural literacy, exposure, interpretive ability, and semantic metacognition among students.

By focusing on Bugis-language expressions, this research contributes to a growing body of literature that advocates for integrating multilingual resources in linguistic education. It highlights the importance of regional languages as rich semantic reservoirs that can strengthen students' interpretive skills. It also addresses a research gap in semantic pedagogy within Indonesian higher education, especially in teacher education programs.

Moreover, this study has broader implications for understanding meaning-making among multilingual speakers. In multilingual contexts, learners constantly navigate between linguistic systems that differ in expressive richness, cultural coding, and semantic patterns. Examining students' abilities to distinguish denotative and

connotative meaning in Bugis provides insight into how multilingual speakers manage semantic complexity and shift between literal and figurative interpretation.

In summary, this study is positioned at the intersection of linguistics, education, and cultural studies. It provides an empirical account of undergraduate students' semantic competence in a culturally rich regional language. It responds to a research gap, aligns with national curriculum priorities, and offers theoretical insights into meaning-making in multilingual settings. Through systematic analysis of student work, the study aims to illuminate how novice learners understand meaning across literal and figurative levels and identify areas where semantic pedagogy can be strengthened. Based on these considerations, the present research seeks to answer the following questions: How accurately do undergraduate students identify denotative meaning in Bugis-language expressions? How accurately do they identify and explain connotative meaning?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by descriptive statistical measures. The qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate for examining how learners articulate and interpret meaning in naturalistic educational contexts, as it allows the researcher to capture the nuances of students' linguistic reasoning, explanations, and meaning-making processes. Rather than testing hypotheses, the purpose of this design is to provide a rich portrayal of students' semantic competence by analyzing the actual expressions they produce and the explanations they offer. Descriptive statistics were used to quantify the accuracy of students' responses, thereby complementing the qualitative insights with measurable indicators of performance. This combination of approaches is widely used in semantic competence and figurative language research, particularly when examining learner interpretations across literal and figurative domains.

Participants

Participants consisted of 11 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in Class A of the Buginess Language and Literature Education Program at Universitas Negeri Makassar. All students were between 18 and 20 years of age and had completed their first semester of foundational linguistic courses. As residents of South Sulawesi, the participants are bilingual or multilingual speakers familiar with both Bahasa Indonesia and at least one regional language, predominantly Bugis. Their background makes them suitable for investigating semantic competence in Bugis-language expressions, as they possess varying degrees of cultural exposure that may influence their interpretation of figurative meanings. Participation was integrated into regular classroom activities, and all students completed the same semantic task as part of their course requirements.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a written assignment designed to elicit students' ability to distinguish between denotative and connotative meanings. Each student was instructed to produce: (1) One denotative sentence in Bugis, accompanied by a literal explanation, and (2) One connotative sentence in Bugis, followed by an explanation of its figurative or cultural meaning.

This format allowed the researcher to examine both their production of expressions and their metalinguistic awareness. Example submissions include *Mukanya manis seperti madu* (a connotative expression submitted by student 240505500006 Aulya Zalsabilah), *Ni langie engka witting* (there are stars in the sky) as a denotative expression from student 240505500009 Sulfiani, and *Iyaro bosie terri ri langie* (hopes as high as the sky) from a

handwritten student submission. All assignments were handwritten, photographed or scanned, and compiled into a dataset for analysis.

Scoring

To assess accuracy, each student received two separate scores, denotative meaning (0–50), assessing literal correctness and clarity. Connotative meaning (0–50), assessing figurative interpretation, cultural appropriateness, and explanatory depth. The maximum total score was 100 points. Scoring criteria included correctness of meaning, relevance of examples, and clarity of written explanation. The scoring rubric allowed both quantitative comparison across students and qualitative reflection on patterns of semantic competence.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding and descriptive statistics. Written responses were coded for (1) Literal accuracy whether the denotative meaning was correctly identified; (2) Cultural interpretation students' ability to recognize socio-cultural nuances in figurative expressions; (3) Metaphor comprehension understanding of symbolic or metaphorical associations. (4) Explanation clarity the precision and completeness of learners' metalinguistic reasoning. Themes emerging from these codes were used to describe students' strengths and difficulties. Quantitative scores were tabulated to provide overall performance indicators. The integration of qualitative and quantitative analysis ensured a comprehensive understanding of students' semantic abilities in distinguishing denotative and connotative meanings.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of written assignments submitted by 11 undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory semantics course. The results are organized into three major components: (1) students' performance in identifying denotative meaning, (2) students' performance in identifying connotative meaning, and (3) types of semantic difficulties observed across participants. Both quantitative scoring and qualitative thematic analysis are integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the learners' semantic competence.

Overall Performance Overview

Quantitative analysis of student scores shows a clear pattern: the participants demonstrated stronger competence in interpreting denotative meaning than connotative meaning. This confirms long-standing claims in semantic acquisition literature that literal meaning is cognitively simpler and more directly accessible to language learners, while figurative meaning demands higher-level inferencing, cultural awareness, and deeper linguistic interpretation.

Across the 11 participants, the mean score for denotative meaning was 48.6/50, indicating near-perfect comprehension. In contrast, the mean score for connotative meaning was 46.8/50, slightly lower and with observable variability. While the difference between the two means seems small numerically, the qualitative data reveal significant distinctions in the precision, confidence, and completeness of student explanations.

What is particularly notable is that even when students successfully produced a connotative Bugis expression, several struggled to articulate its figurative implications. Instead of explaining metaphorical associations, emotional valence, or cultural symbolism, some provided literal translations or incomplete interpretations. The results therefore indicate a need to interpret quantitative scores in light of qualitative data, as numbers alone cannot capture the experiential, cultural, and interpretive challenges that learners encounter when dealing with connotative meaning.

Denotative Meaning Performance Accuracy of Literal Interpretation

Students exhibited high accuracy in producing and explaining denotative expressions. Denotative sentences were typically drawn from everyday actions, observable physical conditions, or straightforward descriptions involving people, objects, or natural phenomena. Examples include sentences describing someone eating, seeing, walking, or the state of objects. These expressions were interpreted correctly with literal explanations that matched the intended referential meaning.

For instance, one student produced the sentence *Ni langie engka witting* (There are stars in the sky), which reflects an observable fact. The student's explanation aligned precisely with the literal meaning, demonstrating full comprehension of denotation. Another student wrote, *Iyaro daeng makunraikku* (She is my older sister), accurately explaining the referential relationship expressed in the sentence. These examples illustrate that students have no difficulty linking linguistic expressions with their real-world referents.

Consistency Across Students

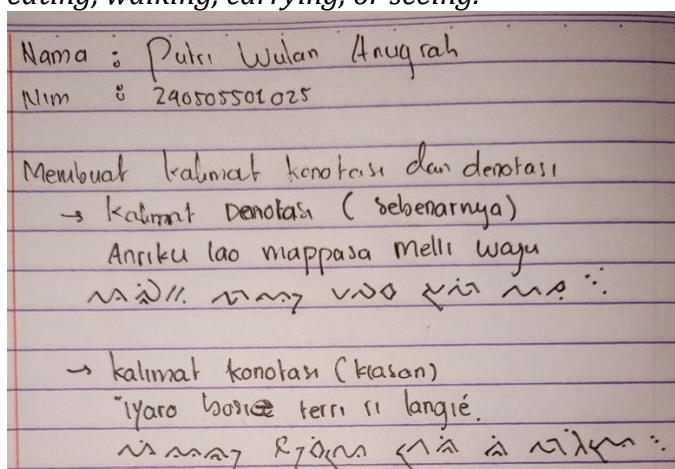
The high degree of consistency across participants suggests that their understanding of literal meaning is relatively homogeneous. Most students scored between 45 and 50 on the denotative task, which indicates both the ease of the task and the students' familiarity with such expressions. Because denotative meaning requires no cultural inference or metaphor recognition, even students with limited semantic metalinguistic skills were able to perform well.

This reflects findings in semantic theory suggesting that the processing of literal meaning relies primarily on basic linguistic decoding, memory, and perception, rather than higher-order reasoning. Nonetheless, subtle differences emerged. A few students wrote correct denotative sentences but provided slightly vague or redundant explanations. Although this did not significantly affect scores, such responses indicate early developmental stages of metalinguistic awareness a skill that becomes crucial as students progress toward more advanced semantic interpretation.

Types of Denotative Expressions Used

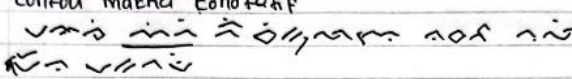
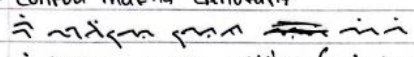
Most denotative sentences fell into three categories:

1. Descriptions of physical actions
eating, walking, carrying, or seeing.



2. Descriptions of natural phenomena
presence of stars, state of weather.

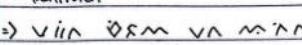
Nama : Sulpiani
Nim : 240505500009
Kelas : A
No urut : 3

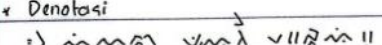
• contoh makna konotatif

 Manca'li wit'ing ri sikotae nasaba tui monnang makatanding
 • contoh makna denotatif

 ri langie engka wit'ing (ada bintang di langit)

3. Descriptions of relational identity
kinship such as sister, younger sibling, or mother.

Nama : NURHAYATI
Nim : 240505500016
Kelas : A PBSO
No-urut : 08

* Tuliskan ^{contoh} ~~makna~~ konotasi dan denotasi dalam kalimat

⇒ 
 makita sibawa mata hoti ditia.
 melihat dengan mata hoti.
 • makna konotasi : memahami sesuatu dengan perasaan atau intuisi, bukan secara literal.

* Denotasi
 ⇒ 
 Iyaro daeng motunraiktu.
 Dia kakak perempuanku
 • makna denotasi : menyatakan hubungan saudara secara langsung.

This pattern shows that students rely heavily on basic vocabulary and everyday expressions when constructing denotative meaning. While appropriate for the task, it also suggests that their semantic repertoire for literal constructs in Bugis may be limited to frequently used, contextually immediate expressions.

Connotative Meaning Performance Variability of Performance

Compared to denotative meaning, connotative meaning elicited more diverse and complex responses. While several students demonstrated a strong ability to identify and explain figurative meanings, others struggled to articulate the symbolic or associative dimensions of the expressions they produced. This variability is crucial, as it indicates that figurative meaning is not evenly internalized among learners even those who share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Some students successfully produced culturally rich expressions such as *Iyaro bosie terri ri langie* (interpreted as hopes as high as the sky), and provided explanations referencing emotional or aspirational meanings. Others offered figurative expressions but

interpreted them too literally or provided minimal commentary, such as simply stating this has a figurative meaning) without further elaboration.

Strengths in Connotative Interpretation

Among the stronger responses, students demonstrated,

1. ***Emotional interpretation***

Students identified expressions of affection, hope, longing, or disappointment embedded in Bugis metaphors.

2. ***Symbolic understanding***

Several students recognized symbolic mappings, such as height representing ambition or sweetness representing kindness and beauty.

3. ***Contextual reasoning***

A few students contextualized expressions within cultural norms, such as familial intimacy, community expectations, or poetic imagery.

These competencies suggest that some learners have developed a culturally grounded semantic awareness enabling them to comprehend figurative meaning beyond dictionary definitions.

Common Areas of Difficulty

Several recurring difficulties emerged in students' interpretation of connotative meaning. Some tended to overgeneralize literally, producing figurative expressions but explaining them in nearly literal terms, indicating incomplete understanding of metaphorical mapping. Others showed limited ability to explain cultural nuance, recognizing figurative meaning but lacking the metalanguage needed to articulate why it was figurative. Students also displayed unfamiliarity with less common idioms, relying heavily on widely used expressions and providing vague interpretations when encountering culturally specific forms. In addition, many reduced connotative meaning to simple aesthetic qualities, such as interpreting Mukanya manis seperti madu only as pretty, without acknowledging deeper cultural associations like kindness or social harmony. These patterns highlight a gap between intuitive comprehension and the analytical skills required for rigorous semantic explanation.

Explanation of Thematic Findings

The qualitative analysis of students' written responses revealed four major themes that illustrate their patterns of interpreting connotative meaning in the Bugis language. First, Reliance on Familiar Metaphors, indicates that most students selected highly common Bugis metaphors frequently used in everyday interaction. This reliance on familiar expressions increases their confidence in interpreting meaning, yet it simultaneously limits their ability to explore more complex idioms or figurative constructions. Second, Emotional and Relational Focus, refers to the tendency of students to use expressions centered on emotions, kinship relations, or social qualities. This finding reflects the cultural characteristics of Bugis discourse, which places emotional and relational values at the core of social interaction, thereby shaping the connotative meanings students produce.

Third, Limited Metalinguistic Vocabulary, highlights students' restricted ability to use technical linguistic terms such as metaphor, symbolism, conceptual blending, or descriptions of affective nuance. This limitation in metalinguistic resources makes it difficult for some students to provide deeper explanations, even though they may intuitively understand the figurative context. Fourth, Influence of Cultural Familiarity, shows that students with strong exposure to Bugis cultural practices are able to offer

richer and more contextual interpretations of connotative expressions. In contrast, students with minimal cultural experience tend to produce literal, shallow, or incomplete interpretations. This underscores that understanding connotative meaning is not merely a linguistic skill, but is strongly tied to cultural experience, social schemata, and knowledge internalized through participation in a speech community.

Quantitative Score Distribution

The quantitative score distribution reinforces the qualitative findings presented earlier. The data show that students demonstrated exceptionally strong mastery of denotative meaning, while performance in connotative meaning displayed greater variability. Out of 11 participants, six students achieved a perfect score (100) on the denotative meaning task, confirming that literal interpretation is highly accessible and consistently understood.

In contrast, performance in connotative meaning was more diverse: nine students scored 45 or higher, indicating adequate to strong understanding of figurative meaning, while three students scored below 45. The lowest score recorded for connotative meaning was 40, suggesting that even lower-performing students recognized the figurative nature of the expressions but lacked the depth required for a fully developed explanation. Overall, the distribution reveals a clear distinction between the stability of literal comprehension and the more variable, culturally dependent nature of figurative interpretation.

Table 1. Summary of Quantitative Score Distribution

Assessment Category	Score Range	Number of Students (n=11)	Interpretation
Denotative Meaning	100	6	Excellent mastery of literal interpretation; highly consistent performance.
	95–99	5	Accurate literal interpretation with minimal variation.
Connotative Meaning	≥ 45	9	Adequate-to-strong understanding of figurative meaning.
	< 45	3	Limited depth in explaining figurative or culturally embedded meanings.
Lowest Connotative Score	40	1	Recognizes figurative intent but demonstrates insufficient explanatory depth.

Discussion

Strong Mastery of Denotative Meaning

The quantitative data show that students' mastery of denotative meaning is very strong: six of eleven participants obtained a perfect score (100), while the remaining students were also in the high band. This confirms that literal, referential meaning is cognitively more accessible than figurative or culturally layered meaning, as it relies mainly on straightforward lexical-referential mapping rather than complex inferencing. Similar patterns are reported in recent work on semantic control and lexical-semantic processing, which shows that accessing dominant, literal meanings is less demanding than selecting weakly associated or non-literal senses (Heo & Kim, 2023). Studies in language and literacy education further suggest that classroom tasks focused on basic comprehension and literal recall are typically easier for learners than those requiring interpretive, evaluative, or symbolic reading (Reynolds, D. (2022)). In this study, denotative Bugis sentences mostly described concrete actions, observable states, or

simple kinship relations, which are highly frequent in students' daily discourse and therefore quickly and consistently understood.

Variable but Generally Adequate Connotative Understanding

In contrast, performance on connotative meaning was more heterogeneous. Nine students scored 45 or above, yet three fell below 45, with the lowest score at 40. This indicates that most students can recognise that an expression is figurative, but the depth, clarity, and cultural precision of their explanations vary considerably. Recent research on figurative language comprehension in diverse learner populations similarly finds a gap between recognising figurativeness and fully unpacking metaphorical mappings and cultural implications (Bühler & Pouscoulous, 2018). Work on metaphor and symbol in school settings also shows that children and adolescents often respond affectively to figurative language (e.g., "beautiful", "interesting"), yet struggle to articulate the underlying conceptual structures or value systems encoded in metaphors and symbols. (Ashton, E., 2022). The connotative scores in this study reflect the same pattern: even lower-scoring students understood that Bugis expressions such as *Iyaro bosie terri ri langie* are non-literal, but many provided only brief or partially literal explanations.

Cultural Grounding and Multilingual Repertoires as Key Resources

Qualitative coding revealed that students with strong Bugis cultural exposure produced richer, more nuanced interpretations of connotative meaning than those with weaker cultural ties. They were better able to link figurative expressions to local moral values, emotional norms, and relational expectations. This confirms insights from Cultural Linguistics and intercultural language education, which emphasise that metaphor and connotation are anchored in culture-specific schemas, scenarios, and categories (Polzenhagen, F., & Reif, M. (2023). Recent analyses of cultural content in language textbooks and teaching materials show that neglecting local cultural representations can limit learners' ability to interpret culturally embedded meanings and identities in texts (Dahmardeh, M., & Kim, S. D. (2021). In contrast, studies advocating culturally responsive and multilingual pedagogies argue that integrating learners' heritage languages and cultural repertoires such as Bugis enhances both semantic depth and critical engagement with texts. (Doganay & Yergaliyeva, 2013). The present findings support these claims by demonstrating that connotative competence is not merely a linguistic skill but also a form of cultural knowledge and identity work.

Limited Metalinguistic Vocabulary and Explanation Depth

A central theme in the data is students' limited metalinguistic vocabulary. Many participants sensed that an expression was metaphorical or culturally loaded but did not use analytic terms such as metaphor, symbolism, conceptual mapping, or affective nuance in their explanations. This constraint led to short, impressionistic comments rather than systematic analyses. Recent work on teacher education and linguistic awareness notes a similar problem: pre-service teachers often lack the disciplinary metalanguage needed to talk about language form, meaning, and ideology in precise ways.

Research on pragmatic and semantic competence also shows that the ability to explain why an utterance is figurative, polite, ironic, or culturally specific is a more advanced skill than simply understanding it in context (Cushing, 2018). Studies in creativity and writing pedagogy further highlight that developing students' use of figurative language in narrative, poetry, and multimodal tasks requires explicit discussion of how metaphors work conceptually and rhetorically. The present study echoes these findings: students'

partial explanations suggest intuitive understanding without a fully developed analytical toolkit.

Alignment with Emerging Work on Figurative Language in Teacher Education

The reliance on familiar metaphors, emotional and relational themes, and variable explanation depth in this study resonates with recent research on figurative language in teacher education and classroom practice. Studies of pre-service language teachers' perceptions show that they generally view metaphor and figurative language as important, but feel uncertain about how to teach these systematically (Mao & He, 2021). Other work explores how metaphors can function as tools for critical reflection and as frames for understanding teaching, learning, and educational leadership, showing that figurative language shapes how teachers conceptualise their roles and students (Deveci, 2021). In literacy and language-arts contexts, research has demonstrated the value of text sets, guided reading, and arts-based tasks that foreground figurative language, encouraging learners to identify, interpret, and creatively use metaphors and other figures.

These approaches are consistent with the present study's implication that explicit, scaffolded work with Bugis figurative expressions could deepen students' connotative understanding and metalinguistic awareness.

The findings of this study align with previous research demonstrating that meaning-making is closely intertwined with identity, social experience, and cultural background. Jahrir (2025) argues that language functions as a space where Indonesian emerging adults negotiate identity, emotions, and social positioning, suggesting that the ability to interpret meaning—especially connotative and interpersonal meaning—is never neutral but shaped by cultural experiences and personal histories. This resonates with the present study, in which students with stronger exposure to Bugis cultural contexts produced richer and more nuanced interpretations of connotative expressions, whereas those with limited cultural familiarity provided more literal or superficial explanations. Furthermore, Jahrir and Sam's (2025) critical discourse analysis of English textbooks in the Merdeka Curriculum shows that linguistic representations in educational materials often contain embedded values, ideologies, and perspectives that require critical interpretation rather than merely literal comprehension. This corresponds with the present findings: while some students demonstrated awareness of emotional, symbolic, and relational meanings within Bugis expressions, others struggled due to limited metalanguage and cultural grounding.

Collectively, these studies underline that semantic competence is not purely linguistic but inherently cultural and critical—a perspective that strengthens the interpretation of the current study's results. Without being equipped to engage with language multidimensionally, including its interpersonal, identity-related, and socio-cultural dimensions, pre-service teachers risk teaching only static, literal meanings. As highlighted by previous research (Jahrir, 2025; Jahrir & Sam, 2025), meaningful language education must foster the ability to interpret figurative meanings, cultural associations, and ideological representations. Accordingly, integrating regional languages such as Bugis into semantic instruction becomes a strategic approach for developing deeper, more holistic, and contextually grounded interpretive competence among future educators.

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