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**NON-EQUIVALENCE IN MUSICAL LANGUAGE:  
A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH TERMS IN INDONESIAN MUSIC PRACTICE**

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**Abstrak**

*Penelitian ini mengkaji tantangan yang terkait dengan penerjemahan terminologi musik bahasa Inggris ke dalam Bahasa Indonesia, dengan fokus pada lima istilah utama: groove, swing, soul, feel, dan jam session. Data empiris dikumpulkan melalui metodologi deskriptif kualitatif, yang mencakup tinjauan pustaka dan wawancara semi-terstruktur yang dilakukan dengan lima musisi profesional Indonesia. Kerangka analisis didasarkan pada Teori Non-Ekuivalensi Mona Baker (1992), yang didukung oleh konstruksi teoretis semantik dan pragmatik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ekspresi musik ini mengandung lapisan semantik yang kaya dan nuansa budaya yang tidak memiliki padanan yang tepat dalam bahasa Indonesia. Di Indonesia, musisi umumnya lebih memilih untuk mempertahankan terminologi bahasa Inggris asli karena kekayaan ekspresif dan kejelasan fungsionalnya dalam konteks praktis. Strategi seperti peminjaman, parafrase, dan kesetaraan deskriptif ditemukan lebih efektif.*

**Kata kunci:** *Terminologi Musik Bahasa Inggris, Tantangan Penerjemahan, Non-Equivalence*

**Abstract**

This research investigates the challenges associated with the translation of English musical terminology into Bahasa Indonesia, with a focus on five essential terms: groove, swing, soul, feel, and jam session. Empirical data were collected through a qualitative descriptive methodology, which included a literature review and semi-structured interviews conducted with five professional Indonesian musicians. The analytical framework is grounded in Mona Baker's Theory of Non-Equivalence (1992), supported by semantic and pragmatic theoretical constructs. The results indicate that these musical expressions contain rich semantic layers and cultural nuances that do not have precise Indonesian equivalents. In Indonesia, musicians generally prefer to retain the original English terminology due to its expressive richness and functional clarity in practical contexts. Strategies such as borrowing, paraphrasing, and descriptive equivalence were found to be more effective.

**Keywords:** English Musical Terminology, Translation Challenges, Non-Equivalence

## 1. Introduction

Language plays a central role in the development and transmission of knowledge within specialized professional fields. In music practice, language functions not only as a medium for general communication but also as a vehicle for describing performance techniques, stylistic expressions, and performances or other collaborative musical activities. Musicians frequently employ specific terms to convey musical ideas, interpret rhythmic patterns, and coordinate performance during rehearsals and live performances.

Within this context, the study of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) examines how language adapts to the communicative needs of particular professional communities. Each discipline develops its own specialized vocabulary that reflects its conceptual framework and practical activities. In the field of music, many technical expressions originate from English and are widely used by musicians worldwide, including in Indonesia. This phenomenon is particularly evident in music, where technical vocabulary operates differently from everyday language (Hyland, 2019).

The widespread use of English terminology in music communication often creates challenges in translation. Certain musical expressions represent complex concepts that involve stylistic interpretation, performance practice, and shared musical experience. As a result, some terms lack direct lexical equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia, creating difficulties in conveying the full meaning of these expressions across linguistic boundaries.

One theoretical framework that explains this phenomenon is Baker's concept of non-equivalence in translation. Baker argues that non-equivalence occurs when a concept expressed in the source language does not have a direct counterpart in the target language. In such cases, translators may apply several strategies, including borrowing the original term, paraphrasing the meaning, or providing descriptive explanations to convey the concept accurately (Baker, 1992; Baker & Saldanha, 2020).

In addition to translation theory, semantic and pragmatic perspectives are relevant for analyzing musical terminology. From a semantic perspective, lexical meaning involves both denotative and connotative aspects that shape how a word represents a concept. Musical expressions often carry layers of meaning that extend beyond their dictionary definitions. Meanwhile, pragmatic analysis emphasizes the role of context and shared knowledge in interpreting meaning. In musical interaction, many expressions gain

meaning through performance practice and the collective understanding shared among musicians. Both perspectives help reveal how musical terms carry meanings in practice that extend beyond dictionary definitions.

Despite the frequent use of English musical terminology in Indonesian music communities, limited systematic attention has been given to how these expressions are interpreted and translated in Indonesian linguistic contexts. Therefore, this study examines five English musical terms commonly used in Indonesian musical practice: *groove*, *swing*, *soul*, *feel*, and *jam session*. These terms were selected because they frequently appear in rehearsals, music education, and performance discussions, and they represent musical concepts that involve expressive interpretation and collaborative performance, making them particularly challenging to translate into Bahasa Indonesia.

Understanding how such terminology functions across languages is important not only for translation studies but also for the study of professional discourse in music communities. Although previous studies have discussed translation challenges in specialized terminology, limited research has examined how English musical terminology is interpreted and used by Indonesian musicians in practical performance contexts. This study therefore aims to address that gap by offering a closer and more systematic look at how these terms are understood and communicated within Indonesian musical communities.

The concept of non-equivalence in translation, as introduced by Mona Baker (1992), provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study. Baker identifies non-equivalence as a central challenge in translation, occurring when a concept in the source language lacks a direct lexical counterpart in the target language. Non-equivalence may arise at various levels, including the word level, the grammatical level, and the textual and pragmatic levels. When word-level non-equivalence occurs, translators may resort to strategies such as borrowing the source-language term, using a more general word, adopting a loan translation, or providing a descriptive equivalent (Baker, 1992; Munday, 2016).

In the context of specialized professional discourse, non-equivalence is particularly common when concepts are deeply embedded in a specific cultural or professional context that is not shared by the target-language community. Musical terminology presents an illustrative case, as many English musical expressions carry

historical, stylistic, and performative connotations that resist simple translation. Alongside translation theory, semantic analysis offers further insight into how meaning is structured in musical terminology.

Semantic theory distinguishes between denotative meaning — the literal definition of a word — and connotative meaning, which involves associative and contextual interpretations (Hurford, Heasley, & Smith, 2017). Musical terminology frequently carries strong connotative dimensions related to musical style, emotional expression, and performance practices that extend far beyond simple dictionary definitions.

Pragmatic analysis, as articulated by Yule (2020), examines how meaning is constructed through language use within specific contexts. In musical rehearsals and performances, meaning is frequently negotiated through shared professional experience rather than through lexical definition alone. Terms acquire nuanced, context-dependent meanings that are understood intuitively by practitioners who share similar performance backgrounds.

The LSP framework provides an additional theoretical lens for understanding the specialized vocabulary of music. This study is limited by the small number of participants and its focus on contemporary Indonesian musicians. Hyland (2019) argues that professional communities develop distinctive lexical and discourse resources that reflect the epistemological and practical demands of their fields. In music, the widespread use of English terminology among professionals reflects not only the global reach of popular music culture, but also how naturally these terms fit the practical demands of performance and collaboration. This study contributes to translation studies by highlighting how musical terminology operates as culturally embedded professional discourse that resists direct lexical transfer.

## **2. Methodology**

### **Method**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate English musical terminology that does not have direct lexical equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to explore linguistic meanings, cultural nuances, and contextual interpretations rather than to measure statistical

frequency. Qualitative linguistic research allows scholars to examine language phenomena in depth, particularly when meanings are shaped by cultural practices and professional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis is guided by Baker’s (1992) concept of non-equivalence, combined with semantic and pragmatic analytical frameworks. The research focuses on five English musical terms: *groove*, *swing*, *soul*, *feel*, and *jam session*.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five professional Indonesian musicians who have extensive experience performing in jazz, pop, and contemporary music settings. Participant profiles are summarized in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Participant Profiles**

Code	Instrument / Role	Experience (years)	Primary Genre	Education	Affiliation
M1	Drummer	30+	Jazz, pop, Contemporary	S2 Music	Independent Musician / Educator
M2	Bassist	32+	Jazz, Pop	S2 Management	Tulus group/ Educator
M3	Guitarist	20+	Pop, hard rock, Contemporary	S2 Music	Bandleader / Educator
M4	Keyboardist	30+	Jazz, pop	S1 - architecture	Independent musician, educator
M5	Vocalist / Arranger	25+	Jazz, Soul, pop	S2 Music	Music Teacher / Performer

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a semi-structured, conversational format to encourage natural and reflective responses. All participants were informed of the study’s purpose and provided verbal consent to participate. Data were anonymized using the participant codes shown above (M1–M5).

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected from two primary sources. First, lexical definitions were obtained from well-known English music dictionaries and academic source, including *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, and *Oxford Music Online*, in order to identify the semantic characteristics of each term within English-language discourse. Second, qualitative data were gathered through the semi-structured interviews individually with participants M1–M5.

The interview questions explored several dimensions related to the use and understanding of the selected musical terms. Participants were asked to explain how they understand and define these terms in their own words, based on their experience as musicians. They were also asked to describe how the terms are commonly used in communication during rehearsals, performance or other collaborative musical activities. In addition, the interviews examined whether they tend to use Indonesian equivalents of these terms or prefer to retain the original English expressions in practice. Finally, they were asked how they usually explain these concepts when teaching students in an educational environment.

To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes in informal conversation setting. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis. During the interviews, the researcher took notes to capture key points and contextual information.

Following the completion of all interviews, the transcripts were reviewed and organized to patterns and themes related to how musicians interpret and use these English musical terms in their professional practice. This involved looking closely at how each participant responded, paying attention to where the interpretations aligned and where they differed in terms of meaning, everyday usage, and how they use each term in teaching.

### Data Analysis Technique

The data were analysed using a three-stage framework combining lexical comparison, semantic analysis, and pragmatic interpretation, followed by application of Baker’s non-equivalence framework.

In the first stage, each musical term was examined through lexical comparison between English and Indonesian. In the second stage, semantic analysis identified the denotative and connotative dimensions of each term. In the third stage, pragmatic analysis examined how the terms function in actual musical communication, drawing on interview data from participants M1–M5. Finally, the findings were interpreted through Baker’s (1992) framework of non-equivalence to categorize the type of translation difficulty observed for each term.

### 3. Findings and Discussions

The analysis shows that the five selected musical terms do not have precise lexical equivalents in Bahasa Indonesia. The Indonesian expressions sometimes used as translations represent only partial aspects of the original meanings. A comprehensive lexical and semantic comparison is presented in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Lexical Comparison of Selected Musical Terminology**

<b>Term</b>	<b>English Definition</b>	<b>Indonesian Equivalent</b>	<b>Translation Issue</b>	<b>Type of Non-Equivalence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
<i>Groove</i>	A rhythmic pattern that creates a strong sense of movement and musical flow, typically arising from	alur ritmis / rasa irama	Partial meaning; expressive nuance missing	Semantic non-equivalence	Indonesian expressions describe rhythm but do not capture the interactive and experiential aspect of groove that emerges in

<b>Term</b>	<b>English Definition</b>	<b>Indonesian Equivalent</b>	<b>Translation Issue</b>	<b>Type of Non-Equivalence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
	ensemble interaction				ensemble performance.
<i>Swing</i>	A rhythmic style characterized by uneven subdivision of beats, originating in jazz tradition	<i>gaya swing / irama swing</i>	Stylistic and cultural meaning not fully conveyed	Partial equivalence	The Indonesian phrase functions mainly as a stylistic label rather than conveying the subtle rhythmic timing and performance practice embedded in the term.
<i>Feel</i>	The emotional and rhythmic character expressed in musical performance; the embodied quality of a musician's playing	<i>rasa / nuansa</i>	Rhythmic and stylistic aspects not represented	Cultural-semantic gap	While <i>rasa</i> reflects emotional perception, the English term <i>feel</i> encompasses embodied rhythmic performance qualities that the Indonesian equivalent does

<b>Term</b>	<b>English Definition</b>	<b>Indonesian Equivalent</b>	<b>Translation Issue</b>	<b>Type of Non-Equivalence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
					not fully represent.
<i>Soul</i>	A music genre rooted in expressive vocal performance with deep historical ties to African-American musical traditions	<i>jiwa / penjiwaan</i>	Cultural and genre-specific meaning lost	Pragmatic non-equivalence	The Indonesian translation captures emotional expression but loses the historical, genre-specific, and cultural connotations associated with soul music.
<i>Jam session</i>	An informal musical gathering for spontaneous improvisation, typically among experienced musicians	<i>improvisasi bersama / latihan santai</i>	Descriptive explanation rather than equivalent term	Descriptive translation	The Indonesian phrase explains the activity but lacks the cultural connotations of spontaneous collaborative improvisation in jazz and popular music traditions.

Interview data from participants M1–M5 confirm that all five terms are consistently retained in their original English form during rehearsals, performance discussions, and music instruction. The following excerpts illustrate representative patterns of usage.

*“When I say ‘groove,’ everyone in the band immediately knows what I mean — it’s the feeling of the rhythm locking in. If I said ‘alur ritmis,’ it would sound strange. It’s not how we talk in practice.” (M1, Drummer)*

*“Swing is difficult to explain in Indonesian. It’s a feeling in the timing, not just a style label. I just say ‘swing’ and demonstrate it. You can’t translate the sound.” (M2, Bassist)*

*“When I teach, I use ‘feel’ all the time. My students understand it because they’ve heard the term in the music context. If I say ‘rasa,’ it becomes too general — it loses the musical meaning.” (M5, Vocalist / Arranger)*

*“Soul music is soul music. Saying ‘musik penjiwaan’ doesn’t capture the genre — it just sounds like emotional playing. The cultural background of the word soul is something you can’t translate.” (M4, Keyboardist)*

*“A jam session is very specific. ‘Latihan santai’ sounds like a casual practice, but a jam session is about spontaneous creation with fellow musicians. It has its own culture.” (M3, Guitarist).*

These experts demonstrate that the meanings of the terms emerge from shared professional experience rather than from formal definitions, confirming the pragmatic dimension of non-equivalence identified in Baker’s framework.

The findings of this study indicate that the selected English musical terms present significant challenges in translation into Bahasa Indonesia due to their semantic complexity, cultural specificity, and pragmatic embeddedness. The lexical comparison in Table 2 confirms that Indonesian equivalents capture only partial aspects of the original meanings, supporting Baker’s (1992) concept of non-equivalence as discussed in Munday (2016).

From a semantic perspective, each of the five terms carries both denotative and strong connotative meanings (Hurford et al., 2017). The term *groove*, for example, does not simply denote a rhythmic pattern; it implies a collective rhythmic feel that emerges

from real-time ensemble interaction. This interactive and experiential dimension is absent in Indonesian expressions such as *alur ritmis*. Similarly, swing carries historical and stylistic associations rooted in jazz tradition that cannot be adequately conveyed by a descriptive label such as *gaya swing*.

The interview data provide direct evidence of pragmatic non-equivalence. As M1 noted, the term groove is immediately understood within the performance community because its meaning is shaped by shared musical experience rather than lexical definition. This aligns with Yule's (2020) pragmatic principle that meaning is constructed through use within specific communicative contexts.

The case of soul is particularly instructive. The term functions simultaneously as a genre label, an aesthetic quality, and a culturally embedded reference to African-American musical heritage. The Indonesian equivalent *penjiwaan* captures only the emotional-expressive dimension, losing the historical and cultural specificity that defines soul as a musical concept. M4's observation that "the cultural background of the word soul is something you can't translate" illustrates precisely the cultural-semantic gap identified in Baker's framework.

The consistent preference among all five informants for retaining English terms reflects a broader pattern of lexical borrowing in specialized domains where conceptual equivalence is difficult to achieve (Algeo, 2010; Haspelmath & Tadmor, 2009). This pattern is consistent across different instruments and musical roles, suggesting it is a community-wide practice rather than an idiosyncratic preference. The adoption of these expressions into Indonesian musical discourse as unmodified loanwords indicates that the music community has developed a shared professional vocabulary in which English terms serve as technical markers.

These findings also correspond with the translation strategies proposed by Baker (1992). When non-equivalence occurs, borrowing is the dominant strategy observed, while paraphrasing and descriptive translation appear as supplementary strategies primarily used in pedagogical contexts, as demonstrated by M5's teaching practice.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has examined the non-equivalence of five English musical terms *groove*, *swing*, *soul*, *feel*, and *jam session* in Indonesian music practice, applying Baker's (1992) framework alongside semantic and pragmatic analysis. The findings confirm that each of these terms presents significant translation challenges due to the combination of semantic complexity, cultural specificity, and pragmatic embeddedness that characterizes professional musical language.

Indonesian musicians consistently retain the original English terms in rehearsal, performance, and pedagogical contexts, reflecting both the expressive richness of these expressions and the absence of precise Indonesian equivalents. Borrowing emerges as the predominant translation strategy, with paraphrasing and descriptive equivalence serving secondary roles in teaching contexts.

These findings have implications for translation studies, music education, and LSP research. For translation practitioners, they underscore the importance of context-sensitive and culturally informed approaches, particularly in specialized fields where language carries performative and cultural dimensions beyond its lexical meaning. For music educators, they suggest that explicit discussion of the cultural and pragmatic dimensions of English musical terminology may support more effective music learning and communication.

Future research may productively expand the range of musical terminology examined, explore how these expressions are interpreted across different generational cohorts of Indonesian musicians, or investigate comparable phenomena in other non-Anglophone music communities.

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