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## Grading Qualities and (Un)settling Equivalences: Undocumented Migration, Commensuration, and Intrusive Phonosonics in the Indonesia-Malaysia Borderlands

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*Undocumented migrants' bodies are typically assumed to exhibit signs of their so-called "illegal" status. In the absence of phenotypic, linguistic, or religious diacritics of categorical outsidership, however, how are migrants made legible and policed? How might they navigate state surveillance by exploiting their perceived equivalences with members of a host community? Indonesians were long encouraged to informally emigrate to neighboring Malaysia because they readily assimilated as Malay-speaking Muslim members of the greater "Malay race." More recently, however, they have figured in countervailing narratives as a parasitic and frustratingly elusive presence in need of expulsion. This article outlines how Indonesian migrants and Malaysian citizens are responding to these developments by jointly reevaluating their qualitative equivalences. First, it sketches how "diasporic infrastructures" linking Indonesia and Malaysia have enabled the conditions of possibility for the production of equivalences between migrants and hosts. Second, it sketches a semiotics of "grading" (a process whereby agents discern and evaluate qualitative intensities), examining how equivalences between these commensurate collectivities are settled, indicated, and framed along gradations of more-or-less-ness. Third, it assesses how sonically graded differences in embodied qualities of talk can unsettle equivalences between migrants and citizens, potentially putting migrants at risk. [migration, infrastructure, commensuration, grading, equivalence, intensity]*

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**I**n May 2012, an assistant director of Malaysia's immigration department ordered his officers to infiltrate a supermarket in the peninsular Malaysian city of Johor Bahru. Posing as customers, plainclothes immigration officials walked among chicken, fish, and vegetable vendors in search of suspected "illegal foreign workers" from Indonesia. A popular English-language newspaper reported on the raid in Johor, explaining that identifying "illegals" by their "looks alone is tricky" because "many look like locals" (The Star 2012). "However," the newspaper continued, "immigration officers were not duped because of their strong [Malay] accent." Having homed in on the Malay speech and speech forms of the vendors, "officers quickly ambushed the group," the assistant director told the newspaper, despite

some undocumented workers' attempts to hide under vegetable crates. The "illegals" couldn't "talk their way out of [the] raid," the newspaper boasted, and the raid was a success: fourteen migrant workers between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five were detained under Section 6(1)(c) of Malaysia's Immigration Act (The Star 2012).

The supermarket raid in Johor Bahru is diagnostic of recent developments in Malaysia's shifting sociopolitical scene. Indonesians were long encouraged by the Malaysian government to informally immigrate as laborers because they were privileged objects of a moral project of accommodation. Migrants hailing from Indonesia were readily assimilated in Malaysia as members of the country's majority "Malay race," or *bangsa Melayu*: a superordinate family name for Malay-speaking Muslim "ethnic groups" or *suku bangsa* like Bugis, Javanese, Minangkabau, and others indigenous to archipelagic and mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, an increase in undocumented migrant laborers has sparked concerns among some segments of contemporary Malaysian society, especially ethnic Chinese and indigenous Christian groups living in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. Sharing a border with Indonesia on the island of Borneo, Sabah is home to Malaysia's indigenous Christian Kadazandusun and Murut peoples, groups which have found themselves increasingly marginalized demographically, economically, and politically vis-à-vis a burgeoning Malay community. Eyeing what has been described as "extraordinary" and "unusual" population growth among Sabah's Malays since the 1970s, these groups allege that undocumented Indonesian immigrants are being instrumentally mobilized by Malaysia's Malay and Muslim ruling party—the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)—as it seeks to consolidate its political power and assert *Ketuanan Melayu* or "Malay Supremacy" over the state's Chinese and indigenous Christian peoples (Sina 2006).

To assuage concerns among indigenous Sabahans who increasingly view themselves as "strangers in their own land" (Kee 2014:154), the state government held a 2012 Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah. The commission highlighted the perceived enormity of the "illegal immigrants" issue, noting, "For decades, Sabahans have been plagued and haunted by an insidious problem which has turned out to be an all-consuming nightmare. It is endemic. It has grown into a crisis of humongous proportions. . . . It is, of course, the lingering problem of illegal immigrants" (Shim 2014). And yet, while commissioners, opposition politicians, and indigenous Sabahans have recurrently called for integrated operations to "hunt and cleanse Sabah of illegal immigrants" (The Sun Daily 2014), such efforts are frustrated by a practical challenge. As was the case during the 2012 supermarket raid in Johor Bahru, "illegals" from Indonesia who settle in Sabah are widely assumed to "look like locals" (The Star 2012), and as Malay-speaking Muslim members of the "Malay race" are assumed to evince no salient signs of linguistic, religious, or phenotypic markedness vis-à-vis *Melayu tempatan* or "local Malays." It is this constellation of qualities jointly shared by "illegal Indonesians" and "local Malays" that, as one frustrated Sabahan told me, makes it "susah mahu tahu sempadan antara keduanya . . . sama sahaja" [hard to know the border between them . . . they're just the same]. This concerned citizen's account suggests how showing ethnolinguistic and religious signs of a broadly conceived *Kemelayuan* or "Malayness" allows undocumented immigrants to inhabit a "normative, hegemonic, and unmarked racial position" (Bucholtz 2001:84) in a Malay-majority society. Their widely perceived unmarkedness enables undocumented Indonesian migrants to "pass" as local Malays (Goffman 1986).

Notwithstanding the cloaking capacity of this qualitative sameness, the accounts of other Sabahans suggest how this shared ensemble of qualities actually serves as a key condition of possibility for discerning "illegal immigrants" from *Sabahan tulen* or "genuine Sabahans," insofar as it enables their *commensuration* and contrastive evaluation (see Espeland and Stevens 1998; Kockelman 2016c). These accounts highlight migrants' and hosts' *different samenesses* or relative *degrees of sameness*, and are frequently articulated by members of Sabah's Malay community—many of whom

host or conceal undocumented relatives from Indonesia and are largely sympathetic to their plight due to shared senses of *kekeluargaan* (kinship) or *Kemelayuan* (Malayness). “We’re the same, but different” (*Kita sama, tapi berbeza*) said one Sabahan, whose grandparents emigrated to Sabah from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. “We’re more-or-less the same” (*Kita lebih kurang sama*), noted another, who also traced her roots to Sulawesi, where she has an expansive family network. As Malay-speaking Muslims and members of the “Malay race,” Indonesian migrants and Sabah’s local Malays are radically commensurate collectivities: they may be characterized and compared with reference to some shared, projected quality or ensemble of qualities that they jointly evince. These projected qualities materialize in entities and events (Tambiah 1985; Munn 1992; Peirce [1867] 1992; Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015), where a quality of experience (*qua sign*) stands for a quality of entity or event experienced (*qua object*). They range from the *kehitaman* or “darkness” of one’s skin tone, to the *keketatan* or “skinniness” of one’s jeans, to the *kerataan* or “flatness” of one’s pitch during voiced talk, to one’s *keimanan* or “faith” and *ketakwaan* or “piety” to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, to one’s broadly conceived *Kemelayuan* or “Malayness.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, as the Johor Bahru immigration officers who homed in on “strong accents” made clear, while commensurate entities may share the same qualities, they may exhibit those qualities in *different intensities*. That is to say, perceived equivalences between commensurate entities are subject to regimes of intensification or *grading* (Sapir 1944), a cognitive process prior to measurement or counting whereby semiotic agents discern, evaluate, and characterize qualitative intensities along gradations of more-or-less-ness. Put differently, everyday acts of grading establish degrees of equivalence between commensurate entities.

The aim of this introductory sketch is to foreground two points that are explored throughout this essay. First, it suggests how qualitative equivalences between Indonesian migrants and the majority Malay members of their host community can unsettle and stymie efforts to police undocumented workers. It also alludes to how undocumented Indonesians might draw upon equivalences between themselves and members of their host community to negotiate their statuses as objects of state surveillance. Second, it demonstrates how commensurate entities (Indonesian and Malaysian varieties of Malay, for example) are subject to differentiation along intensity clines or gradations of more-or-less-ness. Equivalence relations between commensurate entities may be disturbed, teased apart, or unsettled by semiotic agents, as they sieve for and attend to graded differences in the qualities shared by those entities. In the supermarket raid, for example, equivalences between “illegals” and “locals” became unsettled as immigration officers drew upon contextually-relevant frames to evaluate the materiality of speech forms and grade “strong” deviations from projected (and expected) locally salient typicalities.

This article offers an ethnographic and semiotic account of commensuration and grading, evaluating how these processes inflect a politics of intra-ethnic identification in the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands.<sup>3</sup> My central claim is that grading practices play a crucial role in the marking of migrant difference, and that *relative intensities* of particular qualities now constitute key indices of outsidership (and “illegality”) in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. While broadly attending to how certain index-kind (or more specifically, index-identity) relations have been widely enregistered (Agha 2007) and are readily recognized by non-Malay Sabahans as signs of migrant “illegality,” the essay devotes closer attention to intra-ethnic dynamics, evaluating how undocumented Indonesian migrants and their sympathetic, co-ethnic Malay counterparts are jointly appraising the ways they are *sama, tapi berbeza*—“the same, but different.” Against a backdrop of state surveillance and crackdowns on “illegals,” it shows how Sabah’s Malays and Indonesian immigrants are increasingly aware of their contrastive commonality (Kockelman 2012:67), as it is produced and cultivated through in-situ and historical processes of commensuration and grading.

First, I analyze recent developments in eastern Malaysia surrounding undocumented immigrants from Indonesia, specifically ethnically Bugis Indonesians hailing from the island of Sulawesi who have emigrated to Sabah since the nineteenth century, and now constitute a dominant Malay ethnic group in the East Malaysian state (Sintang 2007). I explore the intermediating and mediating roles of a “diasporic infrastructure” linking Sulawesi to Sabah, explaining how it has facilitated Bugis migrants’ clandestine movement and assimilation, and has enabled the conditions of possibility for commensuration, or the production and ratification of equivalences between Bugis Indonesians and their sympathetic Bugis Malaysian hosts.

Second, I sketch a semiotics of commensuration, grading, and equivalence, with special attention to what Sapir (1944) called “kinaesthetic momentum”—the directional feeling that accompanies acts of grading.<sup>4</sup> This section is not a review of a broader linguistic anthropological literature on grading, given that Sapir’s work on the concept has elicited relatively little anthropological attention compared to his other writings (for notable exceptions, see the work of Kockelman 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; see also Kennedy 1997, Kennedy and McNally 2005). Moving beyond Sapir’s focus on the “semantics of grading” (1944), then, and drawing upon ethnographic examples from the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands, I instead provide a semiotic account of grading’s implications for linguistic anthropology, arguing that grading is indispensable for understanding how semiotic agents evaluate and modulate qualitative intensities, and indicate or (un)settle equivalences between entities.

Third, I examine “real-time” and “after-the-fact” identifications of migrant difference, describing how an excess of certain linguistic features is interpreted as indexical of an excessive *kebugisan* or “Bugis-ness,” a quality that “illegal” Bugis immigrants from Indonesia have a projected propensity to evince in greater intensities than their co-ethnic Bugis Malaysian counterparts. Arguing that grading is not merely encoded in language but also embodied in interaction and corporeal practice, I demonstrate how Bugis Malaysians and Bugis Indonesians are detecting and jointly evaluating wrinkles of difference in their forms and styles of speech by deploying referential and embodied modes of grading, the latter playing out “kinaesthetically”—to repurpose Sapir’s use of the term—from the lungs, to the articulation of the speech organs, to the ears. I attend to the various ways in which migrants and their sympathetic Bugis Malaysian hosts are aware of how sonically-graded differences in phonological and suprasegmental features of migrant speech can unsettle equivalences between them, and potentially put migrants at risk.

The essay has two broader aims, the first explicit, and the second tacit. On the one hand, I explicitly offer a generalizable account of commensuration, grading, and equivalence applicable to a wide range of issues and contexts beyond those discussed here. On the other, I implicitly aim to expand upon an important body of linguistic anthropological scholarship centered on migrant “illegality,” which, while theoretically sophisticated and politically timely, could benefit from a shift in ethnographic perspective and hemispheric purview. Echoing more longstanding ethnomethodological scholarship on the interactional construction of “stigma” (Goffman 1963; Garfinkel [1967] 2006; see also Hankins 2014), increasing ethnographic attention has examined *racializing discourses*—“the actual language use (spoken and written) that sorts some people, things, places, and practices into social categories marked as inherently dangerous and other” (Dick and Wirtz 2011:2; Wirtz 2014; Rosa 2016). Much of this work may be framed as broadly centering on racialized Latina/o migrants and bodies in the United States (Mendoza-Denton 2008; Dick 2011a), migrants from the Global South to Global North (Garcia-Sánchez 2014), or more broadly, ethnographic settings where “border-crossings” are characterized as navigations between incommensurable or radically different domains, and where immigrants figure as phenotypic, linguistic, cultural, and religious others (Dick 2011b; see Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18). In this sense, this body of work may be read with an eye to grander anthropological narratives regarding “incommensurability” (Povinelli 2001), or “incommensurate ontologies” (Kockelman 2016c) across borders.

In places where signs of phenotypic, linguistic, and religious markedness are not readily salient or explicitly available for semiotic elaboration, however, how are migrants policed? What kinds of intra-racializing processes obtain in the making of migrant “illegality”? How might migrants’ and hosts’ radically commensurate values mediate joint identifications of mutual difference? How are signs of otherness or “illegality” reckoned with respect to intensity gradients? I argue that an ethnographic focus on clandestine movement in the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands bears on these broader comparative issues.

### Diasporic Infrastructure, Clandestine Channels, Parasites

Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the end of Indonesian dictator Suharto’s (1966–1998) New Order regime and subsequent political decentralization and economic reform transformed the sprawling archipelagic Southeast Asian nation. These events profoundly affected patterns of mobility, especially for Indonesians in the complex national and transnational movements that had already begun to expand decades earlier (Hugo 1997:68). Though Middle Eastern countries were popular destinations because they were largely unaffected by the monetary crisis, many Indonesian migrants without the means to travel there viewed Malaysia as an alternative, especially as demand for labor in the country’s plantation sector continued to swell. These events witnessed exponential growth in clandestine cross-border movement, particularly among the Bugis—famous nomads, shipbuilders, and seafaring merchants (see Lineton 1975; Pelras 1996; Acciaioli 2000; Ammarell 2002). The Bugis consider the Indonesian island of Sulawesi to be their ancestral home, but have migrated for four hundred years throughout what we today call Malaysia, a place whose current prime minister self-identifies as an ethnically Bugis Malay. Today, many Bugis migrate from the Indonesian province of South Sulawesi to the Tawau district of the Malaysian state of Sabah, widely known for more than one hundred and fifty years as a Bugis enclave (Figure 1) (Sintang 2007; Amat 2012). Traversing channels of mobility first chartered by their predecessors in the nineteenth century, Bugis migrants board ferries like Bukit Siguntang or Thalia in the hundreds at South Sulawesi’s port city of Pare-Pare, bound for the Indonesian border city of Nunukan. Once there, some pass through official immigration channels to Malaysia, boarding ferries at Nunukan’s official port terminal bound for Tawau’s port of entry and immigration office. These official modes of transport are subject to regular inspections by Malaysia’s maritime police, who check passengers’ travel documents once the ferries approach Tawau’s coastline. Many migrants, however, consult networks of family members, acquaintances, friends of friends, or informal brokers located in Nunukan and Tawau known in Bugis as *callo’* to arrange clandestine passage through well-known informal channels called *laluan tikus* or *jalan tikus* (mouse paths). These channels cut across Sabah’s infamously porous borders, weaving and wandering along waterways and terrestrial terrains that sidestep conventionally known surveillance locations (Figure 2). The individuals who traverse them are, as those who make it to Malaysia will say in the Bugis language, *risomokolo* “smuggled there.” Upon reaching safe harbor, many will draw upon the same networks to arrange work in plantation or construction sectors.

Bugis movement from Sulawesi to Sabah is facilitated by a *diasporic infrastructure* shaped by historically cultivated practices of cross-border mobility. One anti-immigrant activist, Mutalib MD, has written that this infrastructure “continues to animate a greater ethnic consciousness” (Mutalib 1999:45) among the Bugis, allowing Bugis migrants from Indonesia to “freely enter through Tawau without any difficulties” (Mutalib 1999:45), enabling the passage of what sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1903) called “contagions of imitation.” Mutalib notes that this infrastructure has intensified intra-ethnic interaction among Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians to such a degree that Sabahans can no longer determine which of the two groups “is more Bugis” (Mutalib 1999:45; see Carruthers 2017a).

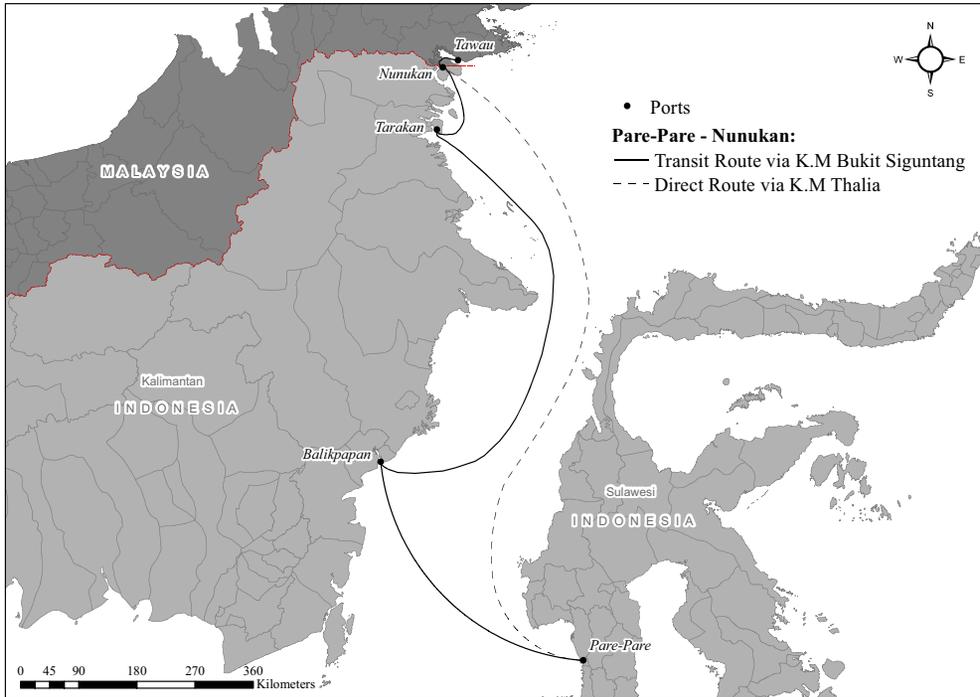
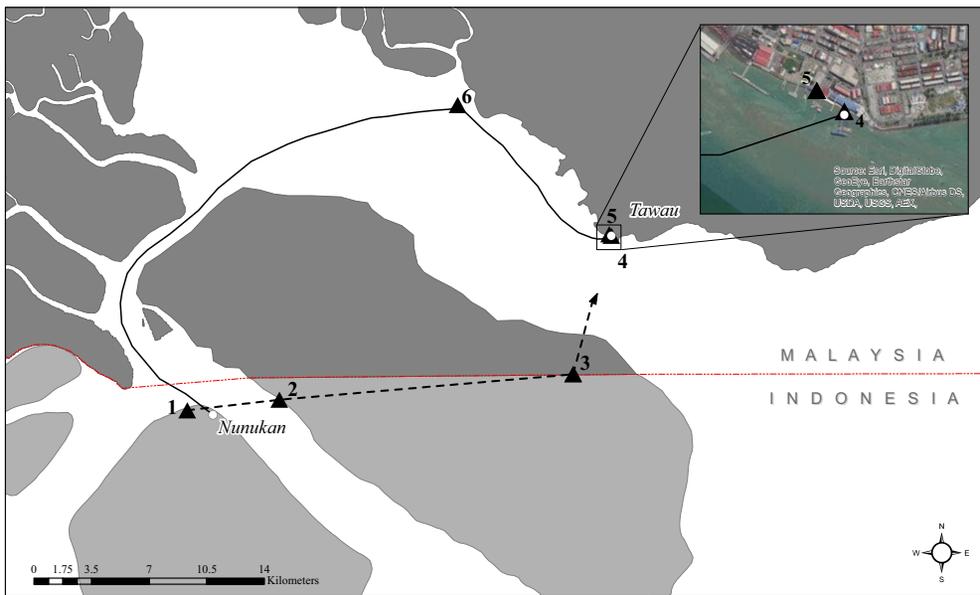


Figure 1. Channels of movement between South Sulawesi, Indonesia and Tawau, Malaysia (Map courtesy of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS Project). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]



- Port
- Jalan Tikus Channel
- Official Channel
- 1 Jetty to Sebatik
- 2 Bambang Jetty
- 3 Aji Kuning
- 4 New Tawau Immigration Terminal
- 5 Old Tawau Immigration Terminal
- 6 Boat Searches by Malaysian Marine Police

Figure 2. Official and Clandestine Channels to Tawau, Malaysia (Map courtesy of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS Project). [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

Recent work in linguistic anthropology has centered on infrastructure as enabling and constraining processes of commensuration and the production of equivalences across swaths of time and space (Elyachar 2010; Kockelman 2012). Kockelman (2010:419) notes that infrastructure has intermediating and mediating capacities, and frames it as “an assemblage of material, social, and cognitive affordances” heedable by semiotic agents as a means toward particular and variegated ends. Considered as a means toward a particular end—or as an intermediary “path toward a destination” (2010:413)—diasporic infrastructure grounds migrants’ ends-rational consideration of the risks and rewards of movement toward a particular place. Considered with respect to its mediating capacity, diasporic infrastructure can indicate or index different ends or alternative routes and possible fruits available to migrants. Finally, as a mediating concept, diasporic infrastructure suggests how Bugis migrants and nonmigrants alike commensurate entities and negotiate oceans of value across speech chains, base transistor stations and fiber-optic lines, kinship networks, the routes of ferries, boats, motorcycles and automobiles, the circulation of falsified identity cards and travel documents, and way-stops along migration routes. Fixed-line telephony enables communicative interaction between migrant laborers in Sabah and nonmigrants in Sulawesi, allowing the latter to commensurate and grade the boons and drawbacks of potential employment in particular plantations in particular places. Televisions, laptops, and smartphones invite nonmigrants and migrants alike to watch the Malaysian prime minister advocate for Malay supremacy and ascribe equivalences between Bugis, Javanese, Minangkabau, and others who are all “bersama dalam serumpun” [together in one group]. The hand-to-hand cross-border circulation of falsified documents maintains equivalences and facilitates passage through migration way-stops. Speedboats and the terrains mastered by their captains enable migrants to safely compare and navigate points of entry in porous borders. Police who turn a blind eye to migrant movement out of sympathy for their fellow Malays tacitly invite migrants to set foot on dry land.

Infrastructure capacitates ends-rational negotiations of disparate entities and their projected values. In turn, such negotiations are causally linked with migrants’ movement and navigation of new terrains. These dynamics have shaped and motivated an influx of undocumented immigrants in Sabah (Carruthers 2017a), estimated by the Malaysian Home Ministry to be two million or more in number. The surge in undocumented Indonesians has caused moral panic among some Malaysian minority groups, particularly ethnic Chinese and indigenous Christians living in Sabah (Carruthers 2017a). Other groups, however, have been perceived as parasiting upon this diasporic infrastructure. Malaysian private telecommunications service providers, for example, have inhabited these networks for financial gain. One such provider, Maxis, has erected billboard advertisements in Tawau, a coastal town bordering Indonesia and an alleged hotbed of undocumented Bugis migrants (Figure 3). The billboard features a message in Malay, “Kadar terendah untuk menghubungi Tanah Air” [The lowest rates to call home], accompanied by its gloss in the Bugis ethnic language, “Ongkosok masempo narek’ko meloki makutanang la’o kampo’tak.” Understood as a mediatized message (Agha 2011), the advertisement’s use of the Bugis ethnic language does two things: 1) it presupposes a diasporic infrastructure of communicative channels linking Tawau with the Bugis homeland of Sulawesi, Indonesia; and 2) it frames its own indexical selectivity for Bugis speakers in Tawau, a major node in this diasporic infrastructure.

So too, political organizations have parasited upon these networks for political gain at the polls. Undocumented migrants have been cast on the national scene as instruments of attempts by Malaysia’s ruling coalition led by UMNO to augment the Malay/Muslim presence in Sabah. UMNO figures on the national stage as a party of enablers and allies of Indonesian migrants, fellow members of the “Malay race” and potential voters. The party is accused of insinuating itself into infrastructures of clandestine movement for political gain in Sabah, where a hefty Bugis population is viewed as a countervailing weight to the state’s non-Malay indigenous Christian



Figure 3. “The lowest rates to call home!”: Indexical selectivity for Bugis migrants in Tawau, Malaysia. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

(e.g., Kadazan-Dusun, Tidung, and Murut peoples) and Chinese populations. UMNO is accused by its detractors in the opposition of facilitating the immigration and assimilation of migrants into everyday life through a variety of channels: by overlooking shadow-ports of entry for undocumented Bugis migrants, by illicitly disseminating and circulating national identity cards to undocumented migrants, and by providing financial incentives for pro-party votes. Accusations of the party’s alleged circulation of Malaysian national identity cards, known as “Project I.C.,” center on a wide variety of state actors and institutions (Harris Mohd Salleh v. The Returning Officer 2001; Carruthers 2017a).

As they have come to be categorized in these ways as an illegitimate and undocumented presence, Bugis migrants from Indonesia now figure in narratives as parasites who are stealing local jobs and displacing local people. Migrants are seen as availing themselves of the affordances that constitute state infrastructure, without “becoming terms in it” (Kockelman 2010). In light of these developments and under pressure from the opposition, the Malaysian government has begun more intensive crackdowns on undocumented migrants and disrupting channels of mobility. Recurring issues in these developments are the troubling equivalences between Indonesians and their co-ethnic hosts, and the everyday diagnostics used to police undocumented migrants or even make them legible. Infrastructure enables the conditions of possibility for indicating or settling these equivalences between

Indonesians and Malaysians. So too, everyday acts of commensuration and grading undergird efforts to trouble or unsettle these equivalences and police undocumented migrants in contemporary Sabah. Acts of policing undocumented migrants often hinge upon the commensuration and grading of Malay speech forms. In the following section I set the stage for exploring these issues further by offering an account of commensuration and grading as semiotic processes.

### A Semiotics of Commensuration, Grading, and Equivalence

Eleven years prior to the supermarket raid in Johor Bahru, the eastern Malaysian state of Sabah began similar crackdowns on “illegal workers” qua “phantom voters.” A 1999 state election had to be declared null and void in one Sabah constituency due to suspected influence of these phantom voters. The finely tuned machinery that mediates election polling was unsettled by a clandestine operation, allegedly put in place by high-ranking Bugis members of the UMNO in Sabah who would later be arrested under the Internal Security Act. Targeting “Malays of Bugis origin” (Harris Mohd Salleh v. The Returning Officer 2001), the operation provided “fake identity cards” to Bugis migrants, who flooded voting booths in support of the ruling party. The Justice who oversaw the election case cited the definition of “phantom” in court from the ninth edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: “a form without substance or reality; a ghost; a spectre.” “In the context of a phantom voter,” he said, “it means that the voter is a noncitizen who is in an electoral roll by virtue of a fake identity card or identity card obtained illegally” (Bernama 2001). National News Agency Bernama reported on issues with phantom voters in June 2001, noting that “[l]ocal people, who claimed to have encounters with illegal voters, said it was difficult to recognize them especially when they were in an area with a mixed composition of races. Once the illegal voters mingled among the crowd, they could pass . . . as locals” (Bernama 2001). “However,” the piece continued, “their alien behaviour and awkward local accent would betray them in the remote polling districts where the voters were mainly from the same ethnic group” (Bernama 2001). This case highlights the spectral nature of equivalence. Perceived equivalences between two entities with shared qualities in proportional quantities—the Indonesian and Malaysian national languages, for example—are spectral in so far as situated, partial, and interested frames of reference may unsettle or render them “without substance or reality” (Bernama 2001). In Johor, equivalences between Indonesian and Malaysian Malay varieties are unsettled as immigration officers deliberately attend to metapragmatically salient wrinkles of phonological or morphosyntactic difference between them. As phantom voters move from the metropole to Sabah’s ethnically monolithic and remote polling districts, graded differences between commensurate Malay varieties are heeded by concerned citizens as they seek out those who do not belong.

The Indonesian and Malaysian national languages are mutually intelligible and radically commensurate codes. Their commensurability reflects an enduring history of flows, crossings, and coalescences between what we today call Indonesia and Malaysia (Collins 2005). Ethnologue states that the national languages are 80% cognate, an explicit act of commensuration and grading based upon lexical similarity, but some experts suggest that the two languages are likely 90–95% cognate (James T. Collins, personal communication). Indonesia and Malaysia are hosts to a transnational cottage industry of language research centers that actively seek to commensurate the two languages, particularly regarding shared orthographic conventions. And yet, efforts to adequate these languages ascribe stable and monolithic interiorities to “Indonesian” and “Malay” in ways that elide “a wealth of diverse regional and social dialects” (Collins 1989:236) throughout Malay-speaking Southeast Asia. They also reflect and are shaped by speakers’ ideologies of language structure and use. As Webb Keane (2003) has pointed out, “whether the linguistic distinctions between [Indonesian and Malay] matter ideologically is highly context-dependent” (Keane 2003:504). Malay varieties throughout Malaysia and those spoken in

Indonesia are the same, but different—assimilated as they are with the the morphosyntax and phonology of regional ethnic languages or *bahasa daerah* like Bugis (see Errington 2014; Carruthers 2017a). For example, Sabah Malay—distinguishable from standard Malay and peninsular Malay varieties with respect to certain phonological features (see Wong 2000)—was often characterized by my interlocutors as “closer” to Indonesian than standard Malay with respect to its sound system.<sup>5</sup> This closeness has its limits, however. At a Saussurian level of relations between relations, /makan/—the verb “to eat” in the Malay variety spoken by Bugis migrants, for example—may have the same value as its counterpart in Sabah Malay: /makan/. And yet, at the level of phonological substance, these entities differ, radically commensurate as they may be. The differential value of these linguistic elements is a product and subject of commensuration and grading, refracted through metapragmatic framings and second-order evaluations.

Now consider the following: a migrant’s face-to-face talk with an immigration officer who turns out to be a relative removed by four degrees of collaterality; phone calls tendered by service providers promising “the lowest rates to call the homeland”; qualities of talk recurrently characterized as strong, foreign, alien, or awkward vis-à-vis the “local accent” of Sabah Malay (Bernama 2001); the assertion that Bugis Malaysians and Bugis Indonesians are “the same, but different” (*sama, tapi berbeza*). In all of these cases, semiotic agents explicitly grade and implicitly quantify or measure different entities with shared qualities (Sapir 1944:95). Crucially, a quality (or an ensemble of qualities) maintains correspondence—and conditions commensuration—between seemingly disparate entities. Put differently, a quality is a “*correspondence-preserving projection*” from some entity that is commensurable or comparable with another (Kockelman 2006). In this sense, and like any semiotic process, commensuration is a relation between sign-object-interpretant relations.

Consider a statement from Prime Minister of Malaysia Najib Razak that was delivered at UMNO’s Golden Jubilee, broadcast on national television, and made available on YouTube. Reciting a poem entitled *Melayu* (Malay) written by Malaysian National Laureate Usman Awang, Prime Minister Najib declared, “Jawa itu Melayu, Bugis itu Melayu, Banjar juga disebut Melayu, Minangkabau memang Melayu, Keturunan Aceh adalah Melayu. . .” [The Javanese are Malay, the Bugis are Malay, the Banjar are also called Malay, the Minangkabau are indeed Malay, the Acehnese are Malay. . .].<sup>6</sup> In this utterance, different subjects—Javanese, Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau—are characterized by the same predicate—*Melayu* or “Malay”—and are tacitly framed as possessing the same abstract quality—Malayness or *Kemelayuan*—stipulated by that predicate. This framing serves to adequate (or make equivalent) several entities (Javanese with Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, and Acehnese) in a series of transitive relations by way of a proposition-internal semiotic process: a series of comparisons qua interpretants (Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, Acehnese) hinges upon a topic-predicate qua sign-object relation (Javanese-Malayness). In the context of the prime minister’s oration, the quality of Malayness serves as a correspondence-preserving projection from a series of entities—Javanese, Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, and Acehnese (Figure 4).

Consider another statement, one I frequently encountered during fieldwork among Bugis migrants in Malaysia: “Milo Malaysia lebih kental ketimbang Milo Indonesia” [The Milo in Malaysia is thicker than the Milo in Indonesia]. Milo is a chocolate drink manufactured by Nestlé and distributed throughout Southeast Asia. Before returning to Indonesia, many Bugis workers in Malaysia will pack boxes upon boxes of Milo to bring home as *oleh-oleh* (souvenirs). They claim that the Malaysian variety is of a higher quality than the Indonesian equivalent that shares its name. With respect to the utterance, Milo is an entity (a sign) brought into relation with a comparable form in Indonesia (an interpretant) by virtue of a shared quality—thickness (an object). In the construction, however, these two forms are characterized as having different degrees of the quality that enables their commensuration. That these entities are framed as having different degrees (or quantities) of the quality that

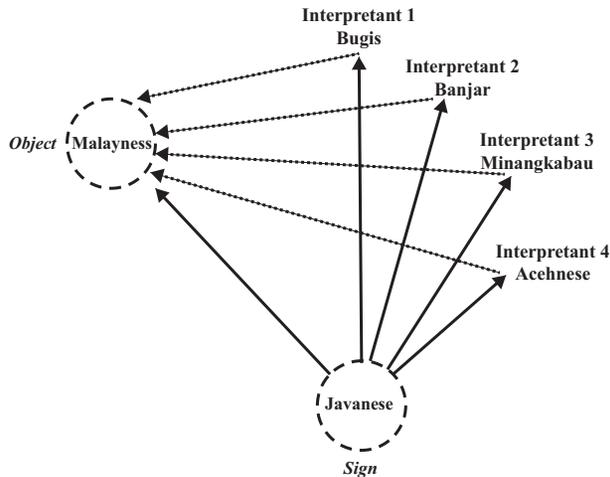


Figure 4. Interpretants of the same sign-object relation: Malayness is a correspondence-preserving projection from four interpretants.

characterizes them is to say that they have been *graded*. In everyday talk, acts of commensuration and grading are interactionally reflected by speakers' use of *intensifiers* (e.g., quite, very, fairly) or *degree* morphemes (-er, more, less) in predicative expressions that take domains of qualia as their referential objects (Bollinger 1972; Kennedy 1997). For a migrant to say "The Milo in Malaysia is thicker than the Milo in Indonesia" implies that *graded differences* in intensities of the same quality are attended to by migrants, and are causally linked to the Malaysian variety's selection over its Indonesian counterpart. For Bugis migrants, the thicker the Milo the better.

In "Grading, a study in Semantics," Sapir (1944:93) describes grading as a cognitive process that "precedes measurement and counting." Grading as a process characterizes judgments like "A is larger than B," which he argued "are made long before it is possible to say, e.g., 'A is twice as large as B'" (Sapir 1944:93). Everyday assessments of relative entities presuppose commensuration and grading across varying degrees of explicitness: "Every quantifiable, whether existent (say house) or occurrent (say run) or quality of existent (say red) or quality of occurrent (say gracefully), is intrinsically gradable" (Sapir 1944:94). Crucial to Sapir's (1944:93) analysis is the idea of envelopment: "If A can be 'enveloped by' B, contained by it, so placed in contact with B, either actually or by the imagination, as to seem to be held within its compass instead of extending beyond it, it is judged to be 'less than' B, while B is judged to be 'more than' A." Ongoing processes of envelopment (whereby anterior values are enclosed by subsequent ones) produce a trail or "set" of "lesses in open series" (Sapir 1944:104) that grounds gradability.

These processes of envelopment are evident in explicit comparative constructions such as "The Milo in Malaysia is thicker than the Milo in Indonesia" or "A is larger than B." In implicit comparative constructions such as "A is large," however, A is implied to envelop a typical or representative entity from the class to which it belongs, or, more generally, with which it is being commensurated. Subjects of statements such as "Loghatnya sangat kebugisan" [Her accent is very Bugis], or "Pekerja Bugis lebih rajin" [Bugis workers are more industrious] presuppose commensurability with some context-bound and situationally relevant *norm* (e.g. a 'typical' Bugis accent) (Sapir 1944:100). This representative entity—e.g., a norm, average, Saussure's type, Sapir's (1944) point of reference, etc.—is established and situated in an open series with values like *mores* and *lesses* placed "'above' and 'below'" it (1944:100), forming a gamut on a continuum (1944:100–104). In implicit comparative constructions, entities are graded with respect to this norm's position on the continuum by degrees of more-or-less-ness. Consider the utterance "Pekerja Bugis

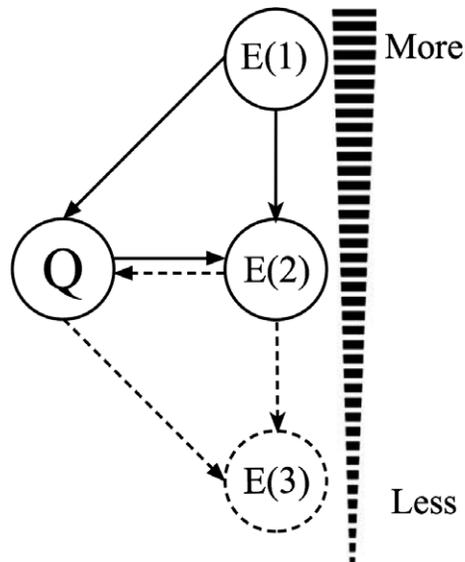


Figure 5. A semiotics of commensuration, grading, envelopment.

lebih rajin" [Bugis workers are more industrious], where the entity E is "Bugis [migrant] workers," the quality Q characterized by the predicate is "industriousness," and the entity in comparison E(2) is some norm of industriousness embodied in the work habits of "your typical" or "your average" migrant laborer. In turn, this comparative entity (an interpretant) may become a sign, and may give rise to some new interpretant or comparison with another entity E(3), e.g., norms of industriousness embodied in the labor of *tempatan* [locals]. These commensurate entities are situated and graded along a continuum of industriousness, where Bugis workers E(1) are "more industrious" than "your average" or "typical" migrant laborer E(2), whose embodied industriousness may in turn be greater than (or envelop) that of some comparative entity E(3) like *tempatan*, frequently characterized by migrants as lacking the industriousness required for palm oil plantation labor (Figure 5).

These formulations are implicit precisely because commensurate entities and the qualities they share are indexically anchored to some context of comparison. What is thick, rich, and high-grade chocolate milk for Bugis labor migrants may be sickly and low-grade for their Malaysian counterparts. A Rp. 2,500,000 monthly salary may seem like a lofty sum for an upwardly mobile Indonesian in Sulawesi, but it might be scoffed at as offensively paltry by her cousin making RM 1,500 per month working in a Malaysian oil palm plantation. And qualities of speech that are marked as very foreign in the ears of an immigration official during a supermarket raid may be unmarked and decidedly local for a labor migrant in the Bugis enclave of Tawau.

Sapir suggests that acts of grading such as these are implicitly "kinaesthetic." Acts of grading intimate upward ("e.g., good:better, bad:less bad") and downward ("e.g., good:less good, bad:worse") movement in terms of "direction of increase" and "direction of decrease" (Sapir 1944:104). This movement trends upward or downward with respect to the position of some entity relative to a norm or point of reference along some continuum, e.g., very close-close-closer-less close-far-very far, or good-better-bad-worse. Consider intensifiers or degree adverbs in everyday talk as interactional reflections of commensuration and grading. Intensifiers like *sangat* or *amat* (both of which mean 'very,' 'extremely,' or 'exceedingly' depending on context) lend a "kinaesthetic" feeling to predicative expressions in that they "scale upward from an assumed norm" (Quirk et. al 1985:590). To say "Bugis migrant laborers are *very* hard workers" is to scale upward from some assumed norm of industriousness that characterizes the work habits of other labor migrants. For Sapir, purely logical

analyses of grade inattentive to these kinesthetics are “insufficient or even misleading” (1944:104). The “kinaesthetic momentum” of grading and the “kinaesthetic feeling of certain graded terms” reflect and are shaped by “the tendency to slip kinaesthetic implications into speech, with the complicating effects of favorable affect linked with an upward trend and of unfavorable affect linked with a downward trend” (1944:104). Analyses of commensuration and grading must attend to the kinesthetics of envelopment. We must account for directions of increase and decrease between commensurate entities on a continuum of “mores” trailed by “lesses.”

As it is used in this essay, “equivalence” hinges upon these kinesthetic implications. Sapir describes “equal to” in a “negative spirit”—as a “more or less temporary point of passage or equilibrium between ‘more than’ and ‘less than’ or as a point of arrival in a scale in which the term to be graded is constantly increasing or diminishing” (1944:105). He categorizes equality as both explicitly dynamic and implicitly dynamic, where the former reflects an increasing/decreasing “toward and away from” a point of equilibrium, and the latter implies either “having increased toward” or “having decreased toward” a point of equilibrium (1944:105–106). For Sapir (1944:106), “equality” is a “medium state or equilibrated state in an imagined back and forth of “more than” and “less than.” To generalize from equality to equivalence, we can argue that these back-and-forths upward and downward or toward and away from some equilibrated state establish *degrees of equivalence* between entities. In turn, efforts to grade some entity upward or downward with respect to another may be read as aims to indicate, settle, or unsettle equivalence. Crucially, then, equivalence (like Sapir’s notion of “equality”) is a destination, rather than a condition, produced through kinaesthesia and movement. Whether or not acts of commensuration and grading are perceived as settling or unsettling hinges upon the frames available to agents as they objectify and tacitly quantify shared qualities between given entities across shifting contexts. That is to say, acts of settling and unsettling equivalence indexically reveal the relative salience of certain qualities, quantities, entities, and frames of comparison immanent in some local ontology.

In the Bugis enclave of Tawau, Malaysia, an historically cultivated diasporic infrastructure has enabled the settling and sedimentation of equivalences between Bugis migrants and Malaysian citizens. In the majority Bugis district and greater Sabah, these equivalences have been settled, ratified, and politically mobilized by individuals and groups convicted of disseminating national identity cards among migrants in exchange for pro-UMNO votes. As a result of these developments that have been widely covered in the national media, an ensemble of qualities broadly abstracted as Bugisness (*Kebugisan*) has become increasingly marked and available for political remobilization by Malaysian citizens concerned by an influx of undocumented workers. In this changing sociopolitical scene, these concerned groups are jointly commensurating individuals who share and project Bugisness in comparable intensities. These acts of commensuration seek to unsettle equivalences between undocumented migrants and their co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts, grading entities with a projected propensity to exhibit “Bugisness” as either “foreign or “local.” Here, “foreign” and “local” are relative terms transposed onto the “mores” or “lesses” of a graded continuum of Bugisness. By sieving for graded differences of a shared quality, immigration officers, police, and concerned citizens effectively mark migrants as outsiders and potentially put them at risk.

In Tawau, these processes of commensuration, grading, and sieving are taking place in spaces known to harbor undocumented migrants, particularly palm oil plantations and fish and vegetable markets. Personnel from Volunteers of Malaysian People (RELA), a paramilitary volunteer corp, and Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) sweep oil palm plantations to seek out suspected undocumented workers and check their documents. In the Tawau harbor, RELA, ESSCOM, police, and agents of the Tawau Municipality Council (Majlis Perbandaran Tawau) engage in random yet regular sweeps of the large fish market adjacent to the harbor’s immigration office and the HotLink billboard advertisement in the Bugis ethnic language. In search of

undocumented migrants and workers with fraudulent or borrowed identity cards or sales licenses, uniformed and plainclothes agents will sweep through the market, attending to graded differences in Bugisness between migrants and citizens in neighboring stalls. Informants privy to these searches suggest that graded differences in *bahasa badan* [body language or bodily hexis], clothing, and talk of the vendors are privileged objects of agents' attention, and that vendors without proper documentation will often escape arrest by jumping into the harbor behind the market. Migrants leaving Tawau for Sabah's closely monitored "red zones" must remain even more vigilant about their presentations of self. As one Malaysian citizen of Bugis extraction informed me, migrants who select to find work in closely monitored cities like Lahad Datu or Sandakan must "tapok Kebugisannya" [hide their Bugisness]. This is especially true for those whose "[Malay] language is really Bugis" (*kebugisan betul bahasanya*) and decidedly foreign. This suggests a widespread awareness as to how speech sounds become imbricated in "sonically differentiated frameworks of value" (Harkness 2014:17) that shape, and so motivate, efforts to unsettle equivalences between citizens and noncitizens.

### Melodic Mountain Ranges, Excesses in Vitamin G, and Intrusive Phonosonics

In October 2013, I was sitting in one of Tawau's many *kopitiam* or coffee houses. Ostensibly a coffee house, this *kopitiam* doubled as beer garden, serving non-halal alcoholic beverages and pork products typically absent from Tawau's eating and drinking establishments that catered to the area's growing Bugis-Malay community. As such, it served as a meeting place where members of Tawau's ethnic Chinese and indigenous Christian Dusun, Murut, and Tidung peoples could socialize over drinks and dishes unavailable elsewhere. On this evening in October, my companion—an indigenous Sabahan concerned about "illegals" — and I discussed particular qualities of talk that differentiated the speech of Sabah's Bugis community from that of other, Malay-speaking "locals," all of whom look "just the same" (*sama sahaja*). An excerpt of our discussion is reproduced below:

#### Text 1

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>F: Pertama, dia punya loghat. Sebutan kadang-kadang sama, sama! Cuma ada punya sleng, ada punya timing, macam dia punya, apa itu, lagu-lagu itu.<br/>AC: Lagu-lagu==<br/>F: ==Lagu. Lagunya, punya soun-soun itu tidak sama. Kalo orang di sini, kan, macam orang lokal, lokal di sini ada juga Bajau, ada lah Tidung, kan? Murut. Dusun, Murut, dan Tidung itu saya tidak bezakan, sama dengan loghat saya. Nah, tapi kalo tempatan yang di sini, Bugis, saya tahu.<br/>AC: Kenapa dengan Bugis itu?<br/>F: Sebab dia ada ikut-ikutan dengan dia punya lbunda punya ... ini, sleng, lagu-lagunya lah. Lebih kurang begitulah.</p> | <p>1 F: First, they've got an accent. Their pronunciation<br/>2 is sometimes the same, the same! It's just<br/>3 that they've got some slang, they've got timing,<br/>4 like they have, what is it,<br/>5 a melody.<br/>6 AC: A melody==<br/>7 F: ==Melody. Their melody,<br/>8 their sounds aren't the same.<br/>9 If people here, right, like<br/>10 local people, locals here we've also got<br/>11 Bajau, there's Tidung, right? There's Murut.<br/>12 The speech of Dusun, Murut, and Tidung I<br/>13 can't differentiate, it's just the same with<br/>14 my accent. Now, if we're talking about locals<br/>15 here who are Bugis, I can tell.<br/>16 AC: What is it about those Bugis?<br/>17 F: Because they follow their<br/>18 native ... uh, slang,<br/>19 it's their melody. It's more or less<br/>20 like that.</p> |
|---|---|

"A melody?," I asked my companion (Line 6). "A melody," he quickly asserted, "Their melody, their sounds aren't the same" (Lines 7–8), taking his palm and tracing

a topsy-turvy wave in the air, as if outlining the peaks and valleys of an invisible mountain range. My companion had effectively characterized the ways in which Bugis immigrants (and some Bugis “locals”) laminate suprasegmental and phonological material from Bugis onto lexical material from the Sabah variety of Malay. This assimilation or superimposition results in “melodic” or “sing-songy” pitch contours (Lines 5–8) that—in South Sulawesi and Sabah alike—are typically associated with distinctly Bugis habits of speech. But whereas many Bugis migrants will “bring” these prototypical intonation contours with them on the journey from South Sulawesi, the speech of migrants’ co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts—most of whom cannot speak Bugis, having grown up only speaking English, Sabah Malay, and Standard Malay—are not nearly as “melodic” or “sing-songy.” Their speech, as they often informed me, was *lebih rata*—“more flat”—than that of their Indonesian counterparts.

This was a point tacitly alluded to by my companion, when I asked him “How to distinguish local Bugis — Malaysian citizens — from those who have recently arrived from Indonesia?” “Ah, the locals from the immigrants,” my companion continued. Bugis migrants’ Malay “language is even more Bugis” [lebih Bugis lagi dia punya bahasa] than that of their co-ethnic Malaysian hosts, he told me. “They’re almost the same, but if you listen closely, you can tell the difference” [Hampir sama, tapi kalau ko dengar baik-baik ko akan sadar perbezaannya]:

## Text 2

- |   |    |   |    |
|---|----|---|----|
| F: Nah, ini Bugis, kita tahu sahaja kerana selalu “G” dia orang tidak boleh pakai.  | 1  | F: Now, these Bugis, of course we know it’s them because it’s always “G” they can’t use.  | 2  |
| AC: Selalu “G”?   | 3  | AC: Always “G”?   | 4  |
| F: Ah, “N,” “N!” “N” kah, “pulang,” “pulan.”  | 5  | F: Ah, “N,” “N!” Is it “N,” “return” (pulang), “return” (pulan).  | 6  |
| “G” kah dia tak boleh pakai? “N” kah? “Ikan” ah “N” tak boleh sebut! Kalo, kan “ikan,” “ikang.”   | 7  | Is it “G” that they can’t use? Is it “N”? “Fish” (ikang) ah it’s “N” that they can’t pronounce! If, right, they say “fish” (ikan), they say “fish” (ikang).   | 8  |
| AC: “Ikan.”   | 9  | AC: “Fish” (ikang).   | 10 |
| F: Kalau “Sandakan,” “Sandakang,” asal “N” hujung . . . “N” dia tak boleh sebut. Tapi oleh kerana dia orang-orang di sini, kan, dia harus learn itu supaya boleh sebut “NG” sama “N.” Tapi macam mana, sudah lancar sudah bercakap keluar juga itu. | 11 | F: If “Sandakan,” it’s “Sandakang,” if “N” is at the end . . . “N” they cannot pronounce. But because they’re people who live here, right, they should learn it so they can pronounce “NG” as “N.” But how can they, if they’re already fluent when they speak, it still comes out. | 12 |
| AC: Dan masih ada [anunya.  | 13 | AC: And there’s still the [um.  | 14 |
| F: [ah, masih ada   | 15 | F: [ah, still is.   | 16 |
| AC: Masih ada [lagunya itu.   | 17 | AC: Still have that [melody.  | 18 |
| F: [tak boleh hilang.   | 19 | F: [cannot disappear.   | 20 |
| Masih ada.  | 21 | Still there.  | 22 |
|   | 23 |   |    |

After a few false starts—“is it ‘G’” or “is it ‘N’” that “these Bugis” immigrants can’t pronounce?—my drinking companion identified a salient point of contrast between Bugis immigrants (a group whose language is “more Bugis”) and locally born Bugis Malaysians (whose language is “less”): a specific phonological change occurring at the ends of words. In Bugis, only the velar nasal [ŋ] and glottal stop [ʔ] appear as word-final consonants. This phonotactic restriction constrains the ways in which Bugis migrants—the vast majority of whom speak Bugis with one another on a daily basis—speak Malay. It constrains migrants’ pronunciation of ready-to-hand items like *ikan* (fish) (Lines 8–11), or well-known place-names like *Sandakan*—a city north of

Sabah—as *Sandakang* (Line 12). Bugis living in South Sulawesi will frequently joke that it is an “excess of vitamin G” or *kelebihan vitamin G* that causes this to happen, a phrase in which standard Indonesian/Malay items *kelebihan* (“excess” or “moreness”) and *vitamin* feature the excess “G” in question. Indeed, this “excess” in “G” has become sociolinguistically iconic (Woolard 2008) of South Sulawesi Malay speech styles, and is a key feature in “Makassar Malay” or South Sulawesi’s regional Malay varieties. During my time studying regional languages and linguistics at South Sulawesi’s Hasanuddin University, I would often hear students remind themselves to “watch their tongues” (*jaga lidah*) lest they evince “too much G” (*terlalu banyak G*) in seminar rooms where they are expected to use “good and proper Indonesian” (*bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar*).

My companion’s account of the “almost same” but “different” nature of speaking among Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians highlights a particular typification schema salient within a particular ontology—one widespread enough in contemporary Sabah—in which graded *excesses* in particular qualities (e.g., “G” and “sing-songy” pitch) are linked to certain ethnic and legal kinds (e.g., “Bugis” and “Pendatang” or [illegal] “immigrant”). Throughout Sabah, meta-significations of this typification schema characterize how to identify these unregistered signs of kindness with varying degrees of explicitness. They stipulate how members of certain ‘unfavorable’ ethnic and legal kinds exhibit certain indices (meaning in turn that individuals who exhibit those indices must be members of those kinds). They may be found in popular newspaper reports—“illegals’ accents will betray them” (Bernama 2001)—or in popular books written about the “nightmare” of “illegal immigrants in Sabah” that serve as how-to guides for metapragmatically construing “Bugis” voices and “illegal” personae across interactional settings in Sabah’s shifting demographic scene (see Mutalib 1999:154–155). Many of these characterizations are articulated by Sabahans concerned about an influx of undocumented Bugis Indonesian immigrants. Notwithstanding these Sabahans’ concerns, how do identifications about these perceived intensities or “excesses”—where “excess” is itself determined through implicit and explicit acts of grading—emerge within interactions between undocumented Bugis Indonesians and their more-or-less sympathetic, co-ethnic Malaysian counterparts? To answer this question, what follows in quick succession is a series of conversational texts and diagrammatic representations of pitch during voiced talk which highlight intra-ethnic evaluations of migrant “Bugisness.”

On December 13, 2014, three friends and I drove through one of Tawau’s many palm-oil plantations. My friends—Malaysians of Bugis extraction—were taking me to the home of some acquaintances who had been working on the plantation for well over ten years. They said that the people we were going to meet exhibited a typically Bugis tendency to *malla-gu-lagu*, referring to the “sing-songy” pitch movement that characterizes Bugis intonation contours superimposed onto lexical material. As she pulled up to the workers’ quarters, my friend in the driver’s seat also told me with a smile that these and other Bugis “Pigi Balikpapan” [Go to Balikpapan] while the other Malays “Pigi Balikpapan” [Go to Balikpapan], referring to a port city in eastern Borneo and a common way-stop for Bugis migrants from Sulawesi headed to Malaysia. Our friends sitting in the backseat cracked up with laughter. Their getting the joke hinged upon their awareness of a phonotactic structure in the Bugis language that shapes and constrains migrants’ Malay speech practices—the same one identified by my companion at the *kopitiam*. In my friend’s joke, Balikpapan and Balikpapan become the proper names for two different places: the Bugis are compelled to go to Balikpapan or *Balikpapan*, as opposed to *Balikpapan* which is visited by other members of the Malay race.

As we sat down on the terrace of the couple’s home, one of my friends—a woman in her early fifties—began speaking with the woman who lived there. Likely indulging my interest in Bugis migrants’ habits of talk and ideologies of language

structure and use, my friend asked the Bugis woman — also in her fifties — about the Bugis-Malay distinction:

### Text 3

W: Mana penting, Bahasa Bugis kah Bahasa Melayu?

H: Penting lah Bugis, Nda' /tahu separuh itu \Melayu!

[Tapi boleh caka' Melayu juga!

W: [Bugis sangat.

F: Pakcik, sehari-hari Pakcik cakap bahasa Melayu kah bahasa Bugis?

P: Bahasa Melayu?

F: Iya lah yang biasa yang Pakcik pakai?

P: Sama.

F: Sama Melayu Bugis==

H: ==Sama Melayu Bugis!

P: Orang tua, kang, nda [pandai anunya

H: [Aku pun, eh nda tahu apa na'caka' itu.

F: Tapi kedua-dua bahasa Pakcik boleh paham boleh cakap dengan bagus.

P: Iyye.

H: Kalo disini ada juga yang pahang ada nda' ::laughs::

W: Paham. Oh iya kah. Sampai sekarang begitu juga? Ah wé dé dé==

H: ==dé dé dé ::laughs::

1 W: What's more important, Bugis language or Malay?

2 H: Bugis is important, I don't /know half of \Malay!

3 [But I can also speak Malay!

4 W: [Very Bugis.

5 F: Uncle, everyday do you speak Malay or Bugis?

6 P: Malay?

7 F: Yeah what do you usually use?

8 P: Both the same.

9 F: Malay and Bugis equally==

10 H: ==Malay and Bugis equally!

11 P: Old people, right, [they're not good at

12 H: [Me too, eh

13 I don't know what they say in Malay.

14 F: But both languages you can understand and speak well.

15 P: Yes.

16 H: Here, there are people who understand it and others who don't ::laughs::

17 W: Understand. Oh like that is it? Until now it's still like that? Tisk tisk tisk==

18 H: ==tisk tisk tisk ::laughs::

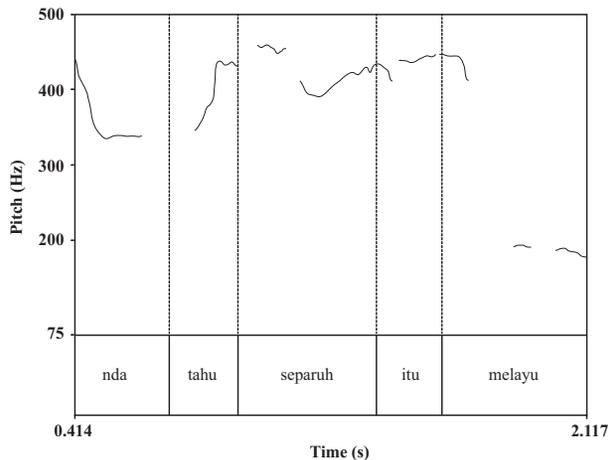


Figure 6. "Nda' tahu separuh itu Melayu!" I don't know half of Malay!

When asked to evaluate the relative importance of "Bugis" and "Malay," the woman offered a seemingly nervous (and perhaps personally embarrassing) qualification: "Nda' tahu separuh itu Melayu!" [I don't know half of Malay!], implying that she felt more at ease with her native Bugis language. As she expresses frustration with her Malay proficiency (Lines 3–4), note the pitch range of the

intonation phrase and the steep phrase-final fall on “Melayu” (Figure 6). One of my friends characterized her *lagu* or intonation contour was “Bugis sangat” [Very Bugis], a relatively implicit comparative construction suggesting that it was commensurate with prototypically Bugis pitch movement during voiced talk. It was not, however, characterized as a mere echo of some norm, nor was it simply framed as an instantiation of some typical and locally salient form. Much like forewarnings to migrants entering red zones whose Malay speech forms remain “Kebugisan betul” [Really Bugis], the characterization of her intonation as “very Bugis” presupposes its gradability relative to an imagined norm or standard, situated on a continuum of Bugisness, and circumfixed by mores and lesses. As my friend who drove me to the workers’ quarters would later explain, to say that one’s talk is “very Bugis” is to imply that it is “sangat kebugisan dibanding bahasa Bugis tempatan” [Very Bugis compared to the language spoken by local Bugis]. It is graded with respect to situationally salient norms and forms that possesses “less” of the quality stipulated by its predicate. Other features in the couple’s talk are also worth highlighting here. The migrant woman’s speech evinced glottal stop substitution for bilabial stop [p] in *cakap* or “speak” (Line 18), attached to the third-person clitic *na-* from the Bugis language. Both migrant workers also exhibited that prototypically Bugis excess in vitamin G (Lines 16 and 22), with Malay question particle *kan* featuring the velar nasal in final position, and word-final bilabial nasal in *paham* or “understand” transforming to [ŋ]. The latter of these elicited a “correction” on the part of my friend W (Line 24), who emphasized word final [m] in *paham* in response to a perceived excess in [ŋ]. And when she was informed that migrants who have long stayed in Malaysia still struggle with Malay on a daily basis, she playfully admonished these absent individuals with a “tisk tisk tisk.”

Our conversation on the terrace continued, and using the couple’s predication of “sameness” between everyday uses of Bugis and Malay (Lines 12–15), we began discussing those uncanny affinities between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the people who call these nations home. “Sama, tapi berbeza” [It’s/we’re the same, but different], said the man, invoking that by now familiar refrain. He teased out one such wrinkle of different sameness by offering a metapragmatic account of lexical variation between the standard Indonesian and Malay adverb of time, “when”:

#### Text 4

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>P:</b> Kalo di Indonesia, “<b>Kapang</b> Balik.” Kalo di Malaysia, “Bila balik.”</p> <p><b>AC:</b> Iyye, “bila balik.”</p> <p><b>P:</b> Kita saja nda’ pakai itu ‘<b>Kapang</b>.’ Sama juga, ‘<b>Kapang</b>,’ ‘Bila.’</p> | <p>1 <b>P:</b> If in Indonesia(n), it’s ‘<b>When (kapang)</b> are you going back.’ If in Malaysian, “When (bila) are you going back.”</p> <p>2</p> <p>3</p> <p>4 <b>AC:</b> Yeah, ‘When (bila) are you going back.’</p> <p>5 <b>P:</b> We don’t use that word ‘<b>When</b>’ (<b>kapang</b>).</p> <p>6 They’re the same, ‘<b>when</b>’ (<b>kapang</b>) ‘when’ (bila).</p> |
|---|--|

This exchange features predications of equivalence between what interactants referred to as the standard ‘Indonesian’ item “Kapang” and ‘Malaysian’ “bila” (note the folk-Saussurian attribution of equivalence at the level of relations between relations). However, the lexeme /kapang/ that my interlocutors referred to as “Indonesian” is orthographically rendered as <kapan> and pronounced /kapan/ in standard Indonesian. Their /kapang/ was /kapan/ but with a Bugis twist, shaped and constrained by a Bugis phonotactic structure stipulating a velar nasal in word-final position.

This wrinkle of difference in Bugis migrant and Bugis Malaysian speech forms—this excess in “G”—is an object of attention in the interactional lives of migrants

and their co-ethnic Malaysian associates. That is to say, word-final [ŋ] is a *pragmatically salient* linguistic variable (Errington 1985, 1988): it mediates the intersubjective work productive of sociality and is relatively open to rationalization and strategic reference in predications of migrant difference. But as the foregoing conversational texts suggest, it is not the only pragmatically salient variable in a Bugis repertoire of intra-racial/intra-ethnic difference-marking.

During the Holy Month of Ramadan in 2014, three other Bugis Malaysian friends took me to the home of extended family members from Indonesia who were living in Tawau. While these family members possessed Malaysian identity cards which marked them as Malaysians by birth, they identified Bone regency in South Sulawesi as their point of origin, a kind of exemplary center for Bugis language, culture, and history. When we arrived at the family home, an older married couple let us in. Not long after sitting down, however, our female host began complaining about her husband's "crazy" decision to bring a relatively substantial amount of gold back to Boné regency in South Sulawesi via ferry—a precarious mode of transport whose regular passengers include so-called *hipnotis* (hypnotist) pickpockets.

### Text 5

<p><b>G:</b> Emas /lima na'bawa pegi          \Indonesia, /lima \emas.          Nda' usah lah na'kiring dui!          Mati lah aku.  <b>M:</b> ::laughs:: Andrew ko merekam          dia punya bahasa.  <b>D:</b> /Unik \tu! ::laughs::  <b>F:</b> Habis terkejut kita \tengok!          ::laughs::  <b>G:</b> Iya, terkejut!</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p>	<p><b>G:</b> /Five pieces of gold <b>he brought</b>          to \Indonesia, /five pieces of \gold.          It wasn't necessary for <b>him to send the money!</b>          I almost died.  <b>M:</b> ::laughs:: Andrew record          her speech.  <b>D:</b> /It's \unique! ::laughs::  <b>F:</b> So you were shocked to \see that          [your husband brought it]! ::laughs::  <b>G:</b> Yeah, I was shocked!</p>
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Much like the married migrant couple's speech featured in the foregoing analysis, the angry wife's talk exhibits by now recognizable features of "very Bugis" talk — glottal stop substitution for /t/ in Malay item *duit* (money, gold) (Line 3), velar nasal substitution for /m/ in Malay item *kirim* (send) (Line 3), and third-person pronominal proclitic *na-* from the Bugis language affixed to Malay verbs (Lines 1 and 3). Based on the responses G's complaint about her husband elicited from my Bugis Malaysian friends (M, D, and F), the interactional salience of these features was overshadowed by that of the wife's *lagu* or intonation contour, one segment of which is reproduced here (Figure 7).

Upon hearing her *lagu*, M suggested I record G, positioning her as an exemplary speaker of the kind of Bugis-inflected Malay talk that I was interested in. In the process, M — like my *kopitiam* companion — took her outstretched palm, tracing a rippling and invisible wave in the air. D echoed her suggestion, noting the "uniqueness" of G's speech (a uniqueness tacitly defined in relation to the talk of your "typical" Bugis Sabahan). Crucially, D's cognitive evaluative judgment as to the uniqueness of G's speech was accomplished through a kind of sonic grading, one that played out "kinaesthetically" in the ears. And in turn, these sonically graded differences were phonically transposed, as D modulated her own ordinarily *rata* or "flat" intonation to imitate G's, highlighting its "uniqueness" with a dramatic rise and fall in pitch. Also engaging in corporeally embodied modes of grading, and returning to the content of G's narrative, F—an individual who would frequently note her *kegeraman* or "annoyance" upon hearing undocumented Bugis immigrants evince their *lagu-lagu* in public spaces where they should *tapok* or "mask" their Bugisness — noted how G must have been "shocked to see" her husband's actions. F voiced a prototypical

Bugisness through recourse to the vocal chords and air pressure from the lungs, deliberately modulating her typically *rata* intonation to imitate the rise and fall of G's speech with a long phrase-final fall on "kita tengok" (Figure 8), and punctuating her utterance with laughter and a knowing smile.

When I noted how different it was to hear them modulate the qualitative intensity of their *lagu-lagu* in ways that approximated Bugis Indonesian styles of speaking, my friends laughed. F told me that *Bugis tempatan* or local Bugis will often engage in such mimetic practice (Lempert 2014). Sometimes, she said, they did so because they "ingin akrab dan mesra" [want to be friendly and familiar] whereas other times, they "mahu cuba untuk bercakap macam mereka dan kedengaran macam main-main" [want to try to talk like them and sound like they're playing around]. But they never do so, she said, with the intention of *menghina* or "insulting."

While these friends highlighted how voicing contrasts (Agha 2007) constitute foci of metapragmatic play (Cekaite and Aronsson 2004), other Bugis Malaysians approach graded differences in the qualities they share with Bugis Indonesians as a point of concern. One individual—a member of Malaysia's United Malays ruling party—also noted her "annoyance" upon hearing undocumented Bugis immigrants evince an "excessive Bugisness" in public spaces. While neither confirming nor denying UMNO's alleged involvement in disseminating national identity cards to such migrants in exchange for votes at the polls, she noted the following:

Menunjukkan bahawa IC itu tidak sesuai untuk mereka miliki, sebab bahasanya seperti bukan Sabahan atau Malaysian. . . . Macam PATI yang berasal dari Sulawesi [The way they

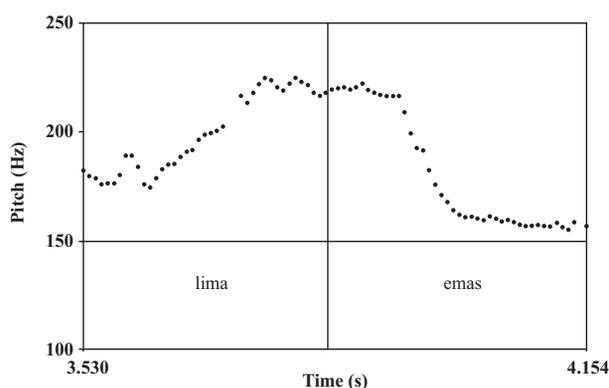


Figure 7. "Lima emas." Five [pieces] of gold.

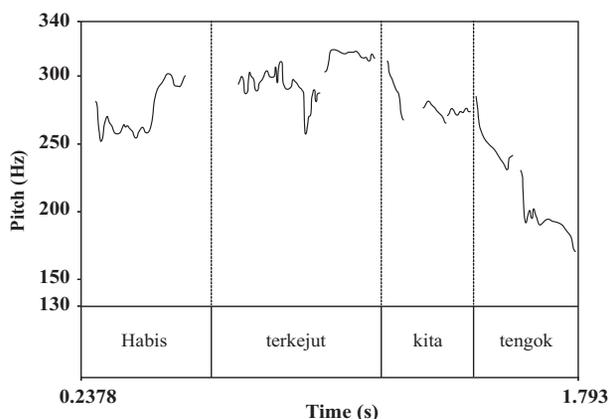


Figure 8. "Habis terkejut kita tengok." You were shocked to see it!

talk points to the fact that the Malaysian Identity Card isn't appropriate for them to have, because their language isn't that of a Sabahan or Malaysian. . . . It's like the language of an illegal from Sulawesi]

This UMNO member does not take issue with the fact that undocumented Bugis immigrants are "illegal" beneficiaries of Malaysian national identity cards, but rather, that they sound like outsiders. This fact is not lost on migrants, who—amid increasing state crackdowns on "illegals"—are coming to identify how certain excessive qualities of speech increase the "possibility of detection and ruin" (Garfinkel [1967] 2006:60). Consider the following conversation that took place between a Malaysian plantation employee (U) alongside two of her Indonesian colleagues (A and D). As the three of them sat in U's house, U noted how a certain migrant worker was making regular visits to her home with extended family in tow. "Dia itu paling lucu kalo bercakap, bah. Kan? Melayunya" [She's the funniest if she speaks, right? Her Malay]. "Yang melagu-lagu itu?" [The sing-songy one?], D asks. U continues:

### Text 6

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| U: Rata-rata Bugis semua begitu.<br>"Jangang." [Semua dari Bugis.   | 1 U: On average all Bugis migrants speak like                       |
| A: [Enrekang pun.   | 2 that. "Don't" ( <b>jangang</b> ) [It's all from the Bugis.        |
| U: Enrekang, tak. Enrekang, tidak<br>/ada caka' \begini! ::laughs:: | 3 A: [Enrekang people also.   |
| "Jangang," "makang."  | 4 U: Enrekang aren't like that. Enrekang don't                      |
| D: Semua "NG"==   | 5 /talk ( <b>caka'</b> ) like \this! ::laughs::                     |
| U: == "NG" ::laughs::   | 6 "Don't" ( <b>jangang</b> ), "Eat ( <b>makang</b> )."              |
| D: "Makang," "malang."  | 7 D: It's all "NG"==  |
| U: Ada pernah sebut "makam."  | 8 U: == "NG" ::laughs::   |
| D: Iya, pasal "makang" dengan                                       | 9 D: "Eat ( <b>makang</b> )," "night ( <b>malang</b> )."            |
| "malang" itu, apa ni, itu <b>tujuang</b>                            | 10 U: There are also folks who say "eat" ( <b>makam</b> ).          |
| serupa <b>tujuang</b> itu, patuh bahasa                             | 11 D: Yeah, as far as "eat" ( <b>makang</b> )                       |
| bahasa ibunda kan? Ah, macam mana                                   | 12 and "night" ( <b>malang</b> ), uh, the ending ( <b>tujuang</b> ) |
| "NG" tu sudah habis?  | 13 is the same ending ( <b>tujuang</b> ) right, from                |
|   | 14 the native language, right? Ah, how can                          |
|   | 15 that "NG" go away?   |

Here, U explicitly characterizes a typical or "average" class of Malay-speaking Bugis migrants who have a greater projected propensity to evince certain qualities of speech than a tacitly presupposed class of local speakers. At the same time, she takes umbrage at the assumption that Bugis from Enrekang—the regency in South Sulawesi where she traces her ancestry—share that propensity (Lines 4–5), and in the process imitates the class of speakers she typified in Line 1. She also alleges that certain features of migrant speech are the objects of attempts at hypercorrection (Line 10), where migrants attempting to use the standard Malay item *makan* or "eat" substitute bilabial nasal [m] for ordinarily occurring [ŋ] in word-final position, later noting that "-ng is changed to -m, like 'makang' becomes 'makam.'" This alleged form may be read as what Labov (1972:178) referred to as "hypercorrection from above the level of social awareness" by migrants who, to riff on Errington's (1985) discussion of hypercorrection in Javanese village settings, do not control the standard form of Malay spoken in Sabah. In response, D, a migrant worker from Sulawesi, acknowledges the Bugis migrant propensity toward "NG," while inadvertently evincing this sign in the process, exhibiting an excess in "G" in the item *tujuan* (ending) (Lines 12–13).

Echoing the opinion of our aforementioned UMNO official, U identifies those Bugis migrants who carry Malaysian national identity cards as the individuals who must truly minimize or mask their "excessive Bugisness" or *kebugisan*:

## Text 7

- U: Apalagi orang yang pegang IC. Bayangkan bah. "Dimana lahir?" "Malaysia."  
 D: Itu, IC, kan?  
 Bahasanya ngam bilang, anu, "bercakap," tapi dia tak bilang "bercakap" bilang "bercaka"  
 U: Iya, jadi, jadi tangkap polis.  
 D: Ada juga, kalo misalnya anu lah, macam ada misalnya tiga bahasa yang dipakai. Nda' tahu mungkin geleng-geleng kepala polis itu bilang, "Bah! Lah! Betul bahasa terlalu pekat tahu lah Bugis ni."
- 1 U: All the more for the immigrants who hold  
 2 Malaysian Identity Cards. Just imagine it.  
 3 "Where were you born?" "Malaysia."  
 4 D: They're the ones with Identity Cards, right?  
 5 The correct language would be to say, um,  
 6 "talk" (bercakap), but they don't  
 7 say "talk" (bercakap) they say "talk" (bercaka')  
 8 U: Yeah, so they, so they get arrested by the  
 9 police.  
 10 D: There's also, for example uh,  
 11 it's like they're using three different languages.  
 12 Who knows, maybe  
 12 the police shake their heads, saying  
 14 "Now! This person's language is  
 15 way too thick, he must be Bugis."

This—the final transcript offered here—highlights how sonically graded differences in embodied habits of talk are imagined to be causally linked to detection and capture. Accents that are "too thick" (*terlalu pekat*) relative to a locally imagined standard are perceived of as indexically revealing unlicensed presences in need of policing. These sequences highlight migrants' awareness of the phonosonic (Harkness 2014) perils of certain sounds whose phonic production and sonic categorization unsettles, rather than settles, projected equivalences between themselves and their co-ethnic Malaysian associates. These sounds are intrusive, not only in the phonetic sense of facilitating the pronunciation of certain Malay words, but also in a more general sense: they're unwelcome sounds, whose "sonic uptake and categorization" (Harkness 2014:12) by dangerous bystanders could prove dangerous.

In much of the sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological literature, nonlexical variables have generally been cast as "relatively less available to speakers' awareness for description" or reflexive manipulation (Errington 1985:304; see Labov 1972; Silverstein 1981). "Awareness" is usually metalinguistically predicated about and referred to, and ethnographically 'locatable' in informants' metapragmatic discourse. Ethnographic approaches to issues of awareness (and intentionality) must not only attend to sign-users' reflexive processes of evaluation, but also to processes of creation, as they inhabit situationally relevant social personae or enact new forms of affiliation (Agha 2007). Recent work glossed under the rubric of "sociophonetics" has addressed these issues, evaluating speakers' reflexive and creative manipulation of phonetic variables as interactional resources in their navigations of everyday life (Eckert 2000; Hay and Drager 2007; Johnstone 2007; Mendeza-Denton 2008). Amidst state crack-downs on undocumented migrants, three nonlexical variables — sing-songy intonation contours, velar nasals, and glottal stops in word-final position — have emerged as diacritics of group membership. That is to say, they have become shibboleths: post facto constructs that emerge when quantitative variation around a statistical norm is (mis)recognized, rationalized, and enclosed as a qualitative category. In Sabah, these diacritics can be mobilized by the state to sieve for noncitizens among its citizens, or by concerned citizens to sieve for unlicensed presences in their midst. And, as shown here, they are jointly attended to by Bugis Indonesians and Bugis Malaysians as signs of their contrastive commonality

In contemporary Sabah, graded differences in projected qualities like Bugisness hinge upon a corporeal kinaesthetics, and in turn come to stand for social personae that are themselves open to grading and differentiation, e.g., "Bugis tempatan" (Local Bugis) versus "Pendatang Bugis" (Bugis immigrants). For Sabahans concerned with policing, phonic differences stemming from different embodied norms of phonatory and articulatory process become sonically graded indicators of licensed versus

intrusive presences: “Bugis tempatan” versus “illegal workers,” phantom voters, PATI, and so on. For Bugis migrants from Indonesia, sonically graded differences between the norms and forms of their Malay speech versus those of their co-ethnic Malay associates are doubly unsettling. Such differences may be politically mobilized to unsettle equivalences between migrants and citizens that shape the formers’ strategies of assimilation. And if wrinkles of linguistic difference are read as indexically revealing an intrusive or unlicensed presence, migrants may fall victim to ongoing state crackdowns. As they negotiate the risks immanent in certain categorizations of linguistic variables, Bugis migrants must in theory smooth out such wrinkles, and engage in graded adjustments of those variables to settle and indicate equivalences between themselves and their erstwhile hosts.

### Conclusion

In *Sense and Sensibilia*, J. L. Austin (1962:74) wrote that “‘Like’ is the great adjuster-word, the main flexibility device by whose aid, in spite of the limited scope of our vocabulary, we can always avoid being left speechless.” So too, we might think of commensuration as a kind of flexibility vehicle by whose aid we can navigate, evaluate, compare, enumerate, and demarcate oceans of difference. To channel the tendency toward nautical metaphor so prevalent in Bugis society, if “commensuration” is the vessel, then “grading” is the rudder.

This essay has explored these issues in the context of the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands, assessing how undocumented migrants in Malaysia engage in everyday acts of commensuration as they reflexively evaluate and create new kinds alignments to avoid being left high and dry in shifting interactional settings across potentially hazardous terrains. I have argued that degrees of equivalence between entities are indicated in relatively implicit and explicit comparative constructions: from phonotactic constraints and the sound shape of “very Bugis” qua “very foreign” intonation contours that trouble perceived equivalences between migrants and hosts, to Indonesian migrants’ reflexive orientations toward situationally relevant norms and forms of talk in Sabah, to Malaysian citizens’ joint orientations toward proportional quantities of certain qualities that indicate out-of-place-ness and illegality. I have made the case that equivalences are settled or unsettled through commensuration and semiotically attendant processes of grading, which are in turn enabled by an historically cultivated diasporic infrastructure.

As I defined it here, commensuration is a semiotic process whose sign is an entity, whose object is a quality (or ensemble of qualities), and whose interpretant is a comparison (with some other entity). Two entities are commensurate if they share the same quality in proportional quantities. Grading, a process that “precedes measurement and counting” (Sapir 1944:93), indicates the relative more-or-less-ness of those proportional quantities. As the foregoing analysis has suggested, grading is “kinaesthetic” in two senses of the word. First, and as Sapir (1944) described at length, grading some entity relative to a commensurate entity intimates a moving upward and toward or downward and away from. I have attempted to capture these kinesthetic dimensions by making the case that semiotic agents can *settle* equivalences—e.g., bring together or ‘move’ one entity ‘closer’ or ‘upward’ toward some relative entity on some continuum of more-or-lesses—or *unsettle* them—e.g., tease apart or “move” some entity away or downward from some relative entity on some continuum of more-or-lesses. Explored with reference to their assimilatory strategies, migrants’ acts of grading are also kinaesthetic in the sense that their attempts to settle and indicate equivalences with their hosts play out in embodied processes of phonation and articulation.

The foregoing account of commensuration has defined *qualities* as those projections which enable entities to collaterally relate. Qualities as they have been discussed here materialize across entities and events, where, framed semiotically, a quality of experience (qua sign) stands for a quality of entity experienced (qua object) in

motivated and indexical ways. It has also foregrounded *quantities* as those properties that differentiate collaterally relating entities along gradations of more-or-less-ness. Using Sapir's (1944) assertion that grading "precedes measurement and counting" as a point of departure, Kockelman suggests that we attend equally to *quantia*, or quantity prior to its quantification (Kockelman 2016a). He argues that an ethnographic account of local and situationally salient modes of qualia and quantia "necessarily presupposes various modes of equalia" which he defines as "equality that is (seemingly) prior to its political mobilization or mathematical formulation" (2016a:115). As they have been explored in this essay, commensuration and grading are modes of equalia par excellence. Recall, for example, Prime Minister Najib's commensuration of Javanese with Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, and Acehese ethnic groups in a series of equivalence relations. These entities may be read alternatively as signs of the same object (Malayness), or as interpretants (Bugis, Banjar, Minangkabau, Acehese) of the same sign-object relation (Javanese-Malayness).

This brings me to an implicit, perhaps more lofty aim of this essay, which has been to address anthropologists' enduring reliance on a disciplinary folk model that shapes our modes of inquiry and knowledge claims: the sameness-difference binary (Boellstorff 2005). Boellstorff has argued that this binary and its prioritization of difference over sameness contributes to anthropology's "heteronormativity," where "hetero-" is understood etymologically as "different." His call for alternative rubrics is rooted in his long-standing ethnographic work on same-sex attraction and LGBTQ communities in Indonesia and beyond. However, it is equally useful for thinking through issues in the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands and other borderland settings, where similarity, sameness, and projected equivalences between entities with shared qualities are semiotically contested through everyday acts of grading, and enabled by everyday acts of commensuration.

In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James (1890:459) wrote that the "sense of sameness is the very keel and backbone of our thinking." In a scene of rapid sociopolitical change in the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands, equalia—instantiated in modes of commensuration and grading—appears to be "the very keel and backbone" of migrants' and hosts' negotiations of their contrastive commonality, and the state's efforts to sort noncitizens from its citizens.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* Joe Errington, Paul Kockelman, Erik Harms, and James T. Collins offered crucial feedback and guidance early on in the development of this essay. A version of the article was presented at the 2015 Penn Semiotic Anthropology Conference in the panel "Quality and Quantity," where Robert Moore served as discussant. The essay in its original form was presented at the 2015 SLA Graduate Student Essay Prize Panel, where Alan Rumsey, Frances Trix, and Jim Wilce served as judges and generous interlocutors. Nicholas Harkness offered incisive feedback on some of the material here as it appeared in my dissertation. Thank you to Jane Wong, Kathryn Hardy, Liz Miles, and Mike Montesano for providing important readings. Special thanks to Journal of Linguistic Anthropology editor Paul Kockelman and anonymous reviewers. To my Bugis friends who appear anonymized in this essay, *tarima kasi' sileasureng malébbikku'*. While these individuals made this article much *more* than it would otherwise be, none is responsible for its *kekurangan* or relative "lessnesses."

1. Much has been said in the area studies literature about *Melayu* (Malay) as a highly situated and labile category of identification and description (see Barnard 2004). While these issues are not central to my expository concerns, suffice it to say that in contemporary Malaysian society "Malays" benefit from affirmative action policies and are constitutionally defined as locally born Malay-speaking Muslims who practice Malay custom. Contemporary notions of a *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) are inherited in part from British colonial-era projects of census-taking (Hirschman 1987; Reid 2001). Early censuses in 1871 and 1881 separated ethnic "Malays" from Achinese, Bugis, Javanese, etc who hailed from or traced their roots to the Dutch East Indies. Later censuses would unify these entities in a single grouping whose name would undergo various revisions—"Malays and other Natives of the Archipelago" (1901), "Malays and Allied Races" (1911), The Malay Population (1921), "Malaysians" (1931),

etc.—but the grouping as a category would always be separated from the two other major categories that operate today: Chinese and Indian (Hirschman 1987:571–576). Malay as a racial category would later be taken up by proto-nationalists in the 1930s, becoming “the primary locus of political passion” (Reid 2001:308) and *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy/sovereignty) would become the principle of the nationalist party—the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)—which continues to operate today.

2. In Malay, circumfix “ke-an” derives abstract nouns from adjectival roots. Ke-an formations may be glossed as “the state, quality or degree” of the root. For example, *ke-hitam-an* (blackness, darkness) is derived from *hitam* (black, dark); *ke-Melayu-an* (Malayness) is formed from “*Melayu*,” etc.

3. For an alternative reading of select material presented here that prioritizes areal and historical particulars, see Carruthers (2017a).

4. There is a wealth of literature on commensuration as a social process (see in particular Espeland and Stevens 1998; see also Kockelman 2016c and Hankins and Yeh 2016). It is often said that to claim that two entities are commensurate is to say that they may be measured with the same metric. Put differently, however, and framed with an eye to Sapir (1944), we might argue that to claim that two entities are commensurate is to mean that they may be characterized and compared along gradations of more-and-less-ness.

5. See Jane Wong (2000, Forthcoming) for an account of Sabah Malay’s phonological and lexical contrasts with standard Malay and other Malay varieties. One salient difference worth highlighting here is that in Sabah Malay (similar to the Malay spoken by Bugis migrants from South Sulawesi), standard Malay (and Indonesian) first person plural inclusive “*kita*” or “*we*” is widely used for the formal second person singular.

6. The poem (and Najib’s recitation of it) continues: “*Jakun dan Sakai asli Melayu, Arab dan Pakistani semua Melayu, Mamak dan Malbari serap ke Melayu, Malah muaf bertakrif Melayu*” [The Jakun and Sakai come from the Malays, Arabs and Pakistanis are all Malay, The Mamak and Malbari have been absorbed into the Malays, even converts define themselves as Malay]. I have chosen to highlight the first five entities listed in sequence not only for the sake of expository brevity. Their appearance at the beginning of the sequence is suggestive of their status as prototypes of ‘Malayness’ vis-à-vis the more ‘unlikely’ candidates at the tail end of the sequence, e.g., *muaf* or ‘converts to Islam.’ While many invoke the poem as a celebration of diversity and the labile nature of “Malayness” in a demographically shifting society (e.g., Even converts can be considered Malay!), its success in articulating such a message relies on the way it tacitly establishes a gamut of *Kemelayuan* or ‘Malayness,’ with more exemplary groups (e.g., Javanese, Bugis, etc.) at the ‘top,’ followed by a trail of more ‘unexpected’ entities (e.g., Arabs, Pakistanis, and *muaf*) toward the end.

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