

In lieu of “keywords”: Toward an anthropology of rapport

Andrew M. Carruthers 

Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

Correspondence

Andrew M. Carruthers, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA.
Email: acarru@sas.upenn.edu

Abstract

The identification of socioculturally important “keywords” remains a distinctive feature of critical social theory. This article asks why this is so while offering a critique of “keyword projects” as they have been formulated and pursued across cultural studies and anthropology. Such projects often remain inattentive to wider patterns of sign relations, concealing from ethnographic view the very patterns within which key “words” emerge and are embedded. Overlooking these patterns precludes finer-grained considerations of what makes certain words situationally “key” within sociocultural life. Engaging with migrant mobilities across the borderlands and borderwaters of Indonesia and Malaysia, the article examines keywords not simply as sociocultural formations or semiotic regularities, per se, but as captions for and construals of fashions of speaking and forms of life. Connecting hitherto unconnected accounts of “rapport,” it illustrates how anthropologists might move beyond “keyword talk” to more fully consider how rapport configures anthropological assumptions about “keyness” itself.

KEYWORDS

keywords, language, rapport, relation, Southeast Asia

Resumen

La identificación de palabras claves socioculturalmente importantes permanece como una característica distintiva de la teoría social crítica. Este artículo pregunta por qué esto es así, mientras ofrece una crítica de “proyectos de palabras claves” como ellas han sido formuladas y buscadas a través de estudios culturales y la antropología. Tales proyectos a menudo permanecen inatentos a los amplios patrones de relaciones de signos, ocultando de la visión etnográfica los mismos patrones dentro de los cuales las “palabras” claves emergen y están embebidas. Ignorar estos patrones precluye consideraciones más detalladas de lo que hace ciertas palabras situacionalmente “claves” dentro de la vida sociocultural. Involucrándose con movilidades migrantes a través de las fronteras y aguas fronterizas de Indonesia y Malasia, el artículo examina palabras claves no simplemente como formaciones socioculturales o regularidades semióticas, per se, pero como subtítulos e interpretaciones de modas de hablar y formas de vida. Conectando hasta ahora narrativas no conectadas de “entendimiento”, ilustra cómo antropólogos pueden moverse más allá del tema de palabras claves a considerar más enteramente cómo el entendimiento configura asunciones antropológicas acerca de

"ser clave" en sí mismo. [palabras claves, lenguaje, entendimiento, relación, sudeste, asiático]

Abstrak

Identifikasi "kata kunci" sosiobudaya kini merupakan ciri khas teori sosial kritis. Artikel ini mempertanyakan dan juga mengkritik "proyek kata kunci" yang dirumuskan dalam kajian budaya dan antropologi. Banyak proyek yang mengabaikan pola relasi-relasi tanda. Padahal, pada pola relasi itu kata kunci muncul karena sudah terdapat di dalamnya. Apabila mengabaikan pola relasi, maka proyek tersebut menghalangi analisis yang mendalam mengenai faktor dan situasi yang menyebabkan kata-kata tertentu menjadi penting, sehingga dianggap sebagai kata kunci dalam kehidupan sosiobudaya. Dengan memfokuskan wacana ini pada mobilitas migran di perbatasan Indonesia-Malaysia, artikel ini membahas kata kunci bukan hanya sebagai konstruksi sosiobudaya atau keteraturan semiotik, tetapi juga sebagai judul dan tafsir gaya bicara dan bentuk kehidupan. Dengan menyangkutkan tulisan-tulisan tentang *rapport* ("hubungan") yang biasanya tidak dihubungkan, artikel ini menjelaskan bagaimana seorang antropolog mampu mengatasi pendapat tentang kata kunci saja, untuk memikirkan secara mendalam tentang cara dan modus *rapport* membentuk asumsi antropologi mengenai *keyness* ("kepentingan") itu sendiri. [kata kunci, bahasa, rapport, relasi, Asia Tenggara]

INTRODUCTION

In November 2015, an article titled "Water Villages Pose Security Challenge" appeared in *The Daily Express*, a popular English-language newspaper published in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, on the island of Borneo. Centering on the security threats posed by an archipelago of "water villages" dotting the edge of the state's coastline, the piece observed how "the influx of illegal immigrants into the State [sic] has resulted in illegal settlements." Deploying two terms of art from classical migration studies, it identified the "pull factors" and "push factors" accounting for this increase in "illegal immigrants into the state," with particular emphasis on ethnically Suluk migrants from the southern Philippines and Bugis migrants hailing from eastern Indonesia's South Sulawesi province. While the Suluk are "pushed" to Sabah, the piece explained, the Bugis are "pulled." For the Suluk, it is the ongoing civil war in the southern Philippines that "pushes" them toward nearby Sabah. For the Bugis, the "pull factor" luring them to Sabah from their ancestral island home of Sulawesi is the promise of *kelebihan*, an other-than-standard Malay expression the English daily glossed for its readers as "more income." For the Suluk, the "push factor" emerges out of a historically complex maelstrom of socio-politically proximate and precipitating forces. For the Bugis, the "pull factor" is neatly cast as unmistakably economic in nature and seemingly distillable into (or emblemizable by) a particular word—*kelebihan*—which, following *The Daily Express*, is glossable (at least for now) as "more income."

The aims of this article are three-fold. First, believing with Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956, 67) that "sense or meaning does not result from words or morphemes but from patterned relations between words and morphemes," I show how *kelebihan* means much more than "more income." It is precisely its patterned relationality—or what Whorf (1956) would call its "configurative rapport"—that partially constrains and so shapes *kelebihan*'s cultural significance and semiotic salience in a social world of Bugis migrant mobilities. In an extended sketch, I demonstrate how *kelebihan* derives what value or "meaning" it has from the rapports or "patterned 'potentials of linkage'" (Whorf, 1956, 67; see also Stengers, 2011) that it entertains and enters into in socio-semiotic life.

Second, by attending to *kelebihan* in this way, I draw attention to the representational limits of a widely influential and particularly resilient genre of talk within anthropology and cognate fields: keyword talk. The identification of "keywords" in culture and society has a long and duly distinguished history within anthropology, critical theory, cultural studies, and the wider humanities and humanistic social sciences. To great and far-reaching effect, critical scholars have gathered our attention around isolable words or phrases in social life, spotlighting them as "key," "salient," or intuitively "important" points of entry for considering pressing issues of material and ideological import. Raymond Williams (1976) famously assembled and alphabetized key or "significant" words in "activities" and "thought" (15) as entries or headings for "crucial area[s] of social and cultural discussion" (24). Williams's sophisticated keyword project did not fetishize these isolable and self-evidently important English expressions but simply highlighted their heuristic value as "key" points of passage into an Anglophone world of social discourse. Yet, a problem nevertheless remains: keyword projects conceal as much as they reveal.

If “linguistic meaning dwells” (Whorf, 1956, 67) not in discrete words but in patterned relations, an exclusive focus on words—however key—effectively erases or obscures the very relations that mediate construals of “keyness.” To complicate things further, there’s no easy answer to the question “What is a ‘word’?” as the criteria for “wordhood” across typologically diverse languages are hardly straightforward or ideologically uncontested. Dixon and Aikhenvald (2002, 2) tell us that “the idea of ‘word’ as a unit of language [was] developed for the familiar languages of Europe,” meaning in turn that “much that has been written about the word is decidedly eurocentric.” And yet, this “element of language which the naïve speaker feels that [they] know best” (Bolinger, 1963, 113) continues to haunt everyday and scholarly talk about language and meaning because it is generally more available to speaker awareness. As Agha (2007, 107) reminds us, language users “commonly perceive the denotational organization of language as comprised largely of words, often conceived as elementary building blocks or ‘atoms’ of meaning.” A disproportionate focus on discrete words, then, reflects and is shaped by language users’ partial awareness of the patterned relations from which those words derive their meaning. For ethnographers, social theorists, and everyday language users, this contrapuntal tension between discrete words and underlying patterns presents a problem. But insofar as problems are sites of “tensional activity” (Dewey, 1938, 34; see also Savransky, 2021) pregnant with theoretical and methodological potential, it’s one worth pursuing here.

My third aim is to tease out this potential by exploring the tensions immanent to keyword projects, while in the process remediating certain tensions obtaining between sociocultural and linguistic anthropological theory and method. A slew of recent writings in sociocultural anthropology has keyed to the enduring importance of keywords to ethnographic understandings of social life, to their affordances for rethinking anthropology’s speculative horizons, or to the relations between “words and worlds” (Besky, 2020; Fassin and Das, 2021; Howe and Pandian, 2020; Peters, 2016; Salazar, 2016a). These and other writings tacitly gesture to another, more practical point about keywords. As mediating “macro-tropes” (Rumsey, 2004), keywords serve a synoptic, text-building function, enabling professional anthropologists to synthesize otherwise disparate ethnographic and theoretical matters of concern under some unifying rubric or caption.

Across the subdisciplinary aisle, linguistic anthropologists have long sought to show how so-called keywords are but the figurative tips of “submerged” (Sapir, 1924) semiotic icebergs. Much linguistic anthropological work is openly and essentially at variance with continued talk in sociocultural anthropology that foregrounds “[key] symbols” (in the spirit of Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 1973) or “[key] words,” but otherwise backgrounds patterned dynamics and effects of discursive semiosis—that is, “the entire range of ways in which human discourse can be used to typify actual and imaginable states of affairs of the universe” (Agha, 2017, 294). Foregrounding attention not simply to key symbols or key words per se but to discursive-semiotic process in all its patterned (i.e., configurative) complexity reveals how and to what end we humans segment the continuous into the discrete, or, as William James ([1907] 1975, 122) puts it, how “we carve out everything, just as we carve out constellations, to suit our human purposes,” often in ways lying beyond the limits of our awareness (Silverstein, 1979).¹

In effect, the keyword problem sheds light on a jointly orchestrated inter-subdisciplinary impasse, one characterizable by the following mantra: “Not *your* formalisms but *our* formalisms are the formalisms that *matter!*” Here, I seek something of a middle path by way of one of anthropology’s enduring (meta-)methodological tropes: *rapport*. As a species of relation (Stengers, 2011; Strathern, 2020), *rapport* has reemerged as an explicit matter of theoretical and methodological concern (Goebel, 2019, 2021; Rutherford, 2018). Emerging work has rightly rehighlighted *rapport* as a neglected or largely underexamined concept within anthropology, despite its notional centrality to the ethnographic method. And yet, in excavating *rapport*’s conceptual genealogies, this work has neglected the central role accorded to *rapport* by Whorf. For Whorf, *rapport* is not the common anthropological notion involving “warm-fuzzy social relations” (Goebel, 2021, 18) or an ethic of “interactional mutuality” (Errington, 2019, 189). Rather, as indicated earlier, *rapport* refers to a sign’s “patterned ‘potentials of linkage’” (Whorf, 1956, 67). If it is in *rapport*—in these potential connections *across* connections—where meaning dwells, then thinking with *rapport* as a keyword effectively (if ironically) unsettles our assumptions about what keyword talk is and does.

I turn to *rapport*’s more recent conceptualizations in anthropology and science and technology studies (STS) to illustrate how—much like we must *do* relation to *study* the configurative nature of relations (Strathern, 2020)—we must *do* *rapport* to *study* configurative *rapport*. A turn to *rapport*, I argue, does not necessarily mean that we must give up on keywords. Lexical items like *kelebihang* are, after all, more readily available to speakers’ metalinguistic awareness and, in the Indonesia-Malaysia borderlands and countless elsewhere, the objects of reflexive characterization and ordinary conversation. Rather, the problem lies not with words per se but with their treatment in would-be isolation, above and away from the configurative, discursive-semiotic surround that lends them whatever “keyness” they’re assumed to have in social life. To this end, thinking with *rapport* reminds us that keywords are merely captions for and construals of fashions of speaking and forms of life.

I conclude this article by attempting an answer to the following question: Why keywords at all? That is, why do keyword projects maintain a special place in anthropologists’ representational economies?

KEYWORD TALK ACROSS BORDERLANDS AND BORDERWATERS

In 2012, amid increasing public pressure from Malaysian citizens in the country’s easternmost state of Sabah, then-Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak announced the formation of a Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants in Sabah. Over the next two years, the Royal Commission would interview and solicit testimony from more than two hundred immigrants, academics, policy experts, and politicians (including a former

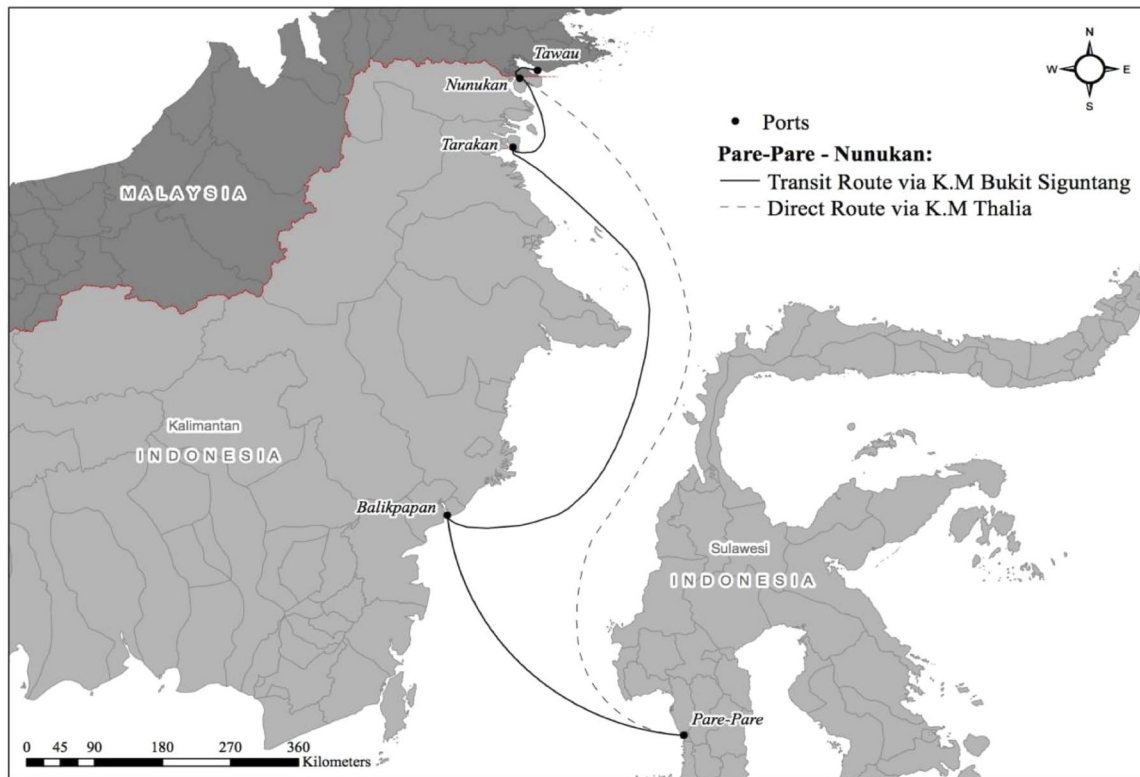


FIGURE 1 Ferry routes taken by Bugis migrants from Indonesia's South Sulawesi province to the border of the East Malaysian state of Sabah. (Map courtesy of ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute GIS Project) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Malaysian prime minister). The resulting report was released to the Malaysian public on December 3, 2014, and characterized the state's "illegal immigrant" problem as "an all-consuming nightmare" and "a crisis of humongous proportions" (Shim et al., 2014, 1). Yet the report left many Sabahans with "dashed hopes, disbelief, and even deeper skepticism [of the federal government]" (Lim, 2015). Among its other shortcomings, the report offered little actionable advice as to how frustrated Sabahans might disrupt infrastructures of clandestine mobility spanning the infamously porous maritime borders their state shares with its island neighbors. It was on the heels of this report that the East Malaysian English-language *The Daily Express* (2015) reported on the "security challenge" wrought by "the influx of illegal immigrants" who, as Malay-speaking Muslims and aided by kinship networks, readily assimilate into the fabric of Sabah's social life. It outlined pressing challenges posed by immigrants and their ever-expanding settlements to the Malaysian state: human trafficking, narcotics and weapons smuggling, illicit and ecologically harmful fishing practices, and clandestine cross-border barter.

The Daily Express's examination of these challenges featured expert commentary and analysis by Wan Shawaluddin, an international relations scholar at Sabah's premier university, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Notable for important work with UMS colleagues on undocumented labor migration across Sabah's east coast border, Wan Shawaluddin couched his analysis in a framework endemic to conventional migration studies: "push-and-pull" talk. In assaying the "push factors" and "pull factors" shaping "illegal immigrant" movement to Sabah, he spotlighted not only Suluk migrants from the Philippines (a people under intensified scrutiny in the shadow of the "Sulu incursion" of 2013) but also Bugis migrants from Indonesia (a people historically renowned for their mobility and assimilatory prowess across Malay-speaking archipelagic Southeast Asia). For the Suluk, it is a confluence of factors, such as the ongoing civil war and "unstable political situation" in the southern Philippines, that "pushes" them toward Sabah, Wan Shawaluddin explained. For the Bugis, it is their self-declared "search" for *kelebihan*—a Malay expression the international relations scholar (and by extension, *The Daily Express*) glossed in English as "more income"—that "pulls" them toward the East Malaysian state (Figure 1).

Kelebihan figures in relation to other work centered not merely on the "pull" to Sabah but on Bugis migrants' stereotypic "unwillingness to make do with what is seen to be second best" (Linton, 1975, 38), made manifest in their propensity for *kerajinan*, or "industriousness," particularly in the state's booming but controversial palm oil sector, where they constitute the "dominant" foreign labor force (Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2015). A colleague of Wan Shawaluddin at UMS—herself a Bugis Malaysian anthropologist—explained that *kelebihan* figures in academic and media accounts such as these as a kind of "keyword" because it recurs in the everyday talk of Bugis migrants, serving analysts as a kind of sociocultural formation through which to better understand the push/pull of Bugis movement. Another Malaysian researcher—an environmental scientist, also Bugis—expressed the same, emphasizing in English that "*kelebihan* is important because Bugis always talk about *kelebihan*!" Outside of Sabah's academic

sphere, a Bugis Malaysian labor and migrant rights activist offered a variation on this theme, lightheartedly identifying *kelebihan* as a kind of recurring Bugis migrant mantra. She, too, would characterize this recurring regularity as key for understanding how Bugis migrants are *kuat kerja*, or “hardworking.”

On the other side of the Indonesia-Malaysia border, Bugis Indonesian linguist and semiotician Firman Saleh offered commentary diverging from that of his Malaysian counterparts. This expression among Bugis migrants may indeed be considered a *kata kunci*, or “keyword,” he explained to me, so long as it recurs as a focalized object of Bugis migration discourse. At the same time, such *kata kunci*, he notes, are but *titik tolak atau pintu masuk*, that is, “starting points or points of entry” for understanding wider configurations of *relasi-relasi tanda*, or “sign relations,” within some linguistic-semiotic system. As we’ll see, attending to such configurative “sign relations” effectively explodes our understanding of the “keyword” in question and demonstrates how *kelebihan*—a nominalized form of the Malay adverb or comparative degree word *lebih*, or “more”—does not merely mean “more income” but rather a “moreness [of] income,” and it, turns out, a “moreness” of much else besides.

The linguist, labor advocate, environmental scientist, and anthropologist evince a heightened feeling for *kelebihan*’s (1) form, (2) sense, and (3) stereotype. It is beyond the scope of this article to detail the complex and interrelated genealogies of these three terms of art, but I offer some practical, abbreviated comments (and attendant references) to clarify how they subserve the argument developed here. Form and sense go hand in glove and have been historically approached in terms of their “duality of patterning” (Hockett, 1987). Saussure (1916) famously wrote on the standing-for relations obtaining between units of *form* (i.e., signifiers or sound-images) and units of *sense* (i.e., signifieds or sense-concepts) (see Agha, 2007; Lee, 1997). Decades later, Benveniste (1962) wrote on “form [*forme*] and sense [*sens*]” as “conjunct properties, necessarily and immediately given, inseparable in the functioning of language” (cited in Meeüs, 2002, 170). Regarding sense alone, we have already seen Whorf gloss the term with “meaning.” Writing in 1924 for a popular, educated audience in *The American Mercury*, Whorf’s mentor Edward Sapir (1924, 151) characterized linguistic sense as the “secret” of language, one that establishes a “form-feeling” or “a definite relational feeling or attitude towards all possible contents of expression and, through them, towards all possible contents of experience” (see Kockelman, 2017; Vološinov, 1986).² More recently, Agha (1997, 2007) has usefully distinguished units of form and sense-bearing units with respect to their semiotic function, the former having a denotatively *diacritic* function and the latter a denotatively *categorial* one. Moving beyond form and sense, he also offers a sociological account of denotational *stereotypy* (Agha, 2007, 119–21; see also Putnam, 1975). A denotational stereotype is “a social regularity of what is predicable of an expression” (Agha 2007, 123), for example, “A wolf_x is ... a hairy beast_{PREDICATE 1}, a predator_{PREDICATE 2}, a pack animal_{PREDICATE 3}, a four-legged creature_{PREDICATE 4},” and so on (see Agha 2007, 120). Such social regularities are made evident in the glossing behavior of language users, as we’ll soon see in the case of *kelebihan*.³

Bugis linguist Firman Saleh—concerned as he is with *relasi-relasi tanda*, or “sign relations”—evinces a disciplinarily honed feeling for patterned relations of form as they give rise to sense (see Saleh, 2021). And yet, Saleh aside, each of these individuals—the linguist, labor advocate, environmental scientist, and anthropologist—also evinces an intuitive feeling for *kelebihan*’s stereotype and its repetitive, recurring regularities of usage in a social domain of Bugis migrants.

Let’s return to *The Daily Express* and Wan Shawaluddin’s characterization of this domain, and to Bugis migrants’ expressed desire for *kelebihan*:

“The economy under Suharto and the current leader is doing okay. So what’s the reason then [for Bugis migrants coming to Sabah]? It’s not that there in Celebes [Sulawesi] there’s not much work, because they are farmers,” [Wan Shawaluddin] said. Based on interviews with *Tenaga Kerja Indonesia* (TKI) [Indonesian Migrant Workers], Bugis, when asked the reason for coming to Sabah responded ‘*ingin mencari kelebihan ... (to get more income). ‘Bukannya tak boleh makang, tapi nda cukup untuk simpang ... (it’s not because they could not afford to eat but the fact that it’s not enough for save).*’ (The Daily Express, 2015)

Here, the newspaper reproduces the speech—or rather, the social speech style or “voice”—of the stereotypic Bugis Indonesian migrant worker (Bugis *Tenaga Kerja Indonesia* or TKI). First, *ingin mencari kelebihan* (to get more income) is explicitly characterized as the common response (or second pair part) to a question (or first pair part) reiteratively posed by an imagined interviewer to Bugis TKI interviewees: “Why did you come to Sabah?” This melding of voices becomes clearer still in a personal communication between Wan Shawaluddin and a colleague by way of the WhatsApp messaging app:

Like this... On average[,] when interviewed[,] that was the response from respondents. If one hundred were asked, ninety answered *kelebihan*!

Gini ... Rata2 bila interview itu jawapan respondents. Kalo 100 yg ditanya, 90 jawab kelebihan! (Wan Shawaluddin, personal communication, 2020)

First, note how Wan Shawaluddin frames the importance of this phrase—*ingin mencari kelebihan* (to get more income)—in terms of its distributional facts: it is a cumulative-stereotypic response from the “typical” Bugis migrant worker. Second, note the word-final velar nasal (think the “-ng” sound

in English “sing”) in other-than-standard (1) *kelebihan* (glossed by Wan Shawaluddin and *The Daily Express* as “more income”), (2) *makang* (eat), and (3) *simpang* (save), rather than standard Malay (1) *kelebihan*, (2) *makan*, and (3) *simpan*. Wan Shawaluddin, along with UMS colleagues Ramli Dollah and Dewi Herviani, deploy the same ostensibly “idiomatic” expressions in a 2015 report:

A large number of TKI-Bugis have backgrounds as farmers in their places of origin. Many have land or gardens enabling them to farm. As one informant said, “It’s not that you can’t *makang*, but it’s not enough to *simpang* (save)” [interview with an informant who wants his identity kept secret]. Another TKI-Bugis from Keningau when asked why he came to Sabah, he replied, “[I] wanted to find *kelebihan* [*kelebihan* which means income that is more than they earn in their village]. (Wan Shawaluddin et al., 2015, 70)

Our ability to detect types of voices hinges upon our ability to detect voicing contrasts (Agha, 2007). Contrasts between “Bugis” Malay *simpang* versus “Standard” Malay *simpan* and “Bugis” Malay *kelebihan* versus “Standard” Malay *kelebihan* have the desired effect, I suspect, of lending an ethnographically realist sense of closeness to or rapport with the subject(s) at hand: TKI Bugis.

This characterological portrait of authentic *etnik*, or “ethnic,” talk re-presents a sociolinguistic emblem of Bugis-ness widely known and commonly predicated about in the Bugis diaspora. In the Bugis language, only the glottal stop and velar nasal appear as word-final consonants, and these constraints on the language’s sound-shape are carried over, as it were, to Malay (i.e., to standard Indonesian and regional Makassar Malay). These transfer effects do not typically affect the speech of Indonesia’s educated, upwardly mobile bilingual Bugis middle class, speakers as they are of Bugis, yes, but also *Bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar*, or “Good and true Indonesian” (Errington, 2022, 15). They figure prominently, if not emblematically, however, in the Malay talk of bilingual Bugis migrant laborers. Some of my Bugis interlocutors jokingly diagnosed this substitution of “-ng” for “-n” as evidence of an “excess in vitamin G” or *kelebihan vitamining* G, in which *kelebihan* and *vitamin* evince the excess “G” in question, and in which the excess is visualized not phonetically but orthographically (it’s not an excess in “-ng” per se, but an excess in the “letter G”).

Importantly, and as I’ve explored at length elsewhere (Carruthers, 2017a, 2017b, 2019, 2023), this diacritic difference is not only sieved and selected for by UMS researchers interested in re-presenting authentic *etnik* talk—and thus a kind of ethnographic proximity or *rapport*—to their readers. It is also sieved and selected for by Malaysian state agents tasked with policing undocumented Bugis immigrants. This wrinkle of difference in phonological shape does not necessarily imply, however, that *kelebihan* and *kelebihan* fundamentally differ with respect to sense. In fact, we may provisionally think of *kelebihan* as *kelebihan*, but with an excessively Bugis twist.

Having offered a feeling for our would-be keyword’s form, I now consider its sense before turning to questions of stereotypy. *Kelebihan(g)* is but one of at least 19 derivations of *lebih*, or “more.” This gives us a partial feeling for its value. But here, for *rapport*’s sake, we might temporarily set aside the question of this lexical item’s meaning, turning instead to a more comprehensive account of the construction-type of which it is a part: the circumfixal [KE-root-AN] construction.

Linguists typically bifurcate the [KE-root-AN] construction into two forms: (a) [KE-root-AN]₁ nouns and (b) [KE-root-AN]₂ verbs, and in so doing, either ignore the relation between the two or characterize it in terms of “two distinct morphological processes” (Mahdi, 2012, 429) featuring homophonous morphemes. I avoid questions raised by these claims by simply approaching this construction-type as a token of what Malay linguist Asmah Haji Omar (1968, 19) has called “neutral words” whose default structural sense is indicated at the “morphological level” but whose categorial function (e.g., as a verb or noun) is configured and thus activated “at the syntactical level.” Omar’s observations align with what Whorf (1956, 97), in the same spirit, called “bare lexemes” or “empty” and ambient stems “to which verbatation or stativation may be applied at will.” This choice in nomenclature recognizes the representational limits of static “form-class” or “parts-of-speech” membership models imported from the Indo-European tradition. As Sapir (1921, 118) observed, “the various parts of speech ... [do] not merely grade into each other but are to an astonishing degree actually convertible into each other... . A part of speech outside the limitations of syntactic form is but a will-o’-the-wisp.”

As a “neutral” (Omar, 1968) or “bare” (Whorf, 1956) structural sense template whose “meaningful grammatical coloring” emerges “as part of certain configurations” (Whorf, 1956, 97), [KE-root-AN]_{STEM}’s default sense may be glossed in English as [root-NESS], or, “the quality [+ABSTRACT] associated with the root”:

- KE-Bugis-AN (Bugis-ness)
- KE-Melayu [Malay]-AN (Malay-ness)
- KE-takut [frightened]-AN (frightened-ness, i.e., fear)
- KE-lelah [tired]-AN (tired-ness)
- KE-panas [hot]-AN (hot-ness, i.e., heat)
- KE-kurang [less]-AN (less-ness)

This self-evident “rapport across words” (Whorf, 1956, 68) suggests how *kelebihan(g)* or KE-lebih [more]-AN potentially signals much *more* than “more income,” inasmuch as it (like the items listed above) partakes of grammatical analogy: as *lebih* is to “more,” KE-...-AN is to -NESS. The following examples of use are more suggestive still:

- (1) Kelebihan ditunjukkan segala sesuatu yang dianggap lebih.⁴
 KE-more-AN DI-point-KAN all thing REL DI-consider more.
 Moreness [is] pointed [to] [by] all things that [are] considered more.
 “Moreness’ is pointed to by anything considered ‘more.’”
- (2) Kita merantau mencari kelebihan.
 1PL.INCL. ME-region MEN-find KE-more-AN.
 We migrate [to] find moreness.
 “We migrate in search of advantage.”
- (3) Apa kelebihan anda?
 What KE-more-AN 2SG?
 What [is] your moreness?
 “What is your strength?”
- (4) Kemaring, kapal kelebihan muatang!
 Yesterday, ship KE-more-AN cargo!
 Yesterday, [the] ship [was] afflicted-by-moreness [of] cargo!
 “Yesterday, the ship was overloaded with cargo!”
- (5) Orang Bugis kelebihan vitamin G.
 Person Bugis KE-more-AN vitamin G.
 Bugis people [are] afflicted-by-moreness [of] Vitamin G.
 “The Bugis suffer from excess vitamin G.”

We see the same default form—[KE-root-AN]_{STEM}—bearing the same default sense—[root-NESS]—appearing as a noun in stativation constructions (sentences 1–3) and a verb in verbatation constructions (sentences 4–5).⁵ Sentence 1, expressed by Saleh the semiotician, puts on full, paradigmatic display an attunement to *kelebihan*’s (and by extension, [KE-root-AN]’s) form-feeling or sense. Speaking in a more rarefied, linguistic-semiotic register in which *kelebihan*’s gloss as English “moreness” is most apt, Saleh casts *kelebihan* as a quality “pointed to” (or indexed) “by anything considered ‘more.’” [KE-lebih-AN] also figures as a noun phrase (NP) in sentences 2 and 3. In contrast to sentence 1, however, I gloss the expression in these sentences with English “advantage” and “strength” to idiomatically capture how the quality of being more-than in some (semiotically salient but otherwise unstated) respect or capacity is tacitly framed as desirable. Sentences 4 and 5 feature examples of our “keyword” not as a noun but as a verb in a verbatation construction of a particular kind—the two-argument adversative. Here, an undergoer or first argument (NP₁) is formulated as adversely *affected* or *afflicted* by the second argument (NP₂) in the manner stipulated by the root of the verb:

[NP₁ [KE-root-AN]_v NP₂]_s
 NP₁ (a ship, the Bugis) [is] afflicted-by-moreness [of] NP₂ (cargo, vitamin G).

“Overloaded with” and “suffering from excess” serve as loose idiomatic English glosses to better capture the sense of this affliction.

The preceding has presented a snapshot of [KE-lebih-AN]’s patterned potential and of the semiotic work that it can do above and beyond a social domain of Bugis mobilities. I now bring our exercise in relational-feeling to a close by circling back to that very social domain by way of the expression’s stereotypy properties. Here, a lesson from Pak Hamsah, Bugis migrant, offers a good point of entry.

A longtime Bugis resident of Sabah and seasoned laborer in the East Malaysian state’s timber industry, Pak Hamsah met me one summer evening at a makeshift bazaar on the outskirts of Tawau, Sabah’s third-largest city and home to the state’s largest Bugis community. He, like many Bugis migrants in Sabah, characterized his arrival to Malaysia as a search for *kelebihan*, to which I asked, “Apakah kelebihan itu?” or “What is *kelebihan*?” Laughing at my clumsily direct query, Pak Hamsah simply (yet excitedly) replied:

Ada macang-macang kelebihan!
 [There] are [many] kinds [of] moreness!⁶

Pak Hamsah’s response to my question presents two interrelated problems. First, what kinds of “moreness” are there? Or rather, rephrased in a Whorfian spirit, what in the archipelagic world of Bugis migrants is chunked or segmented by this abstract, substanceless form? Second, how to get a sense of the stereotypy properties of this abstract quality, admitting as it does of “many kinds”? Pak Hamsah’s response suggests the possibilities of an alternative query not as (flat-footedly) direct as the one I first posed to him. In a survey co-composed with Bugis colleagues at Indonesia’s Universitas Hasanuddin and distributed among some 437 Bugis, respondents were asked not to identify [KE-lebih-AN]’s semantic features per se

but to identify the *jenis kelebihan* or “kinds [of] moreness” luring migrants to nearby Malaysia, where *jenis* in the noun phrase *jenis kelebihan* serves as a partitive meaning “kind,” or “sort” (Sneddon et al., 2010, 143). Respondents could list as many or as few *jenis kelebihan* as they liked. Interestingly, the most common response was not the moreness of “money” or “income” that *The Daily Express* (2015) presumptively diagnosed as primarily (if not wholly) motivating Bugis migrant movement. “Money,” or *uang*, came in distant second, with 96 responses, and “income,” or *pendapatan*, with only 36. Far and away in first place, to the tune of 146 responses, was *pengalaman*—an item commonly and accurately translated in English as “experience” but one better understood as a noun of process [PEN-root-AN] whose root, *alam* (a historical borrowing from Arabic), is glossable with “world” (Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 2020; Winstedt and Wilkinson, 1913, 23). Migrants migrate for a “moreness,” as it were, of “worlding.” Much more than “more income,” indeed.⁷

Showing that *kelebihan* means much more than “more income” matters. It shows that instead of simply “wip[ing] [our] glosses with what [we] know” (Joyce, 1939, 304), we might instead push around the English language a bit, such that the structural sense features and associated form-feeling of our glosses better align with, or better approximate a proximity to, those of migrant talk. Showing that *kelebihan* means more than “more income” matters because it remediates a process of erasure, one whereby the expression’s covert meanings are inadvertently banished “beyond [our] horizons” (Whorf, 1956), and through which its “many kinds,” as Pak Hamsah would say, are effectively reduced to one. This erasure is a feature, not a bug, of a fashion of speaking anchored in and by keyword projects, where seemingly straightforward “words” like *kelebihan* are treated as self-evident “matters of fact” (Latour, 2008) as opposed to complex relational “gatherings” or “matters of concern” (Latour, 2008).⁸

Finally, to show that *kelebihan* means much more than “more income” matters because to do so is to draw focus to its potential-laden patterns in socio-semiotic life. A “word” is a structure of possibility.⁹ Its patterned potentials infrastructurally constrain how, for whom, and to what extent it comes to be construed as socioculturally key amid the “whole fleet of [other] words” (Whorf, 1956, 81) with which it regularly sets sail in social life. One task of ethnography—or indeed, of rapport—is to hone a feeling for form-feeling and these patterned potentials, and for the forms of life and fashions of speaking they afford.

DIAGNOSING KEYWORD TALK

It is not words mumbled, but RAPPORT between words, which enables them to work together at all.

—Benjamin Lee Whorf

In late August 2020—some five months after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic—a call for papers for a “virtual workshop” on “Doing Theory in Southeast Asia” was announced on the well-trafficked H-Net, or Humanities and Social Sciences Online. Appearing on H-SEAsia, H-Net’s network on the history and study of Southeast Asia, and issued by The Chinese University of Hong Kong’s Centre for Cultural Studies, the declared “goal” of the virtual workshop was to “map theoretical frameworks and keywords from the diverse, archipelagic cultures of greater Southeast Asia.” Organizers framed this goal as building upon “recent initiatives around the world to decolonize the scope and vocabulary of theory away from dominant sites of knowledge production in North America, Western Europe, Australia, and Northeast Asia by turning to other locations as frames of reference for inquiry.” Notably, organizers posed a central question for potential presenters: “How might keywords act as focal points for comprehending translocal or intraregional particularity or difference?”

Theoretical inspiration from Southeast Asia’s languages and literatures in all their diverse, archipelagic multiplicity has long been a distinctive feature of decolonial, “autonomous knowledge” (Alatas, 2022) production across the sprawling Island-Mainland region. What struck me about this call for papers was not its important call for the recalibration and retheorization of theory in Southeast Asia by way of a decolonial lens. Rather, it was the heuristic centrality accorded to “keywords” within this decolonizing intervention that I found striking, insofar as the “keyword project” as a theoretical formation emerged in the twilight of British empire, one steeped in an Anglophone, if not Standard Average European (SAE), language ideology. I turn to this genealogy here.

The “keyword” is widely assumed to have been baptized in Raymond Williams’s (1976) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, though the notion has also been linked to Bréal’s ([1900] 1964) *Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning* and Matoré’s (1953) notion of *mots-clés* in *La méthode en lexicologie: Domaine français* (see Keyword Project, 2018; Salazar, 2016a). Now a well-worn reference for cultural critics, Williams’s (1976) *Keywords* is oriented to historical changes in “meaning” across 109 “keywords,” defined as “significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought.” Williams reviews these “significant, indicative words” in a critical way, noting that his “is not a neutral review of meanings” but “an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion” (24).

Williams’s selected keywords, listed in alphabetical order (Aesthetic, Alienation, Anarchism, Anthropology, Behavior, Bourgeois, Bureaucracy, Capitalism, Career, and so on) are “what can be called a cluster, a particular set of what came to seem interrelated words and references, from which [the] wider selection then developed” (22). No other framing or selection criteria are noted, aside from reference to their apparently self-evident importance as lexical weathervanes indicating shifting ideologies in Anglophone culture and society.

Since the publication of Williams's book, this account of the cultural and social "semantics" of keywords has inspired similar accounts across a dizzying array of fields. The "Keywords Project," a joint multiyear and multidisciplinary initiative, began in 2007 between the University of Cambridge and University of Pittsburgh and proceeded in an updated *Keywords of Today* (MacCabe, Yanacek, and the Keywords Project, 2018). Writing that "Keywords had pioneered a new way to tell the history of English" but "that history now needed updating" (xi), the Keywords Project acknowledges that "Williams never makes explicit his criteria for what constitutes a keyword" and thus, in deciding which entries to add and which ones to prune away, they "had to make his criteria explicit":

First, they must be words current in social and political debate, and that currency must stretch beyond academic contexts.... Frequency is not the only criterion.... The best characterization of a keyword is a word that both bears a complex meaning rooted in centuries of social history and also features that complexity in current debate. (xi)

Two questions immediately present themselves: (1) what "word" does not bear a "complex meaning rooted in centuries of social history," and (2) what are the characterizability conditions and interactional schema through which we are to distinguish instances of "debate"? Much how Williams's criteria for keyword-ship are left unspecified, we are left wondering about what counts as a "keyword" under what conditions, and about who's doing the counting.

This problem is not unique to cultural studies. Anthropologists have long collected "keywords," in the nebulous sense outlined above. The 2011 August issue of *Current Anthropology*, for instance, features a series of articles on "keywords" ("neoliberal agency," "consumption," "identity," and "flow") defined by Aldenderfer (2011, 487) as "words that have both general and specific meanings: they can be general in the sense that they are words that are commonly encountered in everyday language that have special, more restricted meanings, such as is often the case in their scholarly use." Many keywords, he goes on to say, "are innocuous, such as those that indicate, say the temporal span or the geographic location of a topic at hand" (487). More recently, a group of scholars has compiled an anthropological ABCs of the Anthropocene in *Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon* (Howe and Pandian, 2020). The book's introduction does much to highlight an ever-increasing sense of ethico-ecological urgency, characterized by an ever-increasing number of "-cenes" (Anthropocene, Anthrobscene, Capitalocene, Chtulucene, Eurocene, Misanthropocene, Plasticene Prometheocene, Simulocene). Yet, it doesn't really explain what work "the lexicon" qua lexicon is doing here, aside from noting that "with the terms that make up this lexicon, [the authors] explore the Anthropocene as an opening to imagine the present in contrary terms" (21).

Anthropologies of Indonesia offer variations on this theme. In fact, attention to socioculturally salient "keywords"—relative to everyday communicative interaction—has been something of a leitmotif across ethnographies of Indonesia: *kriminalitas* (criminality), *rakyat* (the people), the nervous condition known as *latah* (Siegel, 1998), *prestasi* (achievement) (Long, 2013), *merantau* (migration) (Salazar, 2016b), *liar* (wild), *malu* (shame), and temporal adverbs like *belum* (not yet) (Lindquist, 2008) are but a handful of terms used by interlocutors that anthropologists of Indonesia deploy as instances of what Rumsey (2004) calls "ethnographic macro-tropes." The anthropological prototype for this kind of interpretive work, where "keywords" serve as privileged points of entry into Indonesian "social discourse," is Clifford Geertz (1973). His repertoire is well-known by anthropologists of Indonesia and beyond: *kebatinan*, or the Javanese "mystical-phenomenological world-view" (Geertz, 1973, 137), *rasa* (which he glosses as "feeling" and "meaning"), *alus* (refined), *kasar* (crude), *lahir* (the exterior), *batin* (the interior), and more. But behind, or coinciding with, this expository technique is an ambivalence or aversion toward questions of system. "I don't do systems," Geertz tells us in a 2002 interview (cited in Errington, 2010), echoing similar critiques he made thirty years earlier about the "infernal culture machine" of Claude Lévi-Strauss, cognitive anthropology's misplaced search for "refined ethnographic algorithms" (Geertz, 1973, 355), or the interpretation of "lexical antitheses, categorical schemes, [and] morphophonemic transformations that make even the best ethnographies a trial to read" (Geertz, 1976; cited in Errington, 2010).

Geertz's comment on "not doing systems" is at ironic odds with his quasi-lexicographic pursuit of Javanese terms like *rasa* or his characterization of such terms as privileged pictures of the *priyayi* worldview so central to his ethnographic exposition. As Errington (1984) makes clear in his critique of Geertz's discussion of *rasa*, such a pursuit depends precisely on one's ethnographic attunement to configurative dynamics of "patterment" (Whorf, 1956, 258) or "form-feeling" (Sapir, 1921).

Continuing in this vein, Lucy (2010) takes aim at an assumption—among cultural studies scholars, anthropologists, and psychologists—that unitary "words" are "keys" or privileged points of access to the hallowed halls of an other's "mind." Lucy is worth quoting at length here:

Psychologists often speak about language and meaning in terms of individual "words" that label "things" in the world. Such expressions emerge not only in casual speech, but also pervade the scholarly literature.... Speaking in this way perpetuates the illusion that language and speaking are primarily about individual words, words conceived of as sturdy self-sufficient forms with straightforward referential meanings, forms that we take out into the world to attach to various objects we encounter in our experience, much the way a hunter might take a snare out into the forest to capture rabbits (or other "natural kinds"). This view, in turn, strongly entails another, namely, that word meanings are merely derivative of experience, simply labeling and thus ultimately responding to objects, rather than having their own internal value and logic that can play a dynamic role in the constitution and conceptualization of experience. (Lucy, 2010, 266; see Quine, [1960] 2013)

Such assumptions are endemic, Lucy (2010, 272) tells us, to keyword projects that treat certain terms (e.g., Geertzian *rasa*) as ethnographically salient in isolation from their grammatical status in shared social worlds of talk.

Three problems arise from this approach to "words" critiqued by Lucy. The first relates to my earlier comment about the selectional criteria used to sieve for "keywords." There's no easy, impartial, or ideologically disinterested way to draw criterial boundaries around what counts as a word-form when dealing with diverse languages across the typological (i.e., analytic-polysynthetic) continuum (Dixon and Aikhenvald, 2002, 4; Sapir, 1927).¹⁰ A language like English seems to have many freestanding or standalone word forms, but in North American polysynthetic Indigenous languages like Yana, "the same formal unit, the word, is a sentence microcosm full of delicate formal elaborations of the most specialized type" (Sapir, 1927, 128). Second, and as Errington (1984) notes in his critique of Geertz, many word forms do not simply point to "things" in the world but to events or properties of events, where these eventful dynamics are themselves grammatically patterned (take, for example, the aspectual *belum* or "not yet" that serves as a recurring *mot-clé* in Lindquist's ethnography). And third, the meanings of forms that do refer to seeable, touchable, and hearable "things" out there in the world are themselves bound up in dynamic totalities that are "formally complete," as Sapir (1924) would say, yet always unfinished and prone to "leaks."

All this recalls a much earlier admonition from Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) regarding sociocultural analysts' assumptions about what he called the "piling up" of words or "lexations." Here, Whorf effectively redirects our attention to the problems associated with the piling up of "keywords" in would-be lexicons:

We see here the error made by most people who attempt to deal with such social questions of language—they naively suppose that speech is nothing but a piling up of LEXATIONS, and that this is all one needs in order to do any and every kind of rational thinking; the far more important thought materials provided by structure and configurative rapport are beyond their horizons. (Whorf, 1956, 83)

Reapproaching "keywords," then, requires a different scale of resolution (Kockelman, 2017, 89) and—returning to the call to papers used to introduce this section—a mode of epistemic delinking (Mignolo, 2007). What is needed is not a focus on "keywords" as "keywords" but on configurative rapport, on the submerged socio-semiotic infrastructures whose patterned potentials reflect and shape fashions of speaking in and of shared worlds.

(CONFIGURATIVE) RAPPORT

Everything may be described as related, but not everything entertains "rapports."

—Isabelle Stengers

Writing on the relational ethics of "proximity" and "sympathy" among Dutch colonial officials and Papuans, Danilyn Rutherford (2018) draws uncanny parallels between Dutch colonial projects and the goal-oriented nature of anthropological practice. In so doing, she identifies sympathy as a species of rapport. "As rapport," Rutherford writes, "sympathy is a precondition for successful fieldwork" (130). Anthropologists and sociolinguists of Indonesia have pursued similarly reflexive lines of inquiry in recent volumes on the theoretical and (meta-)methodological dimensions of ethnographic rapport (Goebel, 2019, 2021), inviting ethnographers to "reimagine how we theorize rapport," while considering "how such a reimagination might influence how we 'go about,' 'talk about' and 'write about' gathering the data we use in our research" (Goebel 2021, 181).

Rapport keys to questions of interactional meaningfulness and "means-ends-fulness" (Kockelman, 2013, 10) in fieldwork encounters (Goebel, 2019). In this sense, and as Errington (2019, 189) suggests, as a heuristic it offers a window into "conditions and possibilities of interactional mutuality." Goebel (2021) does not deny what Errington (2019, 181) calls rapport's "considerable heuristic and descriptive value" but calls into question how its ideological construal has shaped anthropologists' rhetorical practice of re-presenting situated ethnographic particulars related to "phaticity" or communicative "contact." Following the trail of Malinowski's account of "phatic communion" with Trobriand Islanders in the space-time of "the field," Goebel (2021, 19) tells us that "this emergent ideology erased much of what goes on in face-to-face encounters, including the mediated nature of many such encounters and the contexts in which they are embedded." In lieu of reproducing Malinowskian ideologies of positively valenced phatic communion, Goebel argues that anthropologists must understand that "rapport is never just between researchers and their interlocutors or between interlocutors within a particular research timespace, nor can it be boiled down to some sort of social relationship characterized by positive affect" (3). Rather, he continues, "it is a specific type of phaticity that relies upon historically contingent, yet locally emergent, understandings of signs used to establish and maintain a channel of communication" (3; see also Zuckerman, 2016).

In the anthropological imagination, then, rapport may be best understood in a technical sense as an *ethnometapragmatic chronotope*. It is "chronotopic" in Bakhtin's (2010) sense inasmuch as it is assumed to unfold within a particular envelope of space-time-personhood (e.g., involving coeval "communion" between copresent "researchers" and "research interlocutors" in "the field"). It is "metapragmatic" inasmuch as it involves activities and modalized activity descriptions (e.g., "where, when, and with whom should or must one *do* rapport?"). And it is *ethnometapragmatic* inasmuch as these activities and activity descriptions are linked to a particular social domain of persons (e.g., anthropologists and their interlocutors).¹¹

This anthropological notion of rapport differs, however, from the one proffered by Whorf. To bridge the foregoing conceptualizations of rapport to Whorf's, I highlight the latent affinities between Whorf's formulation and one emerging at the interface of anthropology and STS that posits the relative heuristic value of rapport over "relation."

In her overview of "relation" in Anglophone anthropology, Marilyn Strathern (2020) compellingly demonstrates how "relation" as a term of art once primarily used in English to refer to epistemic or logical notions of association, correspondence, and comparison historically came to characterize relatedness of kin and practices of kin-making. By way of analogy, Strathern draws on philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers's (2011) discussion of French *rapport*, an item whose historical shifts in meaning and usage took "an opposite path from ... 'relation'" (Strathern, 2020, 34–35). Rapport, Strathern explains, "started out with reference to kinship, marriage, and companionship, to become in the sixteenth century a term for the logic of causal connection and structural resemblance."

Stengers highlights how French *rapport*—unlike English "relation," with which it is typically glossed—carries a sense of "proportion" and "comparison" absent in its English gloss:

Both *logos* and Latin *ratio* are an etymological source for terms such as reason and account but also proportion, which signifies an operation of comparison. The French word *rapport* has inherited this constellation of meanings, while its usual translation, "relation," has lost it. Everything may be described as related, but not everything entertains "rapports." (Stengers, 2011, 49).

Rapport is that which "authorizes comparison," Stengers (2011, 49) writes, and she deploys this notion of rapport in an extended critique of "matters of fact" and "objectivity" in the experimental sciences: "Experimental sciences are not objective because they would rely on measurement alone. In their case, objectivity is not the name for a method but for an achievement, for the creation of a rapport authorizing the definition of an object" (49). Stengers elaborates this critique in the context of eighteenth-century chemists who, following Newton's (1704) *Opticks*, "composed increasingly exhaustive tables of affinities or rapports" (Stengers 2011, 51). Such tables, she writes, "were organized by columns, headed by an element, followed by all the elements liable to combine with it" (49). Etienne Francois Geoffroy's (1718) *Table des different rapports* was prototypical of this trend in eighteenth-century chemistry, where *rapports* were synonymous with *affinités chimiques* (Fourcroy, 1796; cited in Klein, 1995, 79).

Strathern notes Stengers's preference for "rapport" over "relation" and her belief that English "affinity" is "the closest vernacular equivalent to the French rapport" (Strathern, 2020, 16). In so doing, Strathern draws links between Stengers's thinking through *rapport* as the push/pull of generative affinity or the "actualization of an authorizing agreement" (Strathern 2020, 17) with Rabinow's (2003) argument that "bringing entities into relation releases capacities hitherto unknown" (Strathern, 2020, 27). "Rapport" so understood incites attention to affinities, associations, comparisons, and relational coming-together. In this spirit, we might gather our attention around some hitherto unexamined affinities between Strathern's and Stengers's influential accounts of rapport (and relation) and ones from further afield.

Though he goes unmentioned by Stengers and Strathern, Ferdinand de Saussure should be brought into this rapport-focused fold. Despite being cast as one of the twentieth century's preeminent theorists of relations and value, Saussure did not write of "relations" and "value" per se. On the question of "value," Michael Silverstein (2016, 80) clarifies:

The proper analogy for the characteristics of signifiers is not economics (as some read Saussure) but a combinatoric algebra—in fact a chemical one: Saussure's "*valeur*," a property of signifiers, is precisely what Dmitri Mendeleev organized as chemical valence—combinatoric possibilities of the various chemical elements insofar as they can potentially occur with another in relatively stable molecular juxtapositions.

Following this chemical (as opposed to economic) analogy, *valeur*, or "valence," is a function of what chemist Edward Frankland (1852) famously called an element's "combining power" (cited in Constable and Housecroft, 2020, 12).¹² The combinatoric potential or valence of a signifier is, then, a relation between relations (see Kockelman, 2013, 12). And yet, much like the problem of "value," Saussure did not write of "relations" as such. He wrote of *rapports*, specifically *rapports syntagmatique*, or "syntagmatic rapports," obtaining between cooccurring signs "in praesentia" (Saussure, 1916, 171), and *rapports associatifs*, or "associative [i.e., paradigmatic] rapports," between signs "in absentia" arranged in "virtual" series (Saussure, 1916, 171–75; see Hockett, 1987; Nielsen, 2016).¹³

Rapport is good to think. It incites attention to valences, tendencies, affinities, to actualizing potential and to "patterned 'potentials for linkage'" (Whorf, 1956, 67), where "potential," following Peirce (1998, 323), "means indeterminate yet capable of determination." Rapport is the work of relational-feeling. It is relational work inasmuch as it is intersubjective work, to be sure, involving phaticity or making contact with others or addressees. But in its broadest possible sense, rapport is relational work because it's all about "making connections" (Errington, 2019). Connecting these hitherto unconnected formulations of rapport, I've sought to show how to *rapport* is to *make connections* between the configurative or densely patterned potential-laden relations of socio-semiotic life, whether those relations be stereotypically "social" ones (e.g., the relations or contrasting role alignments obtaining between "anthropologists" and "interlocutors") or stereotypically "semiotic" or "linguistic" ones (e.g., the phono-lexico-grammatical relations constituting "language" as "system"). In effect, and analogous to Strathern's (2020) comments

on the epistemological immanence of relation, by *doing rapport*—by doing the relational work of connecting with connections—we come to study its configurative nature.

CONCLUSION: (RE)FIGURING RAPPORT

Late sociolinguist of globalization Jan Blommaert (2018) told us that the development of neologisms and the (un)settling of established terms of art are “crucial critical *Gedankenspiel* that remind us of the duty of continuous quality control of our analytical vocabularies.” Similarly, in *Words and Worlds*, Didier Fassin and Veena Das (2021) set out to “vet” anthropologists and cultural critics’ “old vocabulary” (2), noting, in times of crisis, that “the revisiting of the words that we use to better inhabit our worlds” helps “query what we take for granted” (6). Their query takes form in a “lexicon for dark times” and resonates, they say, with comments made by W. H. Auden ([1947] 2011) in *The Age of Anxiety*: “If, as W. H. Auden writes, ‘the world needs a good wash and a week’s rest,’ so do perhaps our ways of representing it, and we should not be, in his words, these ‘near-sighted scholars’ who have uncritically ‘defined their terms’” (Fassin and Das, 2021, 6).

“Word,” “keyword,” “lexicon,” and “vocabulary” are four such terms that too often go uncritically defined and could do, perhaps, with a good wash and a week’s rest. As a genre of what this article has called “keyword talk,” “word-and-world” talk frequently attends to the worldhood of worlds over and against the wordhood of words. Recalling Whorf’s (1956, 83) warning about “the piling up of LEXATIONS,” if anthropologists remain determined to determine the relations between words and worlds, then we might adjust our “horizons” accordingly, to better consider the worlds of rapport within and out of which such words are embedded and emerge. Recalling Malinowski, we might remember that “isolated words are in fact only linguistic figments, the products of an advanced linguistic analysis” (Malinowski, 1966, 11) and of “secondary explanations” (Boas, 1911, 71; Keane, 2018; Silverstein, 1979). Recalling Briggs (2002), we might remember that there are no “linguistic” (or lexical) “magic bullets.”

After a century of anthropological work calling for the expansion of our ethnographic purview beyond words alone, why does keyword talk persist, if not proliferate, as an influential mode of anthropological discourse? What do lexico-phrasal or “words and phrases”-type approaches to social and critical theory say in turn about the anthropological imagination? Our perennial propensity for keyword talk offers a glimpse into the wider fashion of speaking of which such talk is a part, a fashion focused on isolable words as opposed to complexly contingent patterns of discursive semiosis, on figures as opposed to grounds, and on parts as opposed to wholes. On the one hand, this tendency toward metonymic reduction—toward reducing an ever-elusive whole to its self-evidently salient and easily graspable parts—is itself of ethnographic interest. In Sabah, for instance, migrants, media, and migration scholars alike have formulated and so represented an archipelagic world of Bugis movement by way of a particular word: *kelebihang*. On the other hand, this tendency to privilege lexation as a discrete phase or segment of semiosis also presents anthropologists with a productive epistemological “problem” (Dewey, 1938; Savransky, 2021), one whose thoroughgoing problematization has the potential to make a practical difference in our regnant ways of doing things. The problem at hand is not that we anthropologists and cultural critics (or our interlocutors, for that matter) focus on what we come to call keywords. The problem is when our inquiries start and stop with keywords, when we treat them as ethnographic shortcuts or ends in and of themselves, without problematizing how or why they’re “key” or “important” in the first place.

Statistical frequency is one criterion for “keyness” identified by cultural anthropologists and corpus linguists alike, where rises or declines in frequencies of use “indicate changes in social domains” (Fassin and Das, 2021, 4; see also Bondi and Scott, 2010). Useful though this is as a tractable gauge of currency, the keyness or importance of words lies beyond their localizable, surface-segmentable, or “sturdy self-sufficient forms” (Lucy, 2010, 266). A word is but “the potential nucleus of a far-reaching system” (Whorf, 1956, 254), where the system so mentioned is not the analogical equivalent of that well-known contemporary model of keyness—the “word cloud.” Questions of keyness, salience, or importance properly involve more than mere frequency.

An expanded understanding of rapport helps us grapple with this problematic, keying as it does not only to a word’s patterned relations of form, sense, and stereotypy but also to our capacities to make connections between connections. “To make” is productively ambiguous here. Its primary sense refers to deliberate, means-ends-full acts of making, creating, or fashioning connections that could not be said to exist prior to such acts of making (e.g., “I made a bridge to connect two banks”).¹⁴ Its secondary but no less important sense serves to indicate seemingly accidental but revelatory changes in states of awareness relative to antecedent impressions or conditions (e.g., “Whoa, I finally made the connection!”). Across these senses of deliberately linking and coming to attention, to speak of making connections between connections is to speak of a shifting and partial yet serially expanding awareness of hitherto unconnected connections. It is in this movement from part to whole, figure to ground, lexation to linguistic and socio-semiotic patternment where the question of importance emerges.

To riff on Glissant (1981), a keyword is but “an opening” (cited in Glover, 2010, 1). Keywords are captions or “placeholders” (Spillers, 2006) for fashions of speaking and forms of life whose relative keyness or importance is a function of partial and interested construal. What remains is to inquire into the rapports undergirding such fashions and forms. This would encourage us to hone a rapport for rapport and a feeling for form-feeling. It would incite us to rethink the relative relationality of our ethnographic accounts. It would urge a critical awareness of long-standing patterns in the anthropological imagination. Indeed, it would motivate a rethinking of keyness, of salience, and of the seemingly self-luminous quality of importance itself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to editor-in-chief Elizabeth Chin, managing editor Sean Mallin, and anonymous reviewers for generous and generative comments that greatly improved the present essay, iterations of which were presented at the Stanford Anthropology Colloquium and Penn's Wolf Humanities Center in 2021. The piece was completed during a US Fulbright Scholar visiting fellowship at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Institute of Ethnic Studies, directed by Prof. Ulung Datuk Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin. Versions of this article in various guises benefited from readings or comments by Asif Agha, George Bayuga, Adrienne Cohen, James T. Collins, Ramlah Daud, Joe Errington, Miyako Inoue, Webb Keane, Paul Kockelman, Tri Phuong, Elliot Prasse-Freeman, Jacob Rinck, Firman Saleh, Hosna Sheikholeslami, Murni Sima, Deb Thomas, Greg Urban, and Chip Zuckerman. Whatever errors or "lessnesses" remain despite these individuals' better efforts are, of course, my sole responsibility.

ORCID

Andrew M. Carruthers  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9303-1524>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Linguistic anthropologists, too, have pursued their own important keyword projects (see Duranti, 2001).
- ² For a novel extension of these ideas in the domain of Bugis semiotics, see Saleh (2021).
- ³ An abstract noun like *kelebihang* has both structural sense properties and denotational stereotypy properties, but does not, however, possess referential prototypy properties. The analyst cannot "test" for *kelebihang* as one might for concrete nouns. Errington (1984, 286) identifies analogous problems presented by Javanese discourses on the self, explaining that while lexical items like "kin terms, color terms, [or] botanical nomenclature can be defined ostensibly, denoting as they do things in the world to which one can point," other words "cannot be so defined." As Agha (2007, n395) notes, "for many linguistic expressions, facts of structural sense and/or denotational stereotypy carry nearly the entire functional load for deciding category membership, and referential prototypes are non-existent, i.e., undecidable by language users." In an extended sense, and as we will see, the stereotype of an expression is a function of the syntagmatic relations or *rappports* (Saussure, 1916, 171) within which it is uniquely implicated.
- ⁴ Each example features interlinear, "literal," and "idiomatic" glosses. Polyfunctional derivational morphemes (e.g., KE-AN) are left uncategorized for maximally transparent segmentation (see Mahdi, 2012), while "function word" (Omar, 1968) *yang* is glossed as REL (relativizer) and first person plural inclusive and second person singular pronouns *kita* and *anda* as 1PL.INCL and 2SG, respectively.
- ⁵ "Sub-types" of the verbatum construction have been identified according to argument structure and the category of root, though this extends beyond the scope of this essay (see Carruthers 2023).
- ⁶ Note that the Bugis scholar speaks of *kelebihan* while Pak Hamsah speaks of *keleebihang*.
- ⁷ Preliminary analysis of these results was presented in a circulated paper—"Migration and the Push-Pull of 'Worlding'"—during the 2021–2022 Mellon Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania.
- ⁸ Latour (2008, 39) explains that "a matter of concern is what happens to a matter of fact when you add to it its whole scenography, much like you would do by shifting your attention from the stage to the whole machinery of a theater."
- ⁹ I am thankful to Miyako Inoue for suggesting this language.
- ¹⁰ Further complications arise when considering distinctions made between the "syntactic" or "grammatical word," the "prosodic" or "phonological word," and the "orthographic word" (Dixon and Aikhenvald, 2002; Van Gijn and Zúñiga, 2014).
- ¹¹ For insightful overviews of metasemiosis and metapragmatics, see Urban (2006) and Lee (1997).
- ¹² Compare with Max Weber's similar use of a chemical metaphor—*Wahlverwandtschaft* or "elective affinity"—which was translated by Talcott Parsons as "correlation," and thus transformed into "a more palatable metaphor for Anglo-American social scientists—that of statistics" (McKinnon, 2010, 108).
- ¹³ Hjelmslev (1969) recast Saussure's *rapport associatif* as the "paradigmatic relation" most readers are familiar with (see Nielsen, 2016, 157). Nielsen argues that *rapport associatif* is "much broader than the conventional idea of a paradigm" (165) and articulates with C. F. Hockett's (1987) notion of resonances.
- ¹⁴ On bridges and banks, see Heidegger (1971).

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How to cite this article: Carruthers, Andrew M.. 2023. "In lieu of "keywords": Toward an anthropology of rapport." *American Anthropologist* 125: 478–492. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13881>