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Hidden Likeness: Avoidance and Iconicity in Batek

In Batek, both iconic and avoidant speech forms only have the desired effect when their sounds are at the same time like, and different to, their referents. This necessary coexistence of likeness and difference in particular speech forms resonates with the sought for coexistence of alterity and affinity in Batek interpersonal relationships. Attention to how likeness and difference coexist in moments when iconic and avoidant speech forms are uttered, thus challenges entrenched, binary notions of alterity and affinity in anthropological practice more broadly. [Alterity, affinity, avoidance, Batek, iconicity, Southeast Asia]

During a pause in conversation when sitting with Na? ?Aliw¹ on the ground outside her house, she pointed to my bright yellow waterproof bag. “Its yellow color ‘is like’ your ‘starchy food’ will be tomorrow,” she excitedly proclaimed.² We had earlier that day been discussing the possibility of collecting *bawil* fruits, so I inferred that this was the food she was talking about. However, she did not mention the *bawil* fruits by name. Instead, she cryptically used the generic word for “starchy food,” *bap*.³ She did so, as while she delighted in the likeness between the yellowness of the fruit and the yellowness of the bag enough to exclaim about it with joy, she was unable to utter the fruit’s name. This was because the very existence of this likeness also posed a potential risk: as we were planning to collect this fruit, using its name when comparing it with bag could risk offending the fruit season, and hence cause madness. By *not* using the name of the fruit, Na? ?Aliw sought to avoid the danger that was present in her evocation of the likeness between the two objects. In such everyday situations, speaking and veiling speech are practices through which Batek people shape both the consequences that likeness can have in the world, and how likenesses themselves are understood.

Binary notions around what it means for things and people to be like or different—familiar or Other—have long troubled anthropology (Chua and Mathur 2018). Yet, examples such as the one above demonstrate that these notions are both actively shaped through speech and deeply consequential. Through examining two forms of Batek speech—iconic verbs and avoidance language—this paper challenges binary notions of likeness and difference. As each of these speech practices rely on simultaneously evoking both likeness and difference between words and their referents, I argue that specific attention to how likenesses and differences are evoked and veiled is a useful way to re-envision anthropology’s entrenched dualisms with greater nuance.

The Batek De’ (henceforth abbreviated to Batek) are hunting and gathering people who dwell in lowland rainforest areas in Peninsular Malaysia. They are one of at least

19 groups of Orang Asli (Malay “original people”) of Peninsular Malaysia and Thailand, numbering in total around 1,500 people across Pahang (where this research took place), Terengganu, and Kelantan. Although the majority of Batek people can speak fluent Malay, among each other they speak Batek, a language of the Northern Aslian branch of the Austroasiatic language family. This research was conducted in Batek throughout.⁴

Batek social life is oriented around an egalitarian ethical ethos, in which telling others what to do is viewed with suspicion (K. Endicott and Endicott 2008; Rudge 2019a). The deeply ingrained value of personal autonomy underlies this orientation: making protecting the autonomy and integrity of both humans and non-humans central in social relationships (Rudge 2019a). As well as being hunted or gathered for food, forest plants, animals, birds, and fish are a “moral community” (Lye 2005, 257). Many of these Other-than-human entities are ideally treated with caution, not mocked, and handled carefully, in order that good relationships are maintained among the more-than-human assemblage of the forest.

The value of autonomy also inflects Batek residency patterns. Batek used to be highly mobile, moving in small groups from forest dwelling to forest dwelling for both subsistence and social reasons (Lye 1997; 2004; 2005). This allowed them to take advantage of economic opportunities with local Malay and Chinese traders while also maintaining relative autonomy from outsiders (K. M. Endicott 2005; 1997; Lye 2013). Though many are still mobile, in an ongoing change in Pahang since the 1990s, most mobility patterns now tend toward movement between larger and more permanent settlements (though there is some generational, seasonal, and individual variation within this), rather than between forest dwellings. This change is due to a range of factors, but one that Batek repeatedly cite is that the forest is “smaller” now, and therefore they are increasingly afraid of all of the potential predators (*bec*) in the forest, whether human or non-human, who might prey on smaller, more mobile groups. These predators may be tigers and elephants (whom they say are harder to keep away from in today’s smaller forest), Thai poachers, forest guards, tourists and their guides, Indonesian construction workers, illegal traders, or any other non-Batek people who increasingly frequently make use of the forest. Among other factors, this fear pushes Batek people to live in larger groups at the edges of the forest, where Taman Negara (“National Park”) borders rural Malay villages and oil palm plantations. Batek thus now move between being inside the forest and living on its boundaries. Yet while residential mobility patterns are changing, the old patterns are still regarded—especially by older Batek—as important for maintaining autonomy from non-Batek outsiders (Rudge 2017, 64–66).

As Batek people navigate their lives between their forest and its borders, they therefore encounter not only forest entities but also more unfamiliar entities such as oil palms, Bangladeshi migrant workers, police, and missionaries. And, continuing a trend that has been ongoing since the 1970s (K. M. Endicott 2005), many Batek people increasingly take part in casual labor such as tourism (portering, guiding, selling crafts) (K. M. Endicott et al. 2016), labor on oil palm plantations, or ad hoc trade. Indeed, in places that border forest and plantation, most now supplement or substitute hunting and gathering with oil palm plantation labor. In this often-precarious boundary context, where one is surrounded by a wide array of Others both inside the forest and outside it, the stakes of negotiating what is like what and who is like who—and tailoring one’s speech accordingly—become even higher.

This reflects concerns that people have within the forest: while people articulate a conceptual distinction between the *həp* (“forest”) and the *dəŋ* (“town”), even among the *həp* the distinctions between human persons, and among other entities—such as bag and fruit—are important. This is because likenesses can cause shifts in forms, in who is like who, particularly when explicitly spoken about (hence Na? ?Aliw’s caution with the *bawil*). A cautionary tale emphasizes the consequences of speaking about likeness too explicitly: a *taduk* leaf comes to live with the Batek. This *taduk* marries a Batek man, they have children, and they live a good life. This continues

until the Batek mother-in-law of the *taduk* utters that they move “like *taduk* leaves.” In the act of pointing this likeness out—while uttering the name of the *taduk*—the grandmother causes the *taduk* and her children to return to their *taduk* form, never to interact again with human people.

As with Na? ?Aliw and the *bawil*, speech again played—or failed to play due to the grandmother’s mistake—a central role in negotiating the shifts between human and non-human forms that can happen in situations where things are alike. Batek speech is therefore more than ephemeral, and more than abstractly referential. It is not a floating layer added on to reality, but an integral force that shapes the world with real effects and consequences. It does not describe “some pre-existing reality,” but has real implications, constantly shaping the social order (Duranti 1993a, 41 on Samoan).⁵ As certain utterances can have lasting consequences, making, or breaking relationships, how one should speak and veil one’s speech are concerns that comes to the fore as a frequent part of Batek people’s daily lives. This is central to how and why speech shapes notions of likeness and difference.

Two particular forms of speech stand out as central to this process: the use of avoidance language and the use of iconic speech. Both of these Batek speech practices *rely* on whether or not words are “like” or “different” to their referents, both for how they take on meanings, and, in the context of Batek speech ideologies, for how they might be used pragmatically to create or avoid certain real-world effects that speech may otherwise have. Given this, how one speaks and veils one’s speech additionally takes on social and political significance. Both iconicity and avoidance are thus particularly revealing of how ideas of likeness and difference are configured more broadly.

Iconic words (an example in Batek being *syāl* “of wind, to rush past ears [e.g., if a hornbill flies by]”) are usually discussed in anthropology and linguistics in terms of how they are “like,” or “resemble,” their referents (Dingemans et al. 2015; drawing on Peirce 1955). On the other hand, avoidance language may be discussed as working through achieving difference from its referent (an example in Batek could be referring to the *bawil* fruit by using a word other than its name) (see also Ball 2015 on Wauja). But in Batek, both of these forms of speech have at their core the idea that likenesses between words and referents must be *simultaneously* evoked and hidden: for either kind of utterance to be effective, likeness and difference must co-exist. It is this coexistence between likeness and difference that is the focus of this paper. With reference to iconicity and avoidance, I ask exactly *how* ideas of likeness and difference between entities—human and non-human—are configured through speech.

In attending to this question, I offer insights into concepts of likeness and difference themselves, challenging the received understanding of these concepts as a neat binary. Previous studies of mimesis (Taussig 1993), and language-focused ethnographies on iconicity in speech (Kohn 2013; Nuckolls 1996), have based their conclusions on assumptions that likeness and difference are binary opposites: either words are *like* their referent—in which case they are iconic—or they are *different*—in which case they are not. But this misses that likeness and difference themselves may have different meanings in different linguistic contexts. Instead, Batek speech practices prompt a focus on the gray areas—or moments of *hidden* likeness—created in utterances such as when Na? ?Aliw simultaneously described and hid the likeness between *bawil* and bag.

Through considering both iconicity and avoidance, this paper therefore argues that ways of speaking in Batek, and the complex, shifting, relations between likeness and difference that they reveal, can trouble binary notions of what it means for entities to either be alike or different more broadly. Attending to *how* people shape their notions of like and different allows more nuanced attention to be given to how people may use speech to shape their relationships with Others. Given iconicity and avoidance’s unique relationships to likeness and difference, how might these speech practices shape how seemingly *different* entities act on one another? What, then, is the meaning and significance of likeness—and of *hiding* likeness—for Batek people? And

how might Batek concepts of likeness and difference, as made evident in speech, complicate anthropological assumptions that alterity and affinity are radically opposite, binary notions?

This final question is important, as beyond specific attention to mimesis and iconicity, binary notions of alterity and affinity have characterized anthropological research since its inception (Chua and Mathur 2018, 12; see also Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013; Chua 2015). The discipline has become characterized by its “romance with alterity” (Ntarangwi 2010, xii), and its consequent filling of the “savage slot,” thus creating the necessary Other for the construction of “the West” (Trouillot 1991). Notions of alterity and affinity, or difference and likeness, are assumed to be given. At the same time, these concepts become reified by analyses that seek to demonstrate the radical nature of this binary—in other words, that are oriented “towards the production of difference” (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros De Castro 2014). It is politically important to understand the existence of different and multiple worlds, as so often the denial of ontological self-determination is at the root of the violent displacement of Indigenous peoples (Escobar 2020). And yet, the desire to theorize radical alterities as an experimental, conceptual exercise may mask how these multiple worlds might be entangled, not least through the power relations inherent in who gets to decide what difference actually *is*.

Given speech’s potential to navigate the tensions between likeness and difference in Batek, attention to the specificities of Batek speech practices among their broader contexts offers an alternative way to think through difference. Rather than asking how people may achieve either radical alterity or affinity with Others through how they speak, in this paper I thus ask how alterity and affinity may come to coexist in complex ways as persons and things interact with one another through speech. I argue that attention to the messy effects and meanings of language might offer non-dualist modes of thinking about alterity and affinity, and likeness and difference, which complicate these notions themselves. I conclude that this may better reflect how speech is used in contexts such as the Batek’s where multiple persons and entities continually both conflict and coexist, generating both alignments and anxieties that are never neutral or neatly categorizable as “same” or “Other.”

To elaborate on these arguments, the paper introduces the particularities of concepts of the likeness and difference in Batek, before introducing how these relate to general Batek ideologies of speech and sound. Based on this, I proceed to explore how these notions of likeness and difference, when viewed in line with Batek speech ideologies, suffuse how avoidance language and iconic speech are used. I conclude with a discussion on how thinking through speech allows for a contextually nuanced understanding of what likeness and difference might be to people in diverse linguistic contexts. This, in turn, provokes a new angle on anthropological preoccupations with Otherness—one that attends to the power relations inherent in which worldviews get defined in terms of their “radical alterity.”

Being “Minimally Different”: Complicating Alterity and Affinity

As when Na? ?Aliw avoided speaking about the likeness between the fruit and the bag, or when the *taduk*-in-human-form was made to disappear by the grandmother’s utterance, concerns around likeness and difference affect humans and non-humans within the forest. Just as to speak about certain likenesses openly can be dangerous, it is also dangerous to create a likeness using gesture: to wiggle your fingers in imitation of the movement of a leech, for example, would be *lawac*, risking upsetting Gubar (the thunder-being), and causing a dangerous thunderstorm. To eat a pet animal that has lived like you in your home that you have *pi-gas* (“caused to live”) would provoke revulsion. Yet, some forms of likeness are enjoyed: when she walked past her mother and I working on a sleeping mat, Na? ?Aliw’s younger sister exclaimed that the mat was beautiful as it looked like *met kolēp* (“seeds of the *Parkia speciosa*”).⁶ Yet, just as her older sister did with the yellow bag and the *bawil*, she too

used an avoidance word, *kələp*, to refer to this plant's seeds, as this plant can be particularly dangerous in various contexts due to its very strong smell and taste.⁷ Again, therefore, likeness and difference can be made ambiguous: sometimes they are beautiful, sometimes dangerous.

Evoking this complexity, in Batek, notions of “like” and “different” (as used in English) can often both be described using the same term, *lec*. Depending on the context, *lec* can foreground the difference between two things, or it can foreground their likeness. Likeness and difference thus each bear traces of one another in any instance that *lec* is used. But rather than the notion of *lec* being a revelation that makes known that there exists a radically unfamiliar way of understanding what likeness and difference are (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2009)—I argue that *lec* instead provokes an angle that in itself complicates binary notions of likeness and difference, or alterity and affinity.⁸ Rather than looking only for what is *different*, or how things are *made different* in revelatory moments, it is more fruitful to analyze these concepts themselves.⁹

In this view, *lec* does not reflect a radically different world inhabited by the Batek in which like and different co-mingle. Batek people also, where relevant, clearly express likeness and difference as conceptually distinct. Often this is using Malay: to describe something as being “the same” Batek speakers would use the term *sama?*, a Malay loan (*sama*). To describe the properties of difference or Otherness, one might use the Batek term *pōw* (“to be different”)—for example in the construction “is it this one?” “no, it’s *pōw*.” The word *meyhēy* is also used to describe things that are alike; however, it is more commonly used in a more abstract sense to describe situations and concepts (as in “*meyhēy* the time we did this or that”), rather than to describe material or physical properties. Batek people often also use the Malay word *macam* (“like”). Among this lexical landscape of likeness, the term *lec* calls into focus the subtle overlaps in what it might mean to be like and different.

In a well-loved Batek story, a woman smells her grandchild’s urine, exclaiming that it “smells *lec* the *tampōy* fruit.”

<i>mni?</i>	<i>lec</i>	<i>k = λay</i>	<i>tampōy</i>	
Smell	to.be.alike	LOC = body	<i>tampōy</i>	
“Smells like the <i>tampōy</i> fruit”				[Na? Ktłət 2018]

Here, the focus is on the similarity of the two smells. However, in other contexts, the verb *lec* also encodes the meaning of “to be just off,” or “to miss (e.g., a target).”¹⁰ For example, if someone accidentally took the wrong pathway instead of the one they had meant to, or if they mispronounced a word, substituted a similar word for one they had meant to say, got things muddled up, or misspoke slightly, a person might use the same word *lec*, exclaiming *ye? lec!* (“I missed!”).

In English, a speaker might perhaps focus on the aspects of the semantics of the verb “to be like” that encode *similarity*. In turn, understandings of the semantics of the verb “to miss,” “to be off,” or “to be different” might focus on the aspects of this verb that encode the *difference* between the intended goal and the actuality of the object or situation described. However, in Batek, the word *lec* simultaneously evokes the fact that when things are *alike* they are not, therefore, *the same*. In turn, the act of being just off, or just missing, necessitates that the things were close in the first place, even though they may in actuality be slightly different. I therefore henceforth translate the verb *lec* using the phrase “to be minimally different”; drawing on the linguistic concept of “minimal pairs,” in which two words differ from one another in only one regard, for example by only one phoneme.¹¹ Using this terminology evokes that while the two things compared using the word *lec* may bear significant similarities, difference may be present *within* their likeness.

This difference is often as important. When Na? Ktlət described that her sleeping mat's pattern *lec*—“was minimally different”—to the pattern on a turtle's chest (fig. 1), both likeness and difference were thus evoked.

The mat picture is *like* a turtle's chest, but it is not *the same*. There is difference within the likeness: it shares some properties, but not others. The verb *lec* thus brings to the fore the idea that likeness and difference can be two co-existing sides of the same coin, which may be co-present, yet shifting in focus, in any one moment. This coexistence is also central for Batek people as they go about negotiating their relationships with Others.

Thinking about likeness and difference as potentially overlapping problematizes previous studies of multi-modal mimesis (Taussig 1993; Myers 2015), and iconicity in speech (Nuckolls 1996; Kohn 2013), which have relied on binary assumptions around the natures of likeness and difference. Mimetic practices are said to be magic because they are ways of taking on the power or characteristics of a radically different “Other” (Taussig 1993). Similarly, iconic speech is a way that one might become more “involved,” or in other words more attitudinally aligned to a situation or person (Nuckolls 1992). For Kohn, this is for the reason that they cause speakers and listeners to “fail to notice the *difference*” between words and the events they depict—hence allowing the possibility of becoming an “Other” through iconic word utterance (Kohn 2013, 31 emphasis added). However, these studies do not consider that there might be gray areas between likeness and difference themselves. The existence of the term *lec* in Batek therefore prompts a reconsideration of the underlying ideologies of likeness and difference that are often assumed to be givens in discussions of iconicity in speech. The following section discusses these gray areas where likeness and coexistence exist, which are often missed by arguments that mimetic, or iconic practices cause the taking on of radical alterity.

Shadows and Names: Maintaining the Balance of “Minimal Difference”

“Be careful!” Na? Tklōk warned me as, using the tip of my machete, I went to flick away a huge millipede that we had just spotted close to us in the camp. This millipede's bite, so I was told, can be fatal. “If we want to get rid of millipedes, we



Figure 1. A sleeping mat with the image of *dada? ʔay* (‘chest of edible animal’), or *pyat* (‘a type of turtle’), made by Na? Ktlət, photographed by the author. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

have to stand far away and use a long stick," she said. Had I been as close to the millipede as my machete point would have necessitated, I would have risked my shadow crossing over that of the millipede. This would have caused an inappropriate mingling of human and millipede smells that would have been *lawac*, part of a complex of taboos the consequences of which are upsetting Gubar (the thunder-being), and hence causing a storm (Rudge 2019a; cf K. M. Endicott 1979). Keeping certain bodies, smells, and shadows distinct can therefore be of paramount importance. Though the verb *lec* demonstrates that difference itself can be ambiguous, difference is still of real concern for Batek people. Situations where difference is not maintained at all—for example if bodies, smells, and shadows coming—can be dangerous.

These ideas regarding bodily mingling across difference are of relevance for understanding the nuances of mimetic practices for the Batek (sonic, spoken, or otherwise). Studies of mimesis (Taussig 1993) and the studies of gestural mimicry they have inspired (Myers 2015; Hustak and Myers 2012) take the view that creating a likeness is creating a kind of "active yielding" into that which is mimicked (Taussig 1993), whereby mimesis involves "a palpable, sensuous connection" between bodies, in which "contact and copy merge to become virtually identical, different moments of the one process of sensing" (Taussig 1993, 21; Myers 2015, 210). But given the danger of interpersonal impingement, can this apply to the Batek context?

For the Batek, in certain contexts, particular actions *can* cause one to "yield into," or take on the qualities of that thing. But this is dangerous—an impingement on the autonomy of the body in question. A woman should not carry two firebrands in one hand, or eat deformed fruits, for fear of having conjoined twins. Eating pangolin when pregnant would cause one to have a slow and difficult birth. Chopping off the fingers of a monkey when pregnant may cause your child to be born without fingers. Burning wood or preparing pandanus the wrong way around could cause a breech birth. The human person, or their unborn child, really does take on the characteristics of the thing that they have consumed, held, and thus inadvertently imitated. These are real ways that one can inadvertently become, or take on the characteristics of, another entity. Were Na? Ktlət, who wove the sleeping mat (fig.1), to have "yielded" to the turtle through her copying of its pattern, then the act of weaving this mat would have been dangerous rather than beautiful. Yet, when she described the sleeping mat, she expressed not risks, but that the mat was beautiful because it was "minimally different" to the pattern of the turtle's chest. Mimesis—the act of creating a likeness—can thus have consequences other than the taking on of a radically different form.

What *would* have been dangerous would have been had she uttered the name of the particular turtle whose chest's pattern she was recreating. When she told me about the likeness between the pattern of the mat and the turtle's shell, instead of telling me the name, she therefore referred to this turtle as *dada? ?ay* ("chest of meat animal"). When I enquired as to which *?ay* ("meat animal") she was referring to, she replied that it was the "name of my son-in-law." Her son-in-law's name is *pyat*,¹² the type of turtle whose pattern the mat was re-creating. Na? Ktlət was therefore unable to utter that word. Like stepping into a mosque, it would have been *tolah*. She therefore used the above circumlocution, as it was uttering the *name* of her son-in-law (also the animal's name) that was dangerous, rather than mimicking the pattern of the turtle's chest visually on the mat. Had she uttered the name she would have broken the *tolah* taboos, akin to had she physically touched him. Uttering a name can thus be like physically touching that person or co-mingling shadows: it can be "a lesser form of violence" (Diffloth 1980, 159 on Semai). Unlike mimicking a pattern, if you utter a name, you really inhabit that person to whom the name belongs. As well as creating danger, this can also create an intense feeling of *yüp* ("shyness, embarrassment, shame") to the person whose name has been uttered. You are no longer "different" but become "the same."

Among diverse Aslian speakers, naming and name avoidance practices are salient (Benjamin 1968, 132; Kruspe and Burenhult 2019; Lye 1997, 314). They “bring relationships into being” (Lye 1997, 314). Elsewhere, it is often also personal names that are the subject of verbal taboos (Fleming 2011), particularly in cultures of in-law avoidance in Australia (Haviland 1979) and Melanesia (Stasch 2011; 2002; Fleming and Lempert 2011), as well as in Batek. Beyond in-law name avoidance, however, Batek names have personal resonances that necessitate their avoidance: early on in my fieldwork, when being informed of the death of a person upriver whom I had never met, but who was a close friend of the people I was with, I unknowingly uttered that person’s name—at that time not understanding the significance of doing so. When I did this, Na? Larem uttered the below:

ye? *leh* *kan* *prbət* *knmoh* *ʔo?*, *meyhey* *cik* *k = klaŋes* *ye?*
 NEG EMP NEG to.utter name 3SG, to.be.like to.stab, LOC = heart 1SG
 “Don’t utter her name... it’s like being stabbed in my heart”

ye? *ha?ip*
 1SG to.feel.ha?ip
 “I feel *ha?ip*.”

[Na? Larem 2015]

Uttering the name of Na? Larem’s friend made her feel unbearable, physically manifested, *ha?ip* (“longing, yearning, nostalgia, desire”). Inappropriate utterance of names in Batek can therefore “thrust the speaker” into “co-presence” of the addressees (Fleming 2011, 7). My own accidental utterance brought the deceased into co-presence with both Na? Larem and myself with real, negative, and physical consequences. Again, uttering names can have the same impinging effect as physical touch, crossing shadows, or mixing smells.

Names in Batek thus challenge the “Standard Average European linguistic ideology,” in which words simply “stand for” things, and are not things in themselves (Rumsey 2009, 121). This reflects speech practices more broadly. The thing-ness of words, even beyond names, means that speaking with a person can generate a kind of “alignment.” In this regard, speaking with another person can be similar to sharing food (Walker 2018, 16 on Urarina). A refusal to speak at all can therefore be a refusal of alignment. Indeed, Batek people often will not speak at all to people that they are not familiar with. After a long absence, even close friends and family members may have a period of avoiding speaking when being reacquainted with someone. Speech comes as people slowly get back to their old familiarity. When one *cannot* speak to another—for example as with the non-Malay-speaking Bangladeshi migrant workers that the Batek frequently encounter on the oil palm plantation—any alignment can be difficult to create.

Speech is thus a powerful way of defining how entities relate to one another. It negotiates the balance between likeness and difference: who is like enough to speak or utter a name, and who is not; who is aligned with, and who is not. Becoming *too* alike another through the words that you use, and thus really and fully inhabiting that person or thing—by uttering their name, through gesture, or by ingesting certain foods—can cause real and lasting transformations. And, like refusing to let your shadow cross with a millipede’s, a refusal to speak marks entities out as embodying difference. But Batek mimetic practices, such as weaving, play with the boundary between likeness and difference: they *leç*. It is here that their beauty lies. These understandings of how likeness and difference should be balanced suffuse the two Batek speech practices explored in the following sections.

Playing with Minimal Difference: Using Iconic Speech

One kind of speech practice in which these understandings of likeness and difference are salient is the use of iconic verbs. Batek has a rich lexicon for depicting sensory

experiences across domains, in which speakers recreate sensations using the phonology of Batek. Most often, the quality of non-arbitrariness, iconicity, or “sound symbolism” (Nuckolls 1992; 1996; 1999) is a feature of verbs in Batek.¹³ The word *cwīt* “to make a high pitched whining sound” (e.g., of certain cicadas) represents this sound by way of the close front nasal vowel /ĩ/. In some cases, as in Temiar, iconicity is “felt” rather than known (Benjamin 2013, 38). The feeling of uttering the word replicates the sensation it is referring to—such as *bāp*—said shortly and sharply and often at a lower pitch to indicate the feeling of suddenly falling over. Similarly, most occurrences of the bilabial fricative *ɸ*, a rare phoneme in Batek, occur in actions which involve the motion or sound of air: *tuɸ* “to spit,” *yāɸ* “to feel sensation of bouncing,” and *craɸ* “to make a sound of certain cicadas and falling water.”¹⁴ As is familiar from Peirce’s definition of imagic iconicity in which “an *Icon* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes only virtue of characters of its own” (Peirce 1955, 102), these verbs thus denote by virtue of their shared properties with the experience they depict.¹⁵ Like other forms of imitation, they are based on the “resemblance”—or likeness—between form and meaning (Dingemanse et al. 2015, 604).

Iconicity is a common feature of many Aslian languages, including Jah Hut (Diffloth 1976, 84–85), Semai (Tufvesson 2011), Temiar (Benjamin 2013), Kammu (Svantesson et al. 2014), and Semelai (Kruspe 2004). In these languages, iconicity is a characteristic of a separate word class of expressives (or “ideophones” in linguistic studies outside of Southeast Asia, and “mimetics” in studies of Japanese). However, as in other Northern Aslian languages such as Jahai (Burenhult 2005, 113) and Maniq (Wnuk 2016, 89–101), in Batek, iconicity is not a characteristic of a separate word class, but a feature of some verbs. These verbs in Batek do share features with ideophones and expressives in other languages; however, in that they are “marked”: characterized by “depiction” rather than “description” (Dingemanse 2012, 655).

Below, Na? Lɲaŋ is describing being in the forest and hearing what she thought was a dead person (*sarət*). In fact, it was a frog making the sound “*bam*.”

ʔəhʔəh

Oh!

Oh! that “repeated sound of the frog”

t = bam bam bam bam

REL = to.make.repeated.sound.of.frog

yeʔ kdəh ʔay.liw diʔ t = kliŋ bam diʔ d = yeʔ
 1SG to.say what that REL = sound to.make.sound.of.frog that CONTR = 1SG
 “I said what is that that’s making that ‘sound of the frog’ I did” [Na? Lɲaŋ 2015]

“*Bam*” is a phonological recreation of this particular frog sound. This utterance was received with laughter from the onlookers—myself and two other women—who continued to speculate about whether they would have been afraid had they heard “*bam*.” Na? Lɲaŋ could have said “I heard a frog calling and wondered what it was.” This formulation would have been permissible in Batek. Instead, she *depicted* rather than *described* what she perceived. You can speak without using these iconic verbs, but “such speech would risk sounding uninvolved and unemotional” (Benjamin 2013, 54 on Temiar). The use of iconic verbs such as *bam* makes stories more evocative, realistic, specific, and potentially hilarious.

Emphasizing their depictiveness, and like ideophones elsewhere, iconic verbs in Batek are often used in syntactically unusual ways. Unlike non-iconic verbs, iconic verbs are rarely used with personal pronouns. Like ideophones and expressives, they often appear as sentence adjuncts, as phrases on their own, or after a pause (Diffloth 1972; Dingemanse 2012), as below, in ʔEy Tklōk’s description of using the name of the bearcat as a hunting tool:

<i>bīla?</i> If	<i>mi?</i> 3SG	<i>prbət</i> to.utter	<i>“kabut,”</i> “kabut”	<i>bles!</i> sensation. of.falling	<i>ʔo?</i> 3SG	<i>ɲʔil,</i> to.jump. down	<i>poh!</i> sound. of.hitting`
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“if you utter ‘kabut,’ falling! It falls, hitting the ground!
 ba = te? ja? = knmōh dah ʔoʔ-tun dah ʔoʔ-tun dah
 GOAL = earth RT = name already 3SG-REL already 3SG-REL already
 “to the earth, then you know that was its name” [ʔEy Tklōk 2016]

Again emphasizing their depictiveness, and like ideophones elsewhere, iconic verbs are often said with prosodic foregrounding such as higher or lower pitch, as in the below story of a Batek hunter who hears the sound of a frog from outside while he is lying down inside. Naʔ Ktlət, the storyteller, uttered the *būp* sound of the frog at a much lower pitch.

<i>ʔo?</i> 3SG	<i>wək</i> to.return	<i>ba = hayāʔ</i> GOAL = lean-to	<i>ʔo?</i> 3SG	<i>ɲək</i> to.stay
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“he came back to his lean-to, he stayed”
būp *būp* *būp* *būp* *būp*
 sound.of.frog sound.of.frog sound.of.frog sound.of.frog sound.of.frog
 “repeated sound of frog”
ʔo? *haw*
 3SG to.fetch
 “he went to try to catch it” [Naʔ Ktlət, 2018]

When she described the gibbon, the verb “*wəc*” indicating the gibbon sound was said at a higher pitch, with each repetition of the word falling in pitch, just like the melismatic call of an actual gibbon:

<i>ʔo?</i> 3SG	<i>di?</i> to.make	<i>kliŋ</i> sound	<i>kboŋ</i> gibbon
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“he made the sound of the gibbon”
wəc wəc wəc wəc wəc wəc wəc wəc
 to.make.repeated.sound.of.gibbon
 “repeated sound of gibbon” [Naʔ Ktlət 2018]

Prosodic and syntactic foregrounding increases the markedness, and depictiveness, of iconic verbs. Their use is thus similar to what has been described as the “depictive mode of speech” in Maniq (Wnuk 2016, 101–3), in which particular syntax, prosodic foregrounding, or marked voice qualities “make it clear that the utterance is distinct from ordinary speech” (Wnuk 2016, 102). As such uttering a depictive phrase such as *wəc wəc wəc wəc wəc* is akin to a demonstration or quotation (Clark and Gerrig 1990). In the manner of “voice-based” indirect speech, the speaker is stepping back from the utterance (Brenneis 1986, 343). The audience appreciates that the speaker is reporting something, rather than claiming the identity of the entity whose utterance they are re-creating. While the presentation and the iconicity of iconic verbs make them depictive (Dingemanse 2012, 658), giving listeners a vivid depiction of perceptual experiences, speakers thus remain at a distance from the perceptual experience they describe.

Given the depictiveness of iconic speech, studies of iconicity often foreground its phenomenological aspects (Feld 2012; Basso 1981; cf Webster 2015), a tradition going back to Merleau-Ponty (2002). They have been described as “poetry in everyday language” (Evans-Pritchard 1962), which “foreground the exact qualities of sensory perception” (Dingemanse 2011, 80). Creating a likeness through iconic speech—like other mimetic practices—can thus be a mode of somatic attention, or a “culturally

elaborated [way] of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 1993, 138; Porath 2011, 814).

Drawing on these themes, Nuckolls has argued that iconicity—in her case the use of sound-symbolic ideophones in Pastaza Quechua—is a more “involved” way of speaking. This is as a result of the “direct connection” (cf. Gell 1999 on Umeda) that is forged by the close relationship between sign vehicle (in this case, a word) and its object, that allows a listener to “project into” a scene (Nuckolls 1992, 53, 54). This is taken further by Kohn, writing on Runa Quechua, who argues that iconic speech involves a momentary erasure of difference between the utterer, the listener, and the thing described: iconic words represent thanks to the ways that the *differences* between the word and the sensation it evokes are ignored (Kohn 2013, 31). Indeed, iconicity is often framed in terms of allowing the speaker to “become” that which they are describing (High 2018, 71–72). These arguments can be linked to those surrounding mimesis, where *through* the creation of a likeness, mimesis is argued to be a practice of inhabiting a radical alterity, taking on the form of an Other (Taussig 1993). In that view, likenesses—whether visual or linguistic—create the opportunity to enter radical alterities, as the creation of a likeness involves a process of both “doubling” and “active yielding” into the Other (Taussig 1993, 111, 146), through “palpable, sensuous connection” (Taussig 1993, 21). Through likeness, difference between self and Other is dissolved, allowing for transformation into the Other.

But were Batek iconic verbs to create “yielding,” “projecting,” or “involvement,” their use would be fraught with danger. Situations that may risk impingement upon the autonomy of another entity, such as naming, mingling shadows, or particular forms of ingestion and gesture, are dangerous, as was made evident when Na? Ktlot could not say her son-in-law's name, or when I inadvertently almost got too close to the millipede. This is a contrast to iconic speech and other forms of mimesis, which *are* considered to be beautiful, often playful, and evocative, and are unlikely to be dangerous in and of themselves because they do *not* cause this mingling. They instead play with the boundary between being like and being different. Na? Ktlot, in the above example, was not really becoming a frog, she was *reporting* its sound. It is thus useful to consider iconicity in Batek in the light of the term *lec* in Batek: likeness and difference can co-exist. Though iconic language is like the perceptual experiences that it describes, it is not considered the same—and thus uttering it does not create sameness, a subtle distinction Taussig does hint at: “nevertheless the *distinction* between copy and contact is no less fundamental, and the nature of their interrelationship remains obscure and fertile ground for wild imagining” (Taussig 1993, 21 emphasis added). As well as creating a likeness, distinction in Batek iconic speech remains critical.

Far from being cases of “*fail[ing] to notice the differences*” (Kohn 2013, 31 emphasis added), iconic utterances in Batek also include an element of distinction. This makes them a contrast to realistic imitations. These *real* imitations—described as *hinek* (“to imitate”)—may be used by Batek hunters to lure game to them. They are, like name utterance or ingestion, far more dangerous than iconic utterances, as they trick said game into thinking that Batek people *are really one of their own*. The animals become victims because they believe the imitation to be *real*. For the same reason, in Batek it can also be dangerous to utter the names of particular predators' species names when they are close (Lye [2004] 2005, 114). If one uttered the name *yah* (“tiger”) when tigers were close, the tigers may *knel* (“recognize”) one of their own, and *haw* (“come to fetch”) you, just as a mother monkey may do if they mistake a Batek hunter's imitation of a crying baby monkey to be real. This is akin to how uttering a name may cause physical impingement, and perhaps shyness and embarrassment to that person, or how certain gestures or ingestion may cause the real taking on of “Other” characteristics. But the use of iconic speech does not have this effect. There is no danger in uttering, for example, *hjkɔ?* (“to make the barking sound of a tiger”), which is an iconic, phonological imitation of that sound. To evoke likenesses playfully, beautifully, specifically, and without danger, iconic speech does not *mask* difference

(as *realistic* imitation or name utterance may do), but necessarily retains it *within* its resemblance.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Avoidance Language

It is this interplay of likeness and difference that gives iconicity its similarity to avoidance in Batek. Avoidance language can take many forms, peppering everyday speech in numerous ways. Given that names are so salient to the Batek, there are many situations in Batek in which one cannot utter the names (whether teknonyms or original “flesh” (*sec*) names) of particular people, including but not limited to affinal kin. Similarly, if predators are close, if you are going hunting for a particular animal, or when close to a particular plant, it can be taboo to utter their species names. In some circumstances, verbs describing certain actions may also necessitate avoidance strategies: during the fruit season, it becomes taboo to utter the verb *?mcāh* (“to defecate”), as it would risk offending the fruit season. Instead, one should use the term *kapōs*.

Even the system of teknonyms in Batek is a way of avoiding uttering a person’s original, or “flesh” (*sec*) name (Teknonyms are discussed in detail in Lye 1997, 313–20; Rudge 2017, 122–35). But beyond teknonymy, personal naming taboos have added layers of complexity, as nouns referring to animals, places, or plants (which in certain contexts may have their own taboos on them) are often given as personal names (Lye 1997, 315), which are then, in turn, tabooed themselves. The sounded word still refers to both its original meaning—the plant, place, or animal—and to the person to which it now also refers, without renouncing either meaning. Kɲam is named for a river that flows through Taman Negara. An affine of Kɲam (the person) would be prohibited from uttering her name. If they wanted to talk about the Kɲam River, it would not matter that they were talking about the river not the person: the sound of the word is taboo for them. An affine, a brother-in-law for example, would have to find a circumlocution to utter the name of the river, such as “the river with the name of my sister in law” (*tɔm kɲmoh habaŋ ye?*). This not only creates complex webs of taboos but also shows that in Batek the performative effect of the sound adheres “in the material sign-form [the sound of the word] itself” (Fleming 2011; see also Ball 2015 for examples of this in Wauja). In Batek, it is thus the phonology of the word itself which, when uttered out loud, has potency.

Given this, avoidance has the ability to bring persons and things into “co-presence” with one another (Chua 2015), even when that person or thing is not physically present (Stasch 2011, 102; see also Mitchell 2018). If every time you talk about a particular flower you have to find a circumlocution, then your relationship to the person who has the name of that flower is constantly brought to mind whenever you speak about the flower (or rather *don’t* speak about it). Avoidance is not merely a matter of saying something different. In Korowai, through creating a stance of distance by not naming, “a relation of intense reciprocal engagement” is created (Stasch 2003, 325): in creating lexical distinction, avoidance becomes a relation-making act (Stasch 2011, 101). Among the Batek when avoidance language is used, people ensure that affinities and alignments between people or with other entities are only evoked from the safety of a degree of distance.

This paradox reflects the nature of Batek avoidance names themselves, which, while they are used to mask, are also often similar to, or evoke similarities with, the original name or referent of the thing that they are masking. What Fleming describes as “extreme performativity,” which is marked by avoidance of forms “that are similar to the taboo target, along relevant axes of iconism,” is not present in Batek (Fleming 2011, 153). Unlike in Datooga (Mitchell 2018) and Kambaata (Treis 2005), avoidance names in Batek can be close to the original name. The wife of Pokok¹⁶ is tabooed from uttering “Pokok,” his flesh name, as utterance would break the *tolah* taboos. However, it is permissible for her to utter Pokək—an “avoidance” name with only

one phoneme's difference (changing the second /o/ to /ə/). As his wife put it, when she uses this avoidance name:

<i>yeʔ</i>	<i>hãʔ</i>	<i>pi-<c > lec</i>	<i>sikit</i>
1SG	like.this	CAUS-<IMP > to.be.minimally.different	a.little

"I cause it to be a little minimally different" [Naʔ Tklõk 2016]

As above, to describe avoidance, Batek speakers—as they would when describing mimesis in sleeping mats—use the verb *lec*, affixed with the causative prefix /*pi-*/.¹⁷ This can either become *pi-lec*, or *pi-<c > lec* (as in the above example). The semantics of the infix <*c*> are unclear, but it may be a form of combining the causative with the imperfective aspect.¹⁸ Either way, in both formulations, the resulting meaning is of "causing to be minimally different." Indeed, in linguistic terms, Pokok and Pokæk are minimal pairs. Avoidance names are thus referred to as:

<i>knmõh</i>	<i>pi-<c > lec</i>
name	CAUS-<IMP > to.be.minimally.different

"names that cause to be minimally different"

Avoidance language does not totally obscure a meaning, but creates just enough (minimal) difference—it *lec*. Many avoidance names play on this. As Naʔ ʔAliw did when pointing out the likeness between the *bawil* fruit and the bag, avoidance names—though they seek to create difference—make reference to shared properties. The Gibbon (*kbõn*) may be referred to as "spider" (*tawõh*), referring to both of these entities' long limbs. Or, avoidance names may evoke the characteristics of the thing they are masking the name of, for example by using the following formulation, in which the phrase *ʔay t=...* ("the one which...") is followed by a description of a particular characteristic.

ʔay t=haʔat kalkõʔ - 'the one with stinky claws' - tiger
ʔay t=blac hõʔ - 'the one with the slippery shell' - softshell turtle
ʔay t=btek cas - 'the one with long arms' - Siamang
ʔay t=btukul cas - 'the one with folded under hands' - tortoise
ʔay t=clpeŋ kuy - 'the one with a curved head' - hornbill
ʔay t=dwaʔ hacẽh - 'the one with two tails' - elephant
ʔay t=hlʔõŋ hõʔ - 'the one with a black shell' - turtle
ʔay t=neŋ sõk met - 'the one with no eyelashes' - fish
ʔay t=kayes teʔ - 'the one that scratches at the ground' - chicken

Examples such as this are fairly common and generally understood; however, people also delight in making up avoidance names. These more esoteric avoidances *rely* on the likeness between the avoidance name and whatever is referred to, in order that people can figure out what you are talking about.

It can also be possible to use an iconic verb as an avoidance word. For example, during the time that the *rimen* cicada is calling (after the rains, before the fruits), uttering its name would make it feel *yũp* ("shy, embarrassed, ashamed"), and hence stop calling. This could negatively affect the fruit season itself, as the *rimen* is an integral part of the season's ecology. An avoidance word is therefore used for it, *ʔyõt*. This avoidance name is an iconic verb that imitates the sound that the *rimen* makes: *ʔyyyyyyõyõt-yõt-yõt-yõt*. Names can be a form of physical impingement—uttering the *rimen*'s name would make it feel as *yũp* ("shy, ashamed, embarrassed") as a person might if their name were to be uttered by someone who should not. However, in this case of the *rimen*, the very word that is used to *avoid* uttering its name is an iconic verb that imitates its sound. Both iconicity and avoidance thus create likeness with *and* difference from their referents. It is this that allows people to use them as ways of

fostering particular kinds of non-impinging relations, which, in turn, can be amusing, beautiful, or simply used to avoid danger.

Tigers and Fruits: Alike and Different

Though they are both concerned with likeness and difference, iconicity and avoidance may appear to be the opposite of one another. Iconic verbs are typically portrayed as being concerned with creating a resemblance, or likeness, with their referents. By contrast, avoidance language is concerned with hiding its referents, or hiding when things might be alike. But within this, when viewed in terms of a broader language ideology that foregrounds the effects that likeness and difference can have, it becomes clear that in Batek both forms of speech practice are concerned with *hiding likeness through likeness's very evocation*.

It is playing with this “minimal difference” which, in the context of the danger that impingement can have, is beautiful to Batek people. In a song first sung to me by Na? ?Aliw's sister Na? Srimjam, the properties of two similar patterns are described, and compared as being “minimally distinct” (*lɛc*) from one another.

<i>bliku?</i>	<i>blycəŋ</i>				
to.be.ringed	to.be.yellow				
“ringed and yellow”					
<i>lɛc</i>	<i>k = sək</i>	<i>ʔay</i>	<i>ʔmpat</i>	<i>syoŋ</i>	
IMPF-to.be.minimally.different	LOC = fur	body	four	fangs	
“it is minimally different to the fur of the one with four fangs”					[Na? Srimjam 2015]

The thing that is “ringed and yellow,” even though its name is not mentioned in the song, is the *taduk* flower. The one “with four fangs” is the tiger, again whose name is not in the song. It is thus in situations where things are alike—such as tigers and fruits, fruits and bags, or *taduk* and human—that you *should* be mindful of their difference, and thus articulate it without naming it. It is in this seeming paradox of hidden likeness that beauty is to be found.

This aesthetic is rooted in peoples' visions of what it is to be “co-present” with other entities (Chua 2015). Life involves a constant negation of relations to Others, whether flowers, fruits, fragrant leaves, the thunder-being, the fruit season, in-laws, or Batek friends in other camps. Often, this negotiation happens through the ways people speak, shaping the forms of likeness and difference that are present in any given moment. How people do this shows that people are concerned with how to allow for individuality, autonomy, and difference *within* how they relate to one another (Rudge 2019a, 292 on the Batek; see also Bird-David 2017, 14–15 on the Nayaka). This ideal vision of persons as separate yet related—like yet different—is further made evident by a general reluctance to speak on behalf of Others, particularly regarding matters of feeling.¹⁹ If persons are separate, then the projection of oneself into the mind of another, like naming them, or crossing shadows with them, can be a form of physical impingement (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015, 5). Instead, in the ways one speaks and acts, one should remain close, yet distinct—retaining one's alterity within affinity.

These concerns come to the fore at a different scale when Batek people discuss their relations with non-Batek people, or *gɔp*. *Gɔp* is a blanket word used to denote all non-Batek people, whether Chinese, Bangladeshi, or English, but it is also specifically used to denote Malay people. Batek people often live in close proximity to *gɔp* who may be only a 5-minute boat journey away. People may often work for *gɔp*. They enjoy listening to *gɔp* music and eating foodstuffs that they purchase from *gɔp*. Some people might make friends with *gɔp*, even on occasion visiting their homes, or eating in restaurants with them. The realm of *gɔp* is, however, considered to be markedly

distinct from that of the Batek, reflecting the wider distinctions that are drawn between the forest (*həp*) and town (*dəŋ*) (Lye [2004] 2005; see also Rudge 2017).

Yet, this separation is at once clearly articulated in ethical terms of good and bad, and at the same time ambiguous (Rudge 2019a). Among Batek groups in Pahang there are taboos that prohibit the imitation of *gəp*, whether stepping inside a mosque, or imitating Islamic prayer or Qur'anic recitation. These actions would be *tolah*: they risk causing an incurable sickness whereby the body rots around a living mind (K. M. Endicott 1979, 81).²⁰ But for some, who more frequently intermingle with *gəp*, it may become all the more difficult to pin down exactly where distinctions lie.²¹ As multiple factors, including the anxiety produced by forest degradation (Lye [2004] 2005), push some Batek people into increasing reliance on particular *gəp*, this concern to articulate one's difference from *gəp* comes to the fore.

Again, names are central for demarcating difference through likeness. Most (though not all) people have a Malay name as well as their Batek name. Sometimes, it is given to them by Batek parents, alongside their Batek name, but it is more likely given by Malay doctors. People often say they have these names to avoid feeling *yūp* ("embarrassed, shy, ashamed") were their real name to be uttered in front of *gəp*—the same feeling the *rimen* cicada might have were its name uttered. While many people spend a lot of time among *gəp*, shielding their Batek names is a way that people retain distinction while interacting with and among *gəp*—using names that are like theirs.

The vision of social life enacted through iconicity and avoidance is thus of social relations "being built out of gripping, uncertain engagement with persons markedly strange to oneself" (Stasch 2003, 317 on the Korowai). However, the *degree* to which people are "markedly strange" is not always the same. Being "Batek" is not enough to guarantee that your level of strangeness will not be so much that you cannot be spoken to after a long absence. And, in the case of some *gəp*—with whom people may have shared food and memories, perhaps watching one another's children grow up from opposite sides of the river—likeness and affinity might sometimes be foregrounded. It is achieving this balance of co-existing familiarity and distance which is central not only to maintaining autonomy in Batek interpersonal relations among one another but also for how Batek navigate their relationships with *gəp*.

This prompts further consideration of the moments when likeness and difference may coexist. A more cautious approach to understanding ideas of "likeness" and "difference" opens up new lines of thinking in relation to not only how speech practices such as iconicity and avoidance are understood but also in relation to how people actively shape their relationships with Others through speech. This follows a trajectory laid out by Stasch, who, based on Korowai preoccupations with Otherness, as made evident through speech and through other practices, argues that the very idea of Otherness needs to be re-considered in light of its potential as a mode of relating. Thus, one might see "separateness as a relation" (Stasch 2003). Batek notions of "like" and "different" add a further dimension to these discussions, in which Otherness can be viewed in the light of the familiarity that it can entail, just as likeness might be considered in terms of how differences are maintained within it. More than seeing it as having the capacity to be a mode of relating, it is therefore important to ask what Otherness itself *is*. The answer, in Batek, demonstrates that Otherness, or difference, can contain an element of likeness within it. It is these moments of co-existing likeness and difference which, for the Batek, often acquire aesthetic value, all the while avoiding the danger of more extreme likenesses or differences that might invoke danger or shyness and embarrassment rather than beauty.

Understanding these moments in which likeness and difference can coexist—rather than being a stark binary—is important. The work of anthropologists in this process should not be underplayed, as conventional anthropological understandings of difference have often at the same time both familiarized Otherness and exoticized sameness (Restrepo and Escobar 2005, 105). To achieve the pluralization of anthropological discourse that is necessary to get past troubling forms of Othering (Restrepo and Escobar 2005, 99), it is important to go beyond reproducing the cliché of "making the

strange familiar and the familiar strange." In assessing the "truth value" of Others in terms of radical alterity (Restrepo and Escobar 2005, 118), the binaries between "self" and "Other," and "us" and "them" that anthropology needs to challenge are reproduced (Bessire and Bond 2014; Allen and Jobson 2016; Chua 2015).

Similar examples of binary thinking directly affect Batek people, causing them to fall foul of conceptual boundaries between wild and tame, indigenous and scientific, unchanging and progressive, and even human and animal. This has material effects on people's day-to-day lives, both historically and in the present day (Lye [2002] 2003). For example, Othering binaries have been fundamental to conservation planning (Lye [2002] 2003; 2011). Lye has described how the boundaries that demarcate the National Park (Taman Negara),²² in and around which many Batek dwell, reify the conceptual distinction between which people are "traditional" and "wild" (and so dwell inside the park), in contrast to the rest of progressive, modern, urban Malaysia (Lye [2002] 2003).²³ Since the Batek are thus viewed as wildlife, they can more easily be excluded from political life (Lye [2002] 2003, 163–64): "in conservation, boundaries are meant to keep animals in and people out. Politically, boundaries are meant to keep the *right* people in and the wrong people out" (Lye [2002] 2003, 179). Thus, the "theoretical concepts" that make up these conceptual binaries come to "serve a political purpose" that excludes the Batek (Lye [2002] 2003, 163), and that also infuse many of the interactions that Batek people have with non-Batek in even the most mundane of contexts: Na? ?Aliw described how when they were children, on the occasions that she and her peers attended the local *gɔp* school they were referred to as like "monitor lizards" and "monkeys" by their teachers and classmates. Given the care Batek people take over the effects of likeness and difference, this is particularly troubling. Feelings of *yũp* ("shyness, shame, embarrassment") were such that they stopped attending the school.

Yet despite the problems that binary ideas of "us" and "them" cause, ontological anthropology foregrounds on the "radical alterity" that is made known by "moments of ethnographic 'revelation'—in which unanticipated, previously inconceivable things become apparent" (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2009). In thus revealing the radical unfamiliarity and incommensurability of Other worlds, they argue that new theoretical and conceptual anthropological claims can be made (Chua 2015, 645). But this can reinforce deceptively simplistic understandings of "The West" and "the rest," "anthropologists" and "their interlocutors," or "us" and "them"—the latter of each of these two binaries providing the conceptual inspiration through which to consider what might be "otherwise" (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros De Castro 2014). But perhaps notions that some humans might inhabit ontologically Other worlds need not be the only "seed of anthropological inspiration" (Chua 2015, 654). Instead, I propose that attending to the question of what difference *is*, alongside attuning to the relational spaces that are created through how people negotiate likeness and difference, can offer anthropological paradigms that move beyond these often-harmful conceptual binaries.

Batek speech practices are an example of these kinds of relational space that make evident how concepts of likeness and difference are not given. Ways of speaking can shape who is like who, and what is like what, and to what degree—and thus they can be used as strategies for maintaining autonomy from Others in boundary contexts such as the Batek's. Understanding likeness and difference, and the boundaries between self, Other, us, and them, that they are implicated with, demonstrates that these concepts are coexisting and constantly shifting in focus. This might, therefore, be a useful starting point from which to re-envision anthropology's position within the "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991). Attention to the complexities of what it means to be like and different might allow anthropology to reach beyond dualistic frameworks that risk portraying peoples as inhabiting divergent, ontologically isolable worlds (Povinelli 2002). To move toward other possibilities,²⁴ detailed attention to the ways entities—human and non-human, or Batek and *gɔp*—act on and interact with one another through their own careful negotiations of moments that they are like and

different can provide a new blueprint in which anthropology might thus think more closely and more context specifically about Otherness and what it does (Trouillot 1991, 18). This is necessary as Batek examples show how a meta-anthropological paradigm that searches for radical alterity is consistent with—and may have helped to produce—a real-life situation where their teachers carelessly compare Batek children to monkeys and monitor lizards.²⁵ A new context-driven approach is required. Among Batek people, looking to day-to-day notions of when things and people are like but different demonstrates that rather than always being clear-cut categories, likeness and difference can be minimal. This subtlety is carefully negotiated such that people achieve a life that is lived autonomously, yet in relation, to Others. Both when people speak and when they interact with other entities, likeness and difference can move apart and come together in different moments with profound consequences.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout.
2. Glosses are the author's own, see Rudge (2017, 29–43) for a preliminary phoneme inventory, and brief discussion of morphological processes, word formation, word classes, and derivational morphology in Batek.
3. The orthography is adapted from practical orthographies used to transcribe Aslian languages. Symbols used adhere to the International Phonetic Alphabet, with some alterations that are in keeping with Aslian standards (Kruspe, Burenhult, and Wnuk 2015, 424). The syllable realized as /j/, the voiced palatal stop, is represented orthographically as /j/, the syllable realized as /j/ is represented by /y/, and the syllable realized as /ɛ/ (or its allophone [ɛ]) is represented by /r/ in the orthography.
4. Research took place for a total of 18 months spanning periods between February 2014 and July 2015, with further data collected in April–May 2016 and August 2018.
5. For similar ethnographic examples, see Walker (2018), High (2018), Stasch (2003), and Duranti (1993b).
6. Latin: *Parkia speciosa*, Malay: *petai*, colloquial English: “bitter bean” or “stink bean.”
7. For example, it cannot be eaten by menstruating women, it cannot be stepped over, and it cannot be thrown or mocked for fear of causing madness.
8. By extension, I am not arguing for a Whorfian understanding of this term.
9. Ingold has similarly pointed out the relationship between likeness and difference: “difference and similarity, becoming other and coming together, go hand in hand” (Ingold 2018, 50).
10. The word also has this meaning in Jahai (Burenhult 2005, 173). In Jedek, the word *llec* has the meaning of “to be wrong” and is a possible example of a fossilized imperfective morpheme acting on an archaic root **lec* that no longer exists in contemporary Jedek (Yager and Burenhult 2017, 515).

11. In my use of this term I do not wish to make a link to older structural-anthropological ideas that taboos serve to ensure order and distinction (Douglas 2015). Rather, I intend a description of the phonological experience of “minimal difference” in Batek speech.

12. A pseudonym.

13. It is also a property of some nouns, in particular bird and insect names (Rudge 2019b; Lye [2004] 2005, 152).

14. Similar associations with the bilabial fricative are present in Maniq (Wnuk 2016, 91) and Jahai (Burenhult 2005, 28).

15. While Batek also contains diagrammatic iconicity, the focus here is on imagic iconicity. Other Asian languages, notably Semelai (Tufvesson 2011) and Maniq (Wnuk 2016, 89–91), also contain diagrammatic iconicity.

16. A pseudonym.

17. See (Rudge 2017, 38–39) for a discussion of types of causative affix in Batek.

18. See (Rudge 2017, 37–38) for discussion of the imperfective.

19. In a manner not dissimilar to opacity “doctrines” in Melanesia (Robbins 2008; Stasch 2008; Schieffelin 2008).

20. Malay *tulah*.

21. See also Bashkow on the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea (Bashkow 2006).

22. The park was originally named the “King George V National Park” when it was first created in 1938–1939 to commemorate the colonial King’s silver jubilee. The park covers much, but not all, of the Batek’s ancestral territories.

23. See Cronon (1996) for a broader discussion of the colonial histories of the “wilderness” concept.

24. This may enable what Verran terms “postcolonial moments”: “ways of telling differences and sameness in new ways” that “increase the possibilities for cooperation while respecting difference.” This new understanding of “sameness” “enables difference to be collectively enacted” (Verran 2002, 729).

25. See Manickam (2015) for a full discussion of some racial stereotypes in Malaysia as rooted in colonial anthropology, alongside Endicott ([1970] 1985) for discussion of animal/spirit stereotypes of Semang peoples such as the Batek in Malay magic.

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