anthropologist's observation or the actor's comments. One does not need to be a good potter to describe pottery, but some kind of apprenticeship can be a useful tool in understanding technical processes, allowing the formulation of specific questions. This also gives access to the implicit knowledge mentioned above.

It is important for documenting technical activities and their links to other social spheres of activity to collect descriptions (plural!) of technical activities, including comments at the particular moment of that activity. More generally, it is interesting to know what part of a technical activity is verbalized, never mentioned, or is forbidden to be mentioned. Besides the identification of variants—which really constitute the bulk of the data analysed—the identification of 'strategic operations' (Lemonnier 1992: 21–4) is of importance. These are particular actions or steps in an operational sequence that cannot be delayed or profoundly modified without jeopardizing the whole process at hand. It is interesting to know both what operations are considered to be 'strategic' and how those operations that are crucial from a physical point of view are dealt with. This is of course where technical specialists and social hierarchies may enter the picture.

Neither the objects nor the physical actions of the actors manipulating them say things plainly about the 'meanings' in question, particularly when artefacts lack any decoration. To have people describe in their
p. 316 own words what they are doing is ↳ of utmost importance because, on the one hand, they show their personal organization strategies for an operational sequence, and, on the other, they may both emphasize or refrain from commenting particular aspects of the technique (or object) in question.

Therefore, it is only by listening to what people say about these artefacts and technical activities, as well as what they say in any of the activities which are related to them in some way or another, that it is possible to grasp the complex insertion of technical behaviour within various other social logics, including their role in non-verbal communication. Together with a precise understanding of the physical (mechanical etc.) aspects of an artefact, linguistics is a way to enquire into the 'bundle' of qualities (Keane 2006b) within an object which are ready to be 'chosen' by members of a given culture, either to act on the matter in a given way and with a certain efficacy, or to include this artefact or material in a particular system of meaning and/or social relations.

For instance, when the Ankave-Anga of Papua New Guinea use a given plant (cordylines) as fences, territory markers, and key element of sacred sites, they elaborate on one of the inherent qualities of that particular plant, which is its vegetative reproduction. It is plausible that the cordylines used today are the clones of those that grew on an ancestral spot, according to myth. The perception of a particular characteristic of the plant therefore reinforces the veracity of the myth as well as the social efficacy of the artefacts made with the plant.

It is hardly necessary to remark that, in the present state of the anthropology of techniques and objects, no particular approach is more appropriate than another in understanding what people exactly 'do' when they act on the material world. The main challenge, now, is to understand how the phenomena addressed by the various possible approaches are, indeed, linked together within a technical action. Paying attention to the way people 'tell' their techniques is an essential part of this program.