Activating Ecological Knowledge: Navigation Practices in the Kalahari Desert

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Action Theory and Ecological Knowledge

We are interested in developing an action theory that examines the interplay between language use and the structure of the environment in which the action occurs (Goodwin, 2000; Nonaka & Takada, 2004; Takada, submitted). This perspective does not mix with the “genealogical model” in which knowledge is seen as being independent of the environment and passed down from generation to generation. Rather, it is understood that the essence of practitioners’ ecological knowledge emerges through a particular style of social interaction, both of which have evolved developmentally, through a history of involvement with the land and its inhabitants (Ingold, 2004). This paper examines the actual navigation practices of two groups of San (the |Gui and ||Gana), who once lived a nomadic life in the Kalahari Desert, in order to elaborate the theoretical perspective outlined above.

Navigation practices of the |Gui / ||Gana

The vast folk knowledge of the |Gui / ||Gana is inseparable from their arid environment. We have shown that their spatial cognition is structured by a multi-scaled integration of folk knowledge, which represents their “traditional” living area (Figure 1). The knowledge system may be summarized as follows: (1) Understanding places where there are few obstacles - the |Gui / ||Gana find these points quickly when they move through the bushveld; (2) Immense knowledge of specific trees, which are used as landmarks in the bushveld; (3) Understanding woodlands and basins as nodes in the environment - these areas provide valuable resources for the |Gui / ||Gana, and were previously used as campsites for their nomadic lifestyle; and (4) Conceptualization of sequences of woodlands or basins with reference to ecological features - such sequences are sometimes used as routes for nomadic movement.

Analysis of their conversation indicates that a distinct style of social interaction forms the basis for activating this knowledge. For example, the tactical use of various semiotic resources, especially gestures and verbal demonstratives, is crucial for allowing an experienced navigator to display directional markers effectively (see also Takada, in press). Moreover, the people have a markedly sympathetic attitude toward the environment and achieve a mutual understanding with each other on this basis; in other words, they develop intersubjectivity in the course of their navigation-related activities.

This study demonstrates, therefore, that the natural environment of the Kalahari Desert, folk knowledge, and a specific style of social interaction are interwoven in the navigation practices of the |Gui / ||Gana. By identifying the complex reciprocity of these features, it will be possible to describe a highly sophisticated realization of the human-environment relationship.

Figure 1: Mental map of the |Gui / ||Gana

References


