

Action matters: Visible representation of kinship in Central and Northern Australia

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Many of us now take it for granted that human interaction is essentially multimodal. As well as speaking or using a sign language, people point, manipulate objects with their hands, and create maps, diagrams and other graphic traces on a range of surfaces. But answers to questions of how cross-modal and 'polysemiotic' integration is achieved, when it is preferred, and what communicative 'systems' can go together remain more elusive. In this presentation I explore these questions by focusing on kinship, a key domain long investigated by anthropologists and linguists alike. The examples are drawn from the rich and complex communicative environment of Central and Northern Australia where Indigenous peoples employ various forms of what is locally termed 'action' (sign and gesture) alongside speech and drawing practices. I argue that considering these actions, that either accompany speech or replace it, enhances understandings of the terminologies and conceptual structures of kinship and provides an opportunity to move beyond "the anthropology of words" (MacDougall, 1997).

I foreground this discussion by giving a brief overview of these Australian kinship systems. I then discuss three main modes of representation. The conventionalised lexicon of 'alternate' sign languages throws light on the underlying features of kinship, as well as providing visible instantiations of embodied forms of social interaction (Kendon, 1988; Green, Bauer, Gaby & Ellis, in press). Co-speech gestures that accompany spoken kin terms illuminate aspects of their meanings that are not apparent if we consider speech alone (Enfield, 2005, 2009). Finally, yet another perspective is provided by semi-permanent and ephemeral graphic representations of kinship found in dynamic narrative practices such as sand drawing (Green, 2014), children's games about kin (Ellis, Green & Kral, 2017), and in the repertoires of desert artists. A comparison of these modes of representation, and the ways they work together, provides an opportunity to examine cross-modal interaction and diversity in a domain of core cultural salience.