

Drawn from the Ground: Sound, Sign and Inscription in Central Australian Sand Stories

by Jennifer Green

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This book is a definitive study of the Arrernte art of *tyepety* or ‘sand stories’ from Central Australia. It draws on a vast corpus of data that has been collected over a 30-year period of collaboration between the author Jennifer Green and Arrernte-speaking people, covering a range of research projects in linguistics, arts and culture. The book takes a multimodal and interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of communication and examines the total effect of individual semiotic systems in interaction. In the case of Arrernte sand drawings, this involves analysing the complementarity of both verbal and visual elements – gesture, physical props, conventional sign language, speech (including intonational features) and song. The variation in the granularity of description is impressive, both from methodological and theoretical perspectives. The objective of the book is to examine the way in which the sequential and co-occurring elements of semiotic bricolage all interact to form a unified semantic product. At a more general level, the objective is to expand the scope of linguistics by including ‘dynamic movements in a definition of language and social action’ thus challenging mainstream study of language that has to date largely overlooked the relationship between vocal and visual elements of communication (p. 3).

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the thematic content of sand stories and a classification of story styles and the tools and physical props used during performance. Sand drawing and narration would appear to be widespread throughout Aboriginal Australia, with documentation existing for Arrernte and Western Desert peoples, the Kukatja and Walmajarri people of the Balgo

region in Western Australia and western Queensland and northern New South Wales groups. Apart from a few anthropological papers and references to this art form, sand drawing performance has largely escaped the notoriety that other Indigenous Australian art traditions have enjoyed. Green's volume remedies this oversight.

Chapter 3 describes the meticulous and painstaking methodology used to record, transcribe and annotate sand stories. In documenting sand story performances, Green and her colleagues use a number of video cameras which simultaneously record performances from different angles (for example, from above and in front of a performer) in order to maximise the capture of both vocal and kinesic content and their coordination. Using the linguistic annotation tool ELAN, Green has devised an intricate system for annotation of multiple video recordings with a notation system that encompasses all semiotic systems – drawing, gestural strokes, speech and the both inter- and intra-modal transitions. It is an innovative and comprehensive methodology.

Chapter 4 effectively examines variation amongst performers to test the extent of conventionalisation of the graphic elements of a performance and concludes thematic continuity is canonical but also open to innovation.

In Chapter 5 we zoom in further on sign conventionalisation to examine those signs unique to sand story performance that contrast with the alternative set of signs used in the broader lexicon of Arrernte sign language. An important contribution in this chapter is an examination of the pragmatics of conventionalised signs and spontaneous gesture and the role that context plays in the interpretation of these co-present communication modes.

The internal structure of the narratives themselves are examined in Chapter 6 through a frame analysis of the temporal sequencing of sand drawing narratives. Together with lexical items that are concerned with sequential structure, the role of hand pointing and other forms of non-verbal deixis are important in signalling transitions from one episode to the next. This is also the chapter that provides the best examples of text to illustrate the sort of language used in these narratives, but in keeping with the focus of the book, these examples are always given in the context of their relationship to other communication modes.

'Vocal style in sand stories' is the title of Chapter 7 but it deals exclusively with the place of song or song-like speech in sand drawing performances. Green describes what appears to be a song-like form of speech that is unique to sand drawing in that there are also formal differences between this type of sung speech and that of other song genres (see p. 197). From all angles of analysis, sand drawing performance is a distinct semiotic system composed of combinations of elements from other discrete semiotic systems of communication, but these

elements also reveal an extraordinary range of typological variation. For example, in Chapter 7 we are provided with examples of sand drawing performances that demonstrate how ordinary speech morphs into rhythmic speech with or without melody and in some other stories, the narrative is totally sung. The act of drawing and accompanying gestures are also subject to variations that might include the marking movements of the hand and wire set to rhythmic motion.

The presentation of the data reflects these multimodal and variant elements. There are numerous line drawings of the bodies of performers indicating corporal movement and signing. For such a visually rich form of communication the book is appropriately sprinkled with photographs and colour plates of related artworks to which sand drawing has a close relationship. There are also many diagrams and photographs that illustrate the sequencing of sand markings, the directions of the marking, the combinatorial grammar and hierarchical structure of visual units (or 'V-Units') and the tension between convention and innovation. There are also more traditional interlinear transcripts of the speech used in narratives and, especially in Chapter 7, there are musical transcriptions of songs.

The final chapter offers some concluding reflections on the dynamic interaction of the corporeal signs of speech, song, gesture, markings or inscriptions together with other signs in the environment. This comprehensive and challenging approach to a multimodal study of human communication requires skills that go beyond the usual training and field experience of most linguists. Green has drawn on many decades of field work and life experience working with the Indigenous people of Central Australia. The depth of these relationships and the innovative analysis combine to make this an important study that is set to influence future research on multimodal approaches to human communication.

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