

Etic and emic approaches to research on Murrinhpatha spatial language

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Etic approaches to language research are those that import the toolkits, methodologies, categories and assumptions associated with a particular research paradigm into new communities, with the expectation that participants will think or behave in certain ways, or that the language will conform—to a lesser or greater degree—to a small set of typological prototypes. *Emic approaches*, on the other hand, are ‘bottom up’ approaches that seek to describe the workings of a language on its own terms, and to uncover the ethno-methods that underpin the use of the language by community members, preferably when conducting relatively ordinary activities and with minimally intrusive methods (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Moerman, 1988; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Floyd, 2021). With typological comparability as a goal, etic approaches run the risk of confirmation bias, where apparently analogous similarities to previously described populations (or their use of linguistic systems) are taken at first glance to be unlike X or similar to Y; meanwhile endogenous linguistic practices and potentially unique aspects of the linguistic system remain under-described or potentially undiscovered.

In this presentation, we report on a variety of research methods and their contributions toward elucidating Murrinhpatha speakers’ practices for referring to places, persons and objects, and into the underlying Murrinhpatha spatial system. The emic approaches include the Placename Avoidance Task (Blythe et al., 2016), the ‘geospatial’ perspective on pointing in face-to-face conversation (Blythe et al., 2024; Possemato et al., 2021), and the Rotating Scene Machine (Blythe et al., 2022). The etic approaches include *animals-in-a-row* (Levinson & Schmitt, 1993) and the director-matching task *man-and-tree* (Levinson et al., 1992). In our recent study the latter task required considerable relaxation of the research protocol in order to accommodate directional points and depictive gestures.

The central concerns of our presentation are whether the types of linguistic data we collect in our documentation endeavours provide authentic accounts of the use of a language under investigation, and how much store should we place on data that is generated by activities that are designed to yield specific types of data that facilitate comparability with previously described linguistic systems. If particular linguistic practices emerge only under extraordinary conditions, should the observed practices be taken as representative indications of what users of the language are capable of producing under those particular conditions, perhaps as low frequency items, or should they be taken as extraordinary outputs which are coerced through the alien activities in which users of a language are engaged? While the various methods are all contributing toward the overall research program, questions remain surrounding ecological validity, particularly with regard to certain linguistic constructions having very different frequencies in these disparate sorts of data.

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