

Cognitive Maps in Dene and Eipo

How do people of different cultures understand and talk about space? In this talk I will focus on concepts of space and topography in two unrelated languages. Eipomek is spoken in the central mountains of the Province of Papua (West New Guinea), and Dene is spoken in the prairies of Cold Lake, Alberta (Canada). The paper explores the degree to which environmental experience of landmarks and spatial orientation is reflected as cultural-specific cognitive maps. The hypothesis is that non-linguistic information as cultural practice has its impact upon spatial language and cognitive maps. Furthermore, topographical information of the immediate environment in particular is represented as cognitive maps constituting gestalt-like representations. Different ethnographic grammars, historical texts, and films serve as empirical background showing the influence and constructive process of environmental landmarks upon shaping of spatial categorization. Hence, the general aim is to survey some fundamental spatial notions based on regional landmarks. Landmarks are defined as any kind of cultural-specific environmental external reference points, e.g., mountains, rivers, houses, rocks or a tree. They are point references external to the person. In a city, landmarks may be distant buildings or geographical features that can be seen from many angles and distances, or they may be primarily local such as buildings, signs, trees, storefronts, doorknobs, or other urban details. These landmarks profile and determine a detailed topographical cognitive map of the environment as externally represented via language and other semiotic practices. Indeed, the presented data show a dense linguistic system of topographical mental models represented, e.g., in toponyms and frames of reference.