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Studying string figure-making as a tool of language documentation

ABSTRACT

The practice of making string figures, often called ‘cat’s cradle’, can be found all over the world, and is particularly widespread in Melanesia. For ethno-mathematicians the ‘procedures’, i.e. the ordered series of moves, and the resultant string figures represent intellectual processes that form part of a practice of recreational mathematics. In contrast, modern anthropologists focus on the social and cultural aspects of string figures, including their associations with other cultural practices, with the local mythology, songs, etc. Despite this clear link to language, few linguists have studied string figures, and those who have, focus primarily on these accompanying songs and texts. This paper argues that the study of string figure-making can be an important aspect of language documentation not just through the documentation and analysis of the accompanying oral literatures, but also as a mechanism for documenting other speech types through recordings of the naturalistic speech that surrounds the string figure-making process.

As part of my current project, I’ve been studying string figure-making among the Awiakay in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, and my recent fieldwork has revealed how fruitful video recordings of this practice can be for language documentation. The practice of making string figures provides data on aspects of the Awiakay language through the occasional presence of explanations and formulaic expressions associated with certain figures. However, the video recordings of string figure-making also provide us with an abundance of naturalistic speech, something that is relevant even in societies where string figure-making is not accompanied at all by specific oral practices. For example, much of these linguistic data in the Awiakay case are instructions – both verbal and gestural – which onlookers readily give to the performer even before they get confused or stuck. This paper explores the Awiakay genre of giving instructions, using video excerpts of string figure-making to analyse what type of instructions are usually given verbally and which ones require gestures. In turn, these discussions that surround the practice of making string figures – including instructions to the performer – also provide an additional window into the intellectual processes that underpin the practice.