

# Paamese sand drawings: insights into the polysemiotic nature of human communication and revitalization efforts of an endangered practice

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We present the analysis of 20 hours of spoken, gestural, and pictorial data of Paamese sand drawings, a unique form of communication, practiced by only four elder storytellers on Paama, Vanuatu. This critically endangered communicative tradition provides a unique opportunity to study the inherently polysemiotic (speech, gesture, drawing) & multimodal (hearing, sight, touch) nature of human communication. Although Paamese sand drawings are unique in many respects, they display patterns found across many different cultures: different kinds of semiotic resources are recruited and combined, when it comes to transmitting complex knowledge such as moral values (DeMarrais *et al.* 1992, Green, 2014), kinship structures (Dousset 2003, Enfield 2005, Gaby 2016), or mathematical concepts (Ochs et al. 1996). Analyzing language within its broader polysemiotic and cultural dimensions allows revealing “organizing principles, which would otherwise be invisible” (Gaby 2016, p.160). In accordance with the cognitive linguistic perspective, it is increasingly being acknowledged that human communication involves a number of interacting resources for meaning-making, and that an approach with adequate theoretical and methodological tools is required in order to provide insights into the nature of this process. The methods employed to annotate and analyze the polysemiotic and multimodal data are inspired from Green’s (2014) methodology and adapted to the cultural specificity of Paamese sand drawings.

Studies of minority languages have not only played a significant role in the inception of Cognitive Linguistics four decades ago, but have continuously provided researchers with unique insights into the study of language ever since (Rice 2017). The study presented here follows this tradition, but we would also like to start a discussion on how to make the collaboration with indigenous communities a more balanced two-way relationship. These UNESCO listed mnemonic devices for local histories, indigenous cosmologies, kinship systems, and scientific knowledge are only practiced by four Paamese elders and thus critically endangered. We also propose methods to incorporate the study of sand drawings into school curricula in their essential dynamic nature and cultural context in an attempt to support its revitalization.

## References

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