

TALK

UNIVERSAL EMPHRONESIS/TOM AS SHOWN IN THE LIFE AND LANGUAGE OF THE EIPO, MOUNTAIN PAPUANS OF WEST-NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

One of the questions keeping anthropologists busy is why our ancestors developed brains capable of the manifold amazing performances typical for our species, among them symbolic communication, semantic language and emphronesis, the ability of reading another person's mind (so called "Theory of Mind"). Primates and other mammals, especially dogs, have a capacity for primordial emphronesis, i.e. they are able to guess and understand the thoughts, aims etc. of another individual, even of a different species. Tests involving "false belief" are used to identify the onset of this ability in children. One avenue to explore the extent of emphronesis is to look at respective terms reflecting, on an emic meta-level, the forms of this cognitive power in a given language. I will present results of analyzing the Trans-New-Guinea Papuan Eipo language, unknown until 1974 and laid down in a dictionary in 1983 (Heeschen & Schiefenhövel), as well as documents of everyday behaviour to discuss the Eipo concept and usage of emphronesis.

"Mind" (kanye), in the sense of knowing, understanding, reflecting, assessing, thinking..., is a concept very prominent in the Eipo language: it comprises virtual representations of real things, like "shadow", and "echo", and, in particular, various mental processes. Other words, like teneb-, usually verbs, describe the functions of gaining insight, thinking things through, understanding another person. The most convincing proof of mutual emphronesis was the process of learning, monolingually, the Eipo language. Reading each other's mind turned out to be relatively easy - disproving the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of cultural relativism.