

Edwin Hutchins, *Culture and Inference*. Cognitive Science Series, 2. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. Pp. x, 143. \$14.00.

This is an intriguing little book in which Edwin Hutchins attempts to delineate how Trobriand islanders “go about knowing what they know” such that they can use their knowledge. His success depends on recognizing the importance of inference as a cognitive process and upon a parsimonious, explicit method for identifying and representing that process *in the natural setting of human interaction*. After a brief discussion of inference as a universal (but transparent) cognitive process, he demonstrates its importance using data on Trobriand land disputes. He describes the Trobriand land tenure system and then presents a model for representing the kinds of inferences that are possible within that system. Applying the model to one of three recorded land disputes, he presents the text of the dispute hearing with an analysis of each inference embedded in the text. He carefully differentiates claims based on strong inferences from those based on weak (plausible, sensible) inferences, showing how counter-argument strategies exploit these differences and effect the outcome of the hearing. In a terse conclusion, Hutchins assesses the implications of inference for issues such as reconstructing abbreviated discourse, imputing motives, expectations and their violation, for example, as inherent in thinking about culture as code.

This is an important book for Pacific scholars and for those interested in culture theory. Not only does it answer questions that Malinowski left dangling, but it is also of comparative significance for the large literature on land tenure and dispute management in Oceania. Most of all, this is an important work for culture and cognitive theory and method, demonstrat-

ing that current work in artificial intelligence provides useful methods for discovering and representing those implicit assumptions by which people shape their perceptions and responses to them. The demonstration is accomplished clearly and with refreshing verbal economy.

The book is too short, leaving important questions unanswered. It would be useful to know how the method for representing inference was derived and the extent to which the interviews on the land disputes served to formulate the method or vice-versa. The case presented is the simplest of three cases in order to demonstrate the utility of representing the logic of inference. Do the other cases involve simply more information to process, or do they add a second logical schema and, thus, a second level of complexity? My feeling after reading the book is, "I read it, and I liked it. But you still owe me one."

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