

Signs and Sight in Southern Uganda

Representing Perception in Ordinary Conversation

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ABSTRACT Conversations in Luganda, a widely-spoken language in the East African nation of Uganda, frequently include discussions and evaluations of signs — readily observable phenomena that are understood to predict events that will soon take place. A corpus of material on this topic is examined, consisting of twenty signs and of four conversations in which these signs are discussed. Certain links are noted between specific sensory modes and these signs. The cultural significance of these sensory modes supports the cultural understanding that these signs are publicly available, rather than being restricted to certain individuals or conditions. It also supports the active discussion, rather than passive acceptance, of claims that individuals make to observing and interpreting signs. In this way, the cultural dimensions of sensory modes influence human perception and experience, and also support the public sphere of debates about the significance of events and about courses of action.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the topic of the ethnography of the senses through the examination of a body of material that is structured culturally and linguistically. This body of material, drawn from field work that we have conducted in Uganda, centers on a set of beliefs that certain sensory perceptions (mostly, but not exclusively, of external objects) are indications that specific events will take place in the near future. We examine the beliefs themselves, and also review a set of conversations in which individuals discuss particular instances of such perceptions.

Though many anthropologists might classify this body of material as ‘traditional knowledge’ or ‘folk belief’ or ‘cosmology’, and center their analysis of it on cognition and epistemology, we argue that this material offers novel and interesting insights into the realms of sensation and perception as well. More specifically, we present the ways in which these specific cultural premises and forms can influence human sensation and perception. We note that this material contrasts with some of the other essays in this volume, which focus on the direct analysis of sensory experience. We suggest that these more direct analyses can be complemented by work like our own, that studies culturally codified systems of thinking and talking about sensory experience.

More concretely, we examine several aspects of a means that speakers of Luganda, a major language in Uganda, use to describe, present and draw on sense perceptions. This means is the *akabonero* (plural, *obubonero*), a word derived from the verb *kubona*, to see. Ugandans who are bilingual in Luganda and English often translate

akabonero as ‘sign.’ Following this practice, we sometimes use the English word ‘sign’ in this paper to refer to it. To explore these points, we open with a discussion of the classification of sensory modes in Luganda, and then continue with an examination of some representative *obubonero* and a few conversations, in which they are discussed. We close with some reflections and conclusions.

Sensory modes in Luganda

Though sensory modes are, in some ways, part of the biological substrate of our species, shared by all human groups, there is great variation in the understandings of these modes — and therefore in the experience and the use of these modes — in different cultures and, as Jay (1993) shows in his magisterial study of vision in modern French thought, in different historical periods as well. To examine these differences, one can turn to a consideration of some simple features of language. One can list the verbs that are used in a specific language to describe the act of perception that links the perceiver and the object, and study the patterns of usage of these verbs. One can also examine the ways in which speakers of a language draw upon sensory modes as source domains for metaphors that describe less immediate forms of perception and knowledge. These features are connected to aspects of ordinary conversation in which speakers seek to persuade others of their beliefs and of the value of proposed courses of action.

Luganda, the most widely spoken Bantu language in Uganda, offers an interesting and instructive case of these relations. We open with a comparison of the verbs of sense in English and Luganda. English-speakers share a common-sense understanding that able-bodied humans are endowed with five senses, sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch; to these senses correspond the verbs to see, to hear, to taste, to smell and to feel. They are nearly always listed with seeing first and hearing second, though the others are not ordered as consistently. These words all apply to objects external to the body and the self of the observer, and the first two senses are ones that apply to objects at some distance from the body. Psychologists note at least two other senses, oriented internally rather than externally, the sense of balance or equilibrium, and *proprioception*, the awareness of the position of the body and its parts in space; some claim that hunger and thirst are senses as well. When these additional senses are discussed by most English-speakers, they are usually treated as a kind of feeling: ‘I feel dizzy.’

In Luganda, the actions of perceiving that correspond to the English ‘to see’ are divided between two verbs, *kulaba* and *kubona*. The basic difference between them is in the nature of the objects of perception. The former, *kulaba*, is used for permanent and stable entities such as land, human beings, tables, books and the like. The latter verb, *kubona*, is used for objects that appear and disappear. There are a number of common objects in the sky for which it is used, such as the moon and planets, and also shooting stars, which are called ‘comets’ in Ugandan English. This verb can also be used for fire, fog and other objects that are not always present and tangible.

There are a number of occasions in which either verb could be used, depending on

the particular circumstances. Thus, *kubona* could be used to emphasize the length of absence that preceded the reappearance of a physically stable entity for which *kulaba* could otherwise be used. *Kulaba* would ordinarily be used to refer to seeing a friend or relative who lives near the speaker, but *kubona* will be used to refer to a friend or a relative who suddenly appears after a long absence. There are some creatures, such as ants, which appear seasonally after being absent a long time, to which the verb *kubona* applies. Even a product that suddenly comes on the market in large stocks after being unavailable for some time will be described with *kubona*. In effect, the word is used in reference to things which are seen suddenly and which are also expected to disappear after some time.

By contrast, *kulaba* could be used to emphasize the long duration of a condition that is in its nature temporary. *Kulaba* is also used in cases where one encounters serious trouble, suffering, pain, etc. For example, to render in Luganda, ‘In Iraq, there is a lot of suffering’ one would say *mu Iraq, waliyo okulaba ennaku kungi*. In this example, ‘suffering’ is *okulaba ennaku*, literally meaning ‘seeing suffering’. In other words, in Luganda, bad experiences are ‘seen’. In fact, to say ‘I’m sorry’ or to express shared feelings of sympathy, one says *ng’olabye*, literally meaning ‘you have seen’. *Kulaba* is used for even brief or transitory negative experiences, perhaps to emphasize the speaker’s recognition of their harshness; *kubona* can be used for positive experiences, such as happiness, pleasure or good fortune, that come after a long period and that may not remain very long. From *kubona*, the word *akabonero* (plural *obubonero*) is derived, to which we will return later.

The Luganda verbs *kuloza* and *kuwunyiriza* correspond fairly closely to the English ‘to taste’ and ‘to smell’.¹ The verbs for hearing and touch are different, though. The Luganda verb *kuwulira* covers the semantic space of hearing in English, and also includes what could be called feeling-with-the-whole-body or feeling-at-a-distance: feeling that the sun is warm, or that a wind is cold.² The verb *kukwatako* refers to touching objects, especially with the hand, but also with other parts of the body. Touching with the hand is a core referent, since the verb derives from the stem *kwata* (touch/hold), with the suffix *-ko*, which means ‘on’. The experiences of balance and proprioception are covered by *kuwulira*, which suggests that the feeling-with-the-whole-body is part of the meaning.

We note that *kuwulira* can serve as a general verb ‘to sense,’ much like the English verb ‘to feel’. The core sense of the English verb ‘to feel’ lies near touch, while the core of *kuwulira* lies near hearing.³ It is interesting to note that neither English nor Luganda use sight as the sense that is metonymically extended to other senses, even though it is the most valued sense in both cultures. We speculate that sight may be linked with the agency of the person who senses, since sight is so connected to looking, and to directing one’s gaze and attention to the object that is seen. Feeling and *kuwulira* emphasize more the capacity of the human body to register impressions, whether willed — through the purposive touching in English and the deliberate listening in Luganda — or not.

An introduction to *obubonero* or signs

We now turn to *obubonero*, derived from the verb *kubona*. This paper explores the sensory, linguistic and social aspects of *obubonero*. One of us (Merit Kabugo) spoke with a number of other native speakers of Luganda and collected a set of twenty *obubonero* from a variety of semantic domains. Though this list, included here as Table 1, is not exhaustive, it seems representative.

We note that the *obubonero* that we collected are examples of only one meaning of the word. It is of course difficult and somewhat arbitrary to assign a specific number of independent meanings to any given word, even if this practice has been enshrined by centuries of lexicographers; two senses of a word that one person might think of as separate meanings might be treated as a single category by another. Nonetheless, the word seems a fairly unproblematic instance of polysemy. The word *akabonero* has a broad series of referents, just as the English word ‘sign’ does. A sign on a post that bears the name of the street is an *akabonero* of that name. The word comes close as well to some uses of the English word ‘symbol’: political parties have *obubonero*, such as a hand, used in rallies and posters. A wedding ring is an *akabonero* of marriage. The word can be used to refer to symptoms of illnesses. The Luganda translation of the New Testament, dating to the closing years of the nineteenth century, uses the word to refer to the ‘signs’ that Jesus and his disciples discuss in the Gospels.⁴ Children in primary schools who are being taught to read and write learn that punctuation marks such as the comma and period are *obubonero*.

The twenty *obubonero* that we collected have a different meaning. They are signs that forecast some future event or condition; in a few instances, they indicate a present event or condition, such as pregnancy, illness or danger, which would not otherwise come to be known for some time.

We note that all twenty *obubonero* have a characteristic form. They link an object that is perceived, a specific attribute of the object, and a perceiver. The perceiver already understands the significance of this attribute of this object; it indicates a certain outcome, either for an individual or a set of individuals. Let me give some illustrations. It is generally held that seeing red ants swarming around the house, especially in the courtyard, means that a member of the extended family in the compound is going to die in about a week. Likewise, experiencing a sudden itching in the palms means that the individual is going to receive money in the next few days.

We note that the Luganda-speakers who provided us with these examples omitted certain other instances of signs that seem much closer to this sense. They restricted themselves to signs of future events, even though it is possible to speak of an *akabonero* of an event in the recent past, with a meaning close to the English word ‘clue’. For example, if a courtyard has not been swept, it is a sign that nobody in the compound has been at home. In a similar vein, if there are scratches at a door, it is a sign that someone tried to break in. However, the informants did not provide such examples. They also restricted themselves to signs that are not linked by simple mechanical or physical causality to their outcomes. For example, if one hears the lowing of cattle, one could say, in semantically correct Luganda, that it is an *akabonero* that a herd is passing, and, similarly, if one sees many plants sprouting, it is a sign that a field

Table 1. Twenty cases of signs

	sign	sensory mode (Luganda)	sensory mode (English)	attribute
1	cooked rice	<i>kuwunyiriza</i>	smell	smelling in the forest
2	earth	<i>kuwunyiriza</i>	smell	smell after the rains
3	bean	<i>kuwunyiriza</i>	smell	smell of rotting bean seeds
4	red ants	<i>kulaba</i>	sight	swarming around house or courtyard
5	shooting star	<i>kubona</i>	sight	zooming through the sky
6	woman or dog	<i>kulaba</i>	sight	meeting any as the first thing in the morning, on road or at door
7	plantain	<i>kubona</i>	sight	peeled finger standing upright in cooking pot
8	ringworm spot	<i>kulaba</i>	sight	on body of a youngest child
9	dust-devils	<i>kubona</i>	sight	on the ground during the day
10	owl	<i>kuwulira</i>	hearing	hooting at night
11	fox	<i>kuwulira</i>	hearing	crying at night
12	shrieking noise	<i>kuwulira</i>	hearing	continuous noise in the ear
13	bird (Abyssinian hornbill)	<i>kuwulira</i>	hearing	call (gulu mpa nkuba, 'Heaven, send rain')
14	general fatigue	<i>kuwulira</i>	feeling	general body weakness
15	sunshine	<i>kuwulira</i>	feeling	a sudden brief hard biting scorching sun
16	chill	<i>kuwulira</i>	feeling	a sudden brief chill
17	itching	<i>kuwulira</i>	feeling	sudden itching of the palms
18	stickiness and sweatiness	<i>kuwulira</i>	feeling	feeling of body upon waking up in the morning
19	wind	<i>kulaba</i>	seeing	moving dust, leaves, etc. shifting direction
20	bitterness	<i>kuloza</i>	taste	bitter taste in the mouth

will produce a good harvest. However, our informants did not provide any examples of such patently obvious signs; rather, they gave only ones that would require some additional knowledge. We recognize the long legacy of discussions of causality in studies of African culture by many writers, and we will touch lightly on these issues in the conclusions. We note as well that there is a specific word in Luganda for 'omen,' *bisiraani*. Some, but not all, *obubonero* can be classified as omens, often depending on the circumstances under which they are observed and discussed.

An examination of a set of twenty signs

We include a list of the twenty signs in table 1. We collected some of these by observation of ordinary conversations. Once we recognized the importance of the term *akabonero*, we asked native Luganda-speakers, at group meetings and in informal

	entity to which sign applies	consequence	interval
	people nearby	a snake is in the midst	there and then
	entire village or neighborhood	a destructive rain ahead	usually after a few days
	person who detects smell	you will catch malaria	usually after a few days
	extended family in the compound	a member in the house is going to die	in about a weeks time
	person who sees the star	seer will acquire wealth	indefinite
	person who sees the woman or dog	seer will have bad luck that day	that very day
	household associated with kitchen	a visitor at the meal	that very meal
	the child's mother	child's mother is pregnant	that very time
	entire village or neighborhood	rains will come	in the next two weeks
	household or compound	a close person will die	the next few days
	neighborhood	someone in the village will die	the next few days
	person who hears	the person will fall sick	the next few days
	entire village or neighborhood	rains will come	in the next two weeks
	person who feels	a close person will die	the next few days
	area around person who feels the heat	it is going to rain	in the next few minutes
	person who feels and those nearby	danger is ahead	in the next few minutes
	person who feels	the person will receive money	in the next few days
	entire village or neighborhood	rains will come	in the next two weeks
	entire village or neighborhood	rains will come	in the next two weeks
	person who tastes	the person will catch malaria	in the next few days

one-on-one conversations, to provide us with examples. Many examples were repeated frequently. This form of elicitation is well-established in field linguistics (Duranti 1997:98). We note that this list includes a number of examples that are particularly well-known and familiar, and were offered to us repeatedly. They are often among the first to be cited in discussions of signs, such as the sign of a woman or a dog (meeting a woman or a dog before meeting a man when departing the compound or house in the morning as a sign of bad luck that day), and the sign of plantain (seeing a peeled plantain stand upright when it is thrown into a cooking pot as a sign that a visitor will arrive at the meal). The very familiarity of these instances indicates a certain level of self-consciousness of these signs, since it shows that many Luganda-speakers have already discussed them with others.

We note a number of characteristics that these twenty signs have in common. Firstly, all of them refer directly to a sensory perception. They do not refer to intuitions or hunches. They come to people when they are fully awake, rather than when they

are asleep, or in a state of trance or intoxication. In addition, these sensory perceptions come to individuals without their being willed, chosen, sought or invoked. They simply occur, usually in the routine course of daily life. Moreover, these signs are not ordinarily susceptible to human intervention; one would not, for example, scatter ants in an area to make people think that someone will die.⁵

We note that these signs include most, but not all, the senses. As table 1 indicates, the list contains examples that are based on five of the six senses described by Luganda-speakers. The one that is not included is *kukwatako*, to feel by touching. There are instances of *kuwulira*, feeling-with-the-whole-body, including generalized senses of hot, cold and fatigue⁶ (These signs also happen to include all five senses listed by English-speakers). Moreover, all twenty signs are associated with one, and only one, sensory mode. There are no instances of both seeing and hearing something, for example.

Another characteristic of these signs is that they all refer to a one, and only one, object of the experience: the call of a fox, a feeling of a chill, a taste of a bitter substance. These objects are all natural rather than supernatural, though the names of two signs, both associated with rain, have some overt supernatural significance. One of the signs that are observed during the dry season to note the coming of rains is the call of the Abyssinian hornbill, *Bucorvus abyssinicus*. It is said to cry *gulu mpa nkuba* ('Heaven, send rain') and God is believed to attend to it. Another sign of the oncoming rains is the presence of dust-devils, small whirlwinds that raise dust from the dry grounds; these are called *akazimu* or 'wind-ghosts,' a term that refers to the ancestors who accompany the first rains as they come to the lands of their descendants. The word *zimu* refers to the spirits of deceased individuals. As the English term 'dust-devil' suggests, though, these names may be what are termed frozen metaphors, ones that ordinarily do not evoke associations for the speaker and hearer. Moreover, these are natural objects—a bird, dust carried by a wind—rather than supernatural beings.

The projected outcomes can be all classified as positive or negative. 40% (8/20) of the cases are positive, and 60% (12/16) are negative. The outcomes are concentrated in specific semantic domains. Three about illness, four about death, five are about rain, and five about fortune and danger. Moreover, the outcomes all occur within a specific temporal range. All twenty signs refer to the future that follows the moment of perception of the sign. The signs may refer to something that will occur in the future, such as a rainstorm or the arrival of a visitor. In at least one instance, the sign refers to a condition that already exists, but that is not otherwise perceptible by ordinary means. This is the sign of the ringworm spot; the sign shows others that a woman is pregnant before the swelling of her belly makes this evident (we reiterate that the spot is seen on the body of a woman's youngest child, not on the woman herself). The sign of a chill, indicating that a danger lies near ahead, and the sign of bitterness, that a person has malaria, seem similar, since the individual would soon learn of the danger by seeing or hearing it, or of the illness by its usual symptoms. We note that nearly all the signs refer to the near future. 6/20 or 30% of the cases indicating something that will happen in the same day, and 14/20 or 70% indicating something that will happen in no longer than a few days. The breakdown of the timing of the outcome is as follows: immediately, two signs; in a few minutes, three signs; the same day, one sign; in a few days, eight signs; in a week

or so, one sign; in two weeks, four signs, all of which have to do with the onset of rain. There is only one instance of a sign forecasting something in the indefinite future.

All twenty signs have a high, though somewhat variable, degree of spatial and social proximity among the sign, the perceiver, and the outcome. Spatially, the sign covers a nearby area. Socially, the sign refers to small social field (individual, seven signs; household, five signs; village, five signs; neighborhood, three signs). Though this social field is small, it is usually larger than a single individual; 13/20 or just under two-thirds of the signs refer to a collectivity rather than just one person. The social field, moreover, is demarcated largely by spatial distance. Though Baganda keep close track of clan membership, the outcomes do not affect members of particular clans exclusively. Nor do they distinguish by gender, age, or religious affiliation, all important social categories. At most, there seems to be a suggestion that the signs might affect permanent or long-term residents of an area, rather than visitors or short-term residents. We note that this spatial and social proximity corresponds generally to the temporal proximity noted above.

A characteristic that struck us as particularly interesting is what we call the public availability of the signs. Most of these signs are readily perceived by all people in a particular place at a particular time. Of these twenty signs, at least fifteen can be publicly sensed: objects that anyone can see, sounds that anyone can hear, scents that anyone can smell, or sensations of heat or cold that anyone in a group would feel.⁷ The exceptions are of common perceptions that everyone has experienced at one time or another and they are the ones that potentially could be experienced at the same time by others. These examples are the sign of the bean, in which a person smells a rotting bean; the sign of a shrieking noise, heard in the ear; the sign of general fatigue, a feeling of general body weakness; the sign of itching, felt in the palm of the hand; and the sign of bitterness, tasted in the mouth.

We note an association between these last characteristics. The more publicly available signs, the ones that can be observed by anyone in a household, compound, village or neighborhood, apply to that wider social group. The less publicly sensed signs forecast outcomes for individuals only. However, their temporal characteristics do not differ from those of more publicly sensed signs; they foretell events that will occur in a few days.

The use of *obubonero* in conversation

We wished to study the use of signs in conversations between Luganda-speakers. We recognized the difficulty of recording spontaneous everyday conversations in which signs were discussed; the taping and transcription of many hundreds of hours of conversation in natural field settings would have been laborious and expensive. We therefore chose to use elicitation techniques, more technically known as elicited production tasks, to obtain representative conversations. A wide variety of elicitation techniques are used in linguistic anthropology for many ends. They include interviews, sentence completion tasks, stimulated recall, and production questionnaires (Marchman 1997; Billmyer and Vargehese 2000; Gass and Mackey 2000; Golato 2003). The elicitations

Table 2. Four conversations in which signs are discussed

1. A conversation about a sudden death.

This conversation takes place between two elderly (50+) women. It is early in the morning in the compound of one of them.

- A: Neighbor, are you aware that Wamala died?
B: The Wamala we know?
A: Yes, he is dead!
B: Has he been sick?
A: No, the man jokingly [capriciously, surprisingly] died suddenly.
B: Ooh! That is why, recently, I forget when exactly, the owl hooted all night long. Did you hear it too?
A: Yes! We heard it and the fox had cried the previous evening. I told my husband that there was likely to be trouble on the village.
B: I too have been waking up feeling very weak these days, and that is why I had to dig near the house, but then there are red ants all over he place!
A: So, that is it, my dear. Wamala is dead.
B: It is a great pity!

2. A conversation about a pregnant woman.

This conversation takes place between two women. 'A' has a one year old baby which she is walking with along a village path. The baby has a ringworm spot on its face. They meet 'B'.

- B: You 'A', why does the baby have this spot! Aren't you in some funny state?
A: What kind of state?
B: Do you mean to say you don't see the spot?
A: Come on, I am not pregnant.

3. A conversation about a poor day at work.

This conversation takes place between a husband and a wife, at home in the evening after the husband has returned from work.

- Wife: Welcome back, dear.
Husband: Thank you (flatly with low spirits)
Wife: You look sad. What is the matter?
Husband: I don't know, but generally the day has been a loss. The car broke down. I didn't get clients.
Wife: What is the matter? Whom did you meet on your way in the morning?
Husband: When I was getting to the main road, I came across Muske's dog.
Wife: That is the bad omen you met.

4. A conversation about a snake.

This conversation takes place between two men walking along a path in the bush through a forest.

- A: You, do you smell rice? [Literally, do you you sense [kuwulira] the smell [wunya] of cooked rice?]
B: How? It seems you are just hungry
A: Uh! But I smell [kuwunya] cooked rice!
B: I do not smell [literally, sense [kuwulira]] it.
A: All right.
B: Eh! Wait a moment, I have also had a sudden chill through my body
A: Quiet, I heard [hear [kuwulira]] something moving... eh! There it is... a snake.
-

tion technique that we selected was a discourse production task. Kabugo asked three instructors at the Institute of African Languages at Makerere University in Uganda to produce representative conversations that included *obubonero*, a task which these individuals readily understood.⁸

We offer brief synopses as follows. In the first conversation, one neighbor tells another of the recent sudden death of someone in the neighborhood. Troubled by this event, they seek to explain his death, which was not preceded by illness. They recall signs that forecasted his death. The second conversation, one woman meets another walking with her toddler. Upon seeing a ringworm spot on the toddler, the first woman hints broadly that the second is pregnant, a claim which the second woman tries to brush off. (We note that a number of *obubonero*, not included in our set of twenty, interpret signs on a child, especially the youngest, as indications of the child's mother's pregnancy and even the sex of her unborn child). We note as well that, despite cultural values that favor fertility, this sign would be seen as unfavorable, since the mother would be understood as not wealthy or careful enough to prevent a case of ringworm in her youngest child and therefore as not ready to have another child. In the third conversation, a man returns home, discouraged from a bad day at the market. His wife, seeking to cheer him up and to explain his misfortune, encourages him to recall a sign that would have forecast this bad day. In the final conversation, two men walk in the forest. The first says that he notices a sign that forecasts the arrival of a snake, a misfortune in this context. The second attempts to cast doubt on the significance of this sign, but is later persuaded when he perceives a second sign that also forecasts the arrival of a snake.

We note a number of characteristics of these conversations.⁹ It is striking that *obubonero* are often presented near the beginning of the conversation. In the first three conversations, the *obubonero* come up early in the conversation, when A and B meet and soon find a topic to discuss, whether of mutual interest (a sudden death, a poor day at work) or a topic imposed by one individual (the pregnancy of a woman). In the conversation about a snake, the two speakers had been walking, and presumably conversing, for some time when the *akabonero* appears. This location of signs early in conversations may reflect the fact that several of the conversations (the first three) are connected to greetings. The formalized exchange of greetings is characteristic polite behavior in Luganda conversation. Other evidence shows an association between the use of signs and formal exchanges of greetings, particularly in the discussion of signs about rain and weather, and the health of humans and livestock. We also speculate that proverbs, a generally similar form of common-sense knowledge used in conversation, may be linked to these signs as well.

The perceiver and the object or perception are often, but not always, linked by a verb of perception. Sometimes there is a simple statement of fact. In the conversation about a sudden death, B states 'there are red ants all over the place' rather than 'I saw red ants,' in the conversation about a poor day at work, B says, 'I came across [a] dog' rather than 'I saw a dog,' and in the conversation about a snake, B states 'my body got a chill' rather than 'I felt a chill'.¹⁰

We note as well that the outcomes are temporally close to the signs and conversations. The conversations about a sudden death and a poor day at work draw on *obubonero* to explain recent events (misfortune in both instances). The conversation about a pregnant

woman includes an indication of a current state that will lead to a future outcome. The conversation about a snake forecasts an event to take place, and that event does occur during the conversation.¹¹ In contrast to this characteristic, found in all conversation, we note a variety of relations of speakers and forecasts. In the conversation about a sudden death, the signs explain a misfortune that occurred to a third party. In the conversation about a pregnant woman, the sign suggests a possible outcome for one of the speakers, which that speaker seeks to deny. In the conversation about a poor day at work, the sign explains a misfortune that occurred to one of the speakers. In the conversation about a snake, the signs indicate a misfortune that occurs to both speakers.

We were interested in the observation that there is some variation in the number of *obubonero* and the agreement of the speakers on the *obubonero*. The conversations about a pregnant woman and a poor day at work include only one sign; the conversation about a snake has two, and the conversation about a sudden death — a particularly troubling topic — has three. We note that in this last conversation, the additional *obubonero* are mentioned as a product of the agreement of the speakers. By contrast, in the conversation about a snake, they are mentioned as an outcome of their disagreement. In the conversation about a sudden death, each speaker presents perceptions that are public (hearing an owl, hearing a fox, seeing red ants). Note that B asks A if she heard the first sign; A agrees that she has, and offers some evidence that she has. The conversation about a snake is interesting in that each speaker has a relatively private sensation (smell, chill), and indeed B explicitly states that he did not experience the first sensation. (This conversation merits further attention, since two verbs, *kuwunyiriza* and *kuwulira*, are used to denote the same perception, smelling rice. A uses the former more positively, and B denies the experience by using the latter. Only after both speakers perceive an *akabonero* does the outcome occur).

When one speaker presents an *akabonero*, the other speaker can actively support the line of interpretation of events that the first speaker is suggesting, or can actively oppose it. These two possibilities, at the most general level, consist of the second speaker either implying, ‘yes, your perception of x is significant, since it forecasts the standard outcome’ or ‘no, your perception of x is just a routine perception of an ordinary object, and does not forecast anything’. These could be called local challenges to the significance.¹² In these conversations at least, the second speaker does not offer global challenges such as ‘no, x does not forecast y, but rather z’ or ‘no, x is never significant and never forecasts anything’ or ‘no, ordinary objects never work to forecast outcomes’.

Regarding the possibility of support, the other speaker can back up the claim ‘I perceived x and therefore y’ through active encouragement, suggestion of other relevant signs, and the like. In the conversation about a sudden death, there is a direct effort to locate *obubonero*. When B hears from A that a third person, C, dies, B first establishes that this is indeed the C known to both A and B. B then seeks a naturalistic explanation, that C had been ill, and only after having this possibility rejected turns to locate signs. A and B, both, contribute to locating these signs. Exchanges like this may well be common after deaths occur, especially sudden unexpected ones. The conversation about a bad day at work also shows such direct effort to locate signs. A, noting B’s despondency, first asks whether specific events provoked this state, and,

finding that they did, suggests looking for an *akabonero* to explain these events. When the sign is located, A uses the word *bisiraani*, omen, to describe it—a strong support of the significance of *obubonero*.

Regarding the possibility of opposition, the claim ‘I perceived x and therefore y’ can be challenged by denying that the particular perception of x is a perception of a meaningful *akabonero* (but allowing that other perceptions of x might be) or by rejecting indirectly the connection between x and y. The conversations about a pregnant woman and about a snake, as mentioned above, contain some debate about the significance of potential signs. In the former, B drops broad hints that she can detect A’s pregnancy by a sign on A’s baby. A feigns ignorance of the commonly known significance of the sign, and tries to deflect the discussion away from the sign. It is possible that A is attempting to deny, or conceal, her pregnancy. In the latter, B suggests that A’s experienced sensation may not be a genuine *akabonero*, but rather merely an ordinary perception that can be explained by appeal to the ordinary operation of human physiology (that is, that A smells rice because he is hungry, not because he is sensing an *akabonero* that indicates the arrival of a snake). B agrees about the significance of the first sign after noting a second sign, by hearing it. (In this conversation, there is a subtle play of different verbs of sense, with the more general *kuwulira* which, in this case, means ‘to feel’ or ‘to sense’ being less emphatic than the more specific *kuwunya* ‘to smell’).

Following on the previous point, we note that speakers engage actively with claims about the significance of *obubonero* for interpreting events, rather than taking them for granted and assuming that their meaning is certain. We would like to suggest that this engagement demonstrates the operation of cultural assumptions about perception, speech, action and the world. The assumptions run something like this: there is regularity in the everyday world. Human life is usually, but not always, governed by ordinary forces, both visible natural forces and invisible supernatural forces (God, the ancestors, spirits and magical practitioners). These forces operate in ways that can easily be observed and understood by everyone, and they can create good and bad fortune.

Readily available signs assist people in anticipating and explaining these turns of fortune, though these signs, too, are not infallible. On the one hand, people might not notice them, and on the other hand, they might mistakenly assume that an ordinary perception is a sign. The conversation about a sudden death illustrates these assumptions. When B hears of this misfortune, she takes three steps: first to verify that she has heard the information correctly, second to seek a naturalistic explanation of the death (by illness), and third, after the second had failed, to locate signs that foretold the death. A supports this effort through various moves, such as interjections, leading questions, expressions of agreement, and noting parallels between her experiences and B’s. We suggest that if their efforts to locate such signs had failed, they would assumed the frightening possibility of a death caused neither by natural causes nor by commonplace supernatural causes but rather by some extraordinary supernatural cause, such as strong witchcraft or supernatural retribution for hidden immoral behavior.

The course of the conversation about a poor day at work is generally similar. On noting B’s poor emotional state, A first seeks a general explanation and then, on hearing of misfortune, tries to locate a sign that would have foretold it. B supports these

efforts by offering an answer with a concrete detail that completes A's reassuring line of thought. By contrast, the conversation about a pregnant woman shows the strong efforts of A to reject B's suggestion that the ringworm spot on her baby indicates that she is pregnant. In the conversation about the snake, it is less clear why B at first rejects A's claims that a sign warns them of danger. This rejection might stem from some element in their prior conversation, or some aspect of their relationship, or perhaps, to speculate even more widely, that B fears that to speak of misfortune will bring that misfortune, or, alternatively, that B thinks that this talk of signs is old-fashioned and backward.

Discussion

To recapitulate our argument, we note that the word for sign, *akabonero*, derives from the Luganda word *kubona*, one of the two verbs that mean 'to see'. The signs may be seen or detected by other senses; they are usually easily perceived by anyone in the area. They offer an indication of events or conditions, that will take place, or, that are already taking place but would not be otherwise known. People who come upon a sign may just notice it, and perhaps modify or alter their actions, but they often comment on the sign in conversation with others. Indeed, individuals often feel a strong impulse to discuss signs with others close to them, particularly when they think that misfortune is about to occur, or when apparently anomalous misfortune strikes someone. We note that these signs are treated in a variety of ways in conversations.

Our materials lead us to offer some observations about these *obubonero*. Firstly, they draw on three elements, which can be called cultural assumptions. The first assumption is that humans share certain capacities to perceive entities in the world. The second is that certain attributes of certain entities operate as reliable predictors of events and states of other entities, in a way that goes beyond the simple regularity of operation of mechanical and physical causes. The third is that the knowledge of the operation of these predictors is widely shared. In other words, though *obubonero* seem somewhat different from a straightforward mechanical or physical notion of causality, they are part of a common-sense world that operates independent of human action.

To elaborate on this point about cultural assumptions, we note that these *obubonero* bridge what might be seen as the private and individual (and perhaps biological) world of sense-perception and the more public and social (and perhaps cultural) world of discussion of human action. (Moreover, the fact that *obubonero* are widely accepted as a topic of conversation means that individuals who perceive these signs can easily anticipate talking about them, unlike other sense-perceptions that would be less culturally available as topics of conversation). Phrased differently, the social construction of reality is based not only on cultural framings of human subjects and of objects in the world, but, as Csordas (1993) has shown, on the embodiment of human attention, and, more specifically, on the types of sense-perception that link human subjects with these objects. In this case, *obubonero* are not merely about the relations of attributes of certain objects, but also about the capacities of human perceivers. Indeed, these *obubonero* rest strongly on a cultural elaboration of certain characteris-

tics of the human sensory apparatus. In particular, the perceptions in certain sensory modes, such as the ones called sight and hearing in English, allow for a greater distance between the perceiver and the perceived object, and the perceptions themselves are commonly shared by individuals in the same space at the same time. Perceptions in other sensory modes, such as the ones called taste and touch, rest on close contact between the perceiver and the perceived object, and the perceptions themselves are less commonly shared. These dimensions of sense perception are elaborated in this case of signs, since objects that are more publicly sensed connote information about events that will affect a larger group of people.

We note a second point about these signs: Luganda-speakers do not automatically accept and take for granted a claim that an *akabonero* has been perceived. Rather, they sometimes seek out these signs, and at other times challenges claims that a sign has been perceived. This variation may reflect the fact that the significance of true signs is widely shared among Luganda-speakers. It also shows the strong interdependencies that link people. We note as evidence the fact that most signs indicate outcomes for groups, rather than for individuals. We note as well the efforts of speakers in the conversations about a sudden death and about a poor day at work to locate the sources of misfortune that might continue to affect them, and the similar efforts of speakers in the conversations about a pregnant woman and about a snake to reject the possibility of pending misfortune. One would rather have good rather than bad fortune; one would rather be able to anticipate or explain misfortune — through normal causal means or through signs — than to have unexplained misfortune.

Thirdly, we speculate that these *obubonero* could be examined as part of a public sphere of conversation. They imply a strong equality of all speakers, who share the capacity to detect and interpret signs, and to use them to account for anomalous incidents in the recent past and future. The examples that we have seen are all deployed on a small social and spatial scale. The instances of the discussions of pending rainfall are at a somewhat larger scale. It would be interesting to explore how signs are deployed on even larger scales, and to compare these face-to-face conversations about signs to larger speech situations, such as those in churches, which also involve signs, assessment of the future, and which also form part of a public sphere (Breckenridge 1998; Frederiksen 2000; Meyer 2004).

Finally, we return to the theme of the senses with which we opened. These human efforts to comprehend a world prone to contingency, and to respond to those contingencies, rest not only on the understandings of that world, but on the understandings of human perceptions of that world. These understandings of human perception, in turn, have a specific form that is rooted in language. The verb *kabona* — ‘to see impermanent things’ — gives rise to the word *akabonero* — ‘sign’. That word, in turn, gives rise to the conversations in which individuals agree or disagree on the acts of interpretation that allow them to operate in a space between the ordinary domain of mechanical causality and the extraordinary domain of the inexplicable. This intermediate space of common-sense acts of signification is a crucial one.

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Appendix

Luganda transcriptions of conversations

1. A conversation about a sudden death.

A: Muliraanwa, wategedde. Wamala bwe yafudde?

B: Wamala on owaffe?

A: Yee, munnange yafudde!

B: Abadde mulwadde?

A: Nedda, omusajja yafudde mangu awo bya lusaago.

B: Ooh! Wamma ennaku ezo, oba lunaku ki, ekiwuugulu kyasula kikaaba; oba naawe wakiwulira?

A: Eeh! Twakiwulira ate n'akabe nako kaali kaakabye eggulo limu. Ne ngamba omwama nti ku kyalo kunaabaako omutawaana.

B: Era nange ennaku zino zonna nkeera ndi muyongobevu, era kwe kulima na wano awaka, naye ate nawo wajudde nsanafu.

A: Munnange nno bye byo, Wamala yatufuddeko.

B: Kitalo nnyo!

2. A conversation about a pregnant woman.

B: Owange 'A', omwana ekisente nga kimwetimbye! Tobeemu engeri ggwe?

A: Engeri etya?

B: Kyogamba ggwe ekisente tokiraba?

A: Twala eri naawe, nze siri lubuto.

3. A conversation about a poor day at work.

Wife: Kulikayo ssebo.

Husband: Nvuddeyo (flatly with low spirit)

Wife: Nga toli musanyufu, kiki?

Husband: Simanyi, naye olunaku lwonna lunfudde, emmotoka efudde, abaguzi tebazze.

Wife: Kiki, wasanze ani ku makya ng'ogenda?

Husband: Bwe nabadde ntuuka ku kkubo ne nsanga akabwa ka Musoke.

Wife: Bye ebyo bye wasanze.

4. A conversation about a snake.

A: Ggwe, owulira omuceere oguwunya?

B: Gutya? Twala eri naawe, ndowooza njala y'ekuluma.

A: Uh! Nze nga mpunywira omuceere omufumbe!

B: Nze siguwulira.

A: Kale ggwe.

B: Eh! Naye lindako! Nange omubiri gunesisiwadde omulundi gumu!

A: Sirika, mpulidde ekitambula... eh! Guugwo... omusota.

Notes

- 1 It is interesting to note that English and Luganda have similar overlaps of verbs related to the sense of smell. In English, the verb 'to smell' can refer to the purposive act of sniffing an object to detect its odor, to the act of perceiving that odor of that object, and to the odor-emitting property of the object itself. The Luganda verb *kuwunya* refers to the act of inhaling and also to the odor-emitting property of the object itself. Adding the suffix *-iriza* 'to do something repeatedly' gives the verb *kuwunyiriza*, which refers to the purposive act of sniffing an object to detect its odor and also to the act of perceiving that odor of that object.
- 2 In her discussion of cultural framing of the senses in Ghana, Geurts (2002:8) describes another case in which hearing is extended to feeling, to sensation and to other modes of experience.
- 3 Adding the suffix *-iriza* 'to do something repeatedly' to *kuwulira* gives the verb *kuwuliriza*, 'to listen'.
- 4 *Tubulire, ebyo biribeerawo ddi? Era kabonero ki akaliraga okujja kwo, n'enkomerero y'ensi?* - (Matayo 24:3). '[And as he sat upon the Mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying]. Tell us, when shall these things be? and what [shall be] the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?'
- 5 The closest case to such intervention that we have heard was told to us by a speaker of Lusoga, a language closely related to Luganda and spoken in the area immediately the east of Baganda. Describing his childhood in a rural area, he told us that his father would sometimes send him out of the compound early in the morning, and tell him to stay nearby. This way, when the father left the compound in the morning, the first person whom he would see would be his son, a male, rather than a less auspicious woman or a dog. He told this story as a bit of a joke, and suggested that his father was not entirely sure that this ruse would be efficacious.
- 6 It is interesting to note that the case of itching, localized in the palms, is covered by *kuwulira* rather than by *kukwatako*, which seems to be restricted to active touching and grasping. We are still not sure whether these two are distinguished by the distance of the subject and the object, the direct action of the subject in perceiving the object, or the localization of the sensation within the subject's body.
- 7 Panopolous (2003) offers an interesting discussion of the contexts in which sound is deemed to have greater public availability than sight in a Greek village.
- 8 The four resulting conversations are contained in table 2; the conversation about a sudden death is based most directly on recent memory, and the other three draw on field experience of the instructors. Though these cannot be taken to be spontaneous conversations, they are nonetheless of use. The people who developed them are all native speakers of Luganda, and, moreover, they have considerable experience in developing Luganda language conversations for a variety of purposes, including pedagogical materials for use in public education and instructional material for health, agriculture and other extension programs by government agencies and NGO's. These materials had gone through testing and review with native speakers of local background, so it may be assumed that the individuals who produced these conversations are skilled at this task.
- 9 One characteristic, the fact that the conversations that we include here involve only two speakers, may not be very representative. The conversation about a pregnant woman is the only one to include a third person, an infant who does not speak or vocalize in any way. We have observed larger groups that discuss signs in our ethnographic and sociolinguistic research on other topics. For example, farmers gather in villages to discuss the signs that indicate the timing of the onset of rainy seasons, sometimes forming groups of several dozen. However, we have no such conversations in our sample of four.

- 10 In the conversation about a snake, *Nange omubiri gunesisiwadde omulundi gumu!* The word *omubiri* means 'body', *kweisiwala* is 'get a chill' and *omulundi gumu* is 'sudden'.
- 11 This last case shows the difficulty of establishing a clear boundary between present and future events. The snake was already nearby at the time of the conversation, though it did not appear until well into the conversation.
- 12 Povinelli (1993) offers a thoughtful discussion of these local challenges to significance in a very different setting, in an Aboriginal community in Australia, where the sensory modes of perception, the links of signs to outcomes, and the distribution of outcomes to social groups and categories all vary significantly from this Ugandan case, but where the possible significance of signs is also an important topic of conversation.

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