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Wild Plant Classification in Little Dixie: Variation in a Regional Culture

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Abstract

This study examines the relation between folk expertise and wild plant classification in Little Dixie, a seven-county vernacular cultural region in central Missouri. A pile-sort task was administered to ten local wild plant "experts" (Euro-American descent) and ten novices (Euro-American descent) to investigate how ethnobotanical knowledge and the cognitive construction of folk taxonomies vary. The results indicate that experts classify plants according to utilitarian features (e.g., edibility, medicinal uses) while novices rely almost exclusively on morphological features (e.g., herbs, trees) while novices rely almost exclusively on morphological features. The classification strategies of experts and novices are substantially different, but a common categorization system is common to both groups. Novices vary more than experts, which is explained by the novices' use of a highly variable classification system and the experts' mastery of alternate ways of classifying the plant domain. These findings strongly suggest that ethnobotanical knowledge is fundamentally based on the recognition of ostensible perceptual features, which is progressively guided by the recognition of culturally learned features.

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