

# First Steps from Walking in Snow to Cross-Country Skiing

An Interactional Perspective on  
Ephemeral Surfaces for Personal Mobility

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the ways in which a young child learns to sense and move through a transient environment while learning to walk on skis. Audiovisual recordings were made of a parent instructing a child on how to walk on snow and to start moving on skis. Focusing on social interaction, the article examines how snow is sensed and made salient in spatio-interactional practices of walking on snow for the purposes of learning to ski. Talk about the weather and snow surface conditions while walking over the snow develops the child's feeling for snow as a surface for personal mobility.

**Keywords** walking, materialities, snow, social interaction, video ethnography

“Reading snow is like listening to music. To describe what you’ve read is to try to explain music in writing” – Peter Høeg (1993, 37)<sup>1</sup>

In Peter Høeg's thriller novel *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992), adapted for the film *Smilla's Sense of Snow*<sup>2</sup> (1997), directed by Billie August, the protagonist Smilla Qaaviqaaq Jaspersen has developed an almost intuitive understanding of all types of snow and their characteristics whilst growing up as a child in Greenland. She has also worked as a scientist of ice and snow. Thus, with her heightened 'feeling for snow' she is sure that the tracks left by a boy who fell while walking on the roof of her housing complex in an apparent accident demonstrate that in fact he was chased by someone (the murderer). She tells a sceptical Danish investigator for the district attorney:

When you're used to playing in the snow, you don't leave that kind of track, because that movement is not efficient, like faulty distribution of your weight going uphill cross-country skiing (Høeg 1993, 37).<sup>3</sup>

Once settled on the ground, snow can materially change its shape and structure according to temperature, wind-drift, layering, solar radiation, and melting. It is not surprising that any human culture, group or individual in a cold, natural environment develops specific sensitivities for how to walk and move on snow given the affordances of the medium in a nexus of everyday mobility practices. In Danish, one can learn to *stå på ski* (literally "stand on skis") and in Norwegian one can *gå på ski* (literally "walk on skis"). In this article I investigate how snow – a complex, dynamic materiality that can, in the right circumstances, afford spatial movement on its surface – is sensed and made salient in spatio-interactional practices at the interface between walking and cross-country skiing.

### **A feeling for snow and its surface while walking**

In order to analyse a person's feeling for snow in this case study, it is important to understand how we sense and experience space and mobility. Using in-depth interviews with, and photo diaries kept by, ordinary people in inner London, Middleton (2010) investigated the sensory, sensual and embodied experiences manifested in urban walking. Others who have examined how we sense space socially and culturally in relationship to walking include Hockey (2006), Imai (2008), Olwig (2008), Saerberg (2010). How we sense

space and matter has also been studied by researchers interested in the discursive and interactional practices and ethnomethods in which they come to have meaning and salience. For example, Goodwin (1999) has analysed scientists at work to uncover how archaeologists, for example, perceive and categorise soil matter within the social, cultural and spatial practices at an archaeological dig. And Büscher (2006) has followed landscape architects as they use powerful IT design tools to visualise the land they walk over. These studies demonstrate the insights that discursive and interactional analyses of empirical materials can bring to our understanding of the mundane practices of scientists and professionals in which space and matter become meaningful and shared.

However, there are few studies as yet of how water in its liquid or solid state is sensed and felt by children in mundane everyday mobility practices, such as walking or skiing (see Pacini-Ketchabaw and Clark 2016 for a collaborative ethnography of water play in early childhood). Particular types of snow and ice are the building blocks of transient natural and human-made structures, such as glaciers, ice sculptures, igloos and ski tracks. Fallen snow affords movement along its fragile surface. In a more general consideration of the question “what is surface?” in relation to more traditional spatial concepts such as space, place, and region, Forsyth et al. (2013) make the case that human geographers need to re-examine the notion of ‘surface’ (Lorimer 2012). They contend that surfaces matter, for example in their function as limits of matter and as spaces for material exchange. Surfaces have texture, durability, extension due to repetition and foldability.

Humans moving through snow most often leave an inference-rich visible trace, as the quotation above from Peter Høeg’s novel reveals. Walking and skiing in newly fallen snow means that tracks and trails emerge, though they are transient, that can shape future actions and practices. Waitt, Gill, and Head (2008) have studied the experiential knowledge displayed by a heterogeneous group of people who regularly walk through a maze of criss-crossing paths in a suburban Australian reserve. They argue that routine walking is best conceptualised as a territory-making process. Within the social context and bodily experiences, walking offers possibilities of making points of connection with ‘nature’.

Despite a sharpened attention to phenomena such as surface, trails and the sensing of the landscape, studies of the mundane geography of snow from a social and cultural perspective are scant (see Rautio and Jokinen 2016 for a study of play in snow piles, and Päivi and Don 2016 for a study of slippery snow on the urban pavement). In their study of the traditional knowledge and local perceptions of the environment in Northern Finland, Ingold and Kurttilla (2000) note their informants' childhood memories of skating on the ice in winter and of being able to ride a bicycle on the hard snow-crust in spring. This article reports on a study of how, in the first place, one comes to appreciate snow – its depth, consistency, surface and affordances – as one walks on snow and prepares to ski recreationally.

### **Nordic skiing**

Nordic or cross-country skiing (*langrendsski* in Danish) is a common and popular recreational and sports pursuit wherever there is adequate snow cover in the world. Arguably, it originated in the Nordic countries and has probably been in existence in some form for thousands of years as a means to move more easily through a snow-covered environment, in addition to snow shoes. Today, to become a cross-country skier one needs a pair of cambered skis with bindings, a pair of ski poles, and a pair of ski boots which can attach at the toe to a binding on each ski. As a technology, skis are designed to take the weight of the skier and afford gliding over the surface of prepared snow. Some skis have a grooved pattern embossed onto the centre zone to enable the skier to press down by a transfer of weight and to grip the snow; however, most skis require a temporary wax appropriate for the snow conditions to be applied to the central 'kick zone' in order to facilitate the leg movement required to propel the ski over the surface of the snow.

### **Interactional analysis of mobility**

Until recently, the automobile has been the primary mode of transport in many studies concerned with social interaction and members' methods of sense-making while mobile (Laurier et al. 2008, Haddington, Keisanen, and Nevile 2012). Many of the methods developed to study the car as affording a social and interactional space can be used to investigate other modes of transport or leisure mo-

bility, such as walking (Broth and Lundström 2013), cycling (McIlvenny 2014, 2015) or skiing. There are several key elements of a multimodal interactional approach to mobility. First, there is a focus on situated mobile practices. It can be argued that by focusing on practices, rather than categorising different types of mobilities, it becomes possible to view individuals not as mere mobile subjects, but as actors who are engaged in shaping and (re)producing mobilities and mobile formations-in-action. Second, there is the power of an inductive methodology to examine sequences of mobile action (for recent work see McIlvenny, Broth, and Haddington 2009, Haddington, Mondada, and Nevile 2013, McIlvenny, Broth, and Haddington 2014). Such an approach is therefore an antidote to 'just so' accounts of mobility practices that assume mobility is a social and cultural practice but without ever elaborating or investigating just how it is accomplished. Third, one can study walking in terms of mobile ethnomethods (Ryave and Schenkein 1974, Hester and Francis 2003) – that is, the emic methods that people use to assemble and account for the sensefulness of their mobile formations, practices and actions as they walk.

### **Data collection**

The data collected for this study includes video recordings made during a seasonal winter holiday in the north of Finland. Winter there is typically six months' long with an almost permanent snow cover and temperatures occasionally dropping down to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The author and his eight-year-old daughter (with other family members and relatives present in some recordings) are the principal participants in the mobile video 'active participant' ethnography. The spoken language used in the data is predominantly English, though on occasions Finnish is spoken. The main site of the study is a municipal public playground near a relative's house on the outskirts of a small town in north central Finland. The child and parent practised at this site on five separate days over a period of seven days. They walked to the site carrying their skis and poles and gained access to the playground by a path that crossed a small wooden bridge.

Since the GoPro camera became popular, head- and body-mounted video cameras have been tried and recommended for a variety of analytical reasons (Brown, Dilley, and Marshall 2008, McIlvenny 2014, Laurier 2013, McIlvenny 2015). Two body-mounted 'sports'

video cameras were used to record the participants in a reasonably unobtrusive way that did not hinder their ability to ski. The video recordings were transcribed in order to further the investigation using ethnomethodological conversation analysis as a methodology (Haddington, Mondada, and Nevile 2013). The analysis focuses on embodied interaction and the sequential organisation of the participants' actions. In the transcripts, the child is referred to as Anabel, and the parent, Peter. Transcript conventions are given in the appendix and are described more fully in Jefferson (2004). A comic transcript is also used to present the data in a novel form that is more readable for short excerpts (Laurier 2014).

### **Sensing snow as a surface for personal mobility**

A landscape covered with fresh snow is almost a three-dimensional *tabula rasa* that scrubs clean the coarse landscape to afford mobile action across its surface. The snow undulates with the geography of the natural and anthropogenic landscape it covers. Thus, particular routes and cadences of movement are possible that are to some extent visible to the trained eye, but that also need to be discovered in and through movement. In good conditions, snow is an almost frictionless surface for spatial movement. Yet, if it is too slippery or icy, then it is difficult to generate momentum or is painful if one falls. Learning to walk on snow and to ski means learning to discriminate and feel the dynamic and every changing snow conditions and to adjust accordingly in order to generate movement, flow and rhythm to successfully traverse the surface.

When conditions are poor, the slippery condition of the snow and ice becomes an abiding concern. For example, on Day 1, the tracks are made in relatively good conditions for skiing, and after finishing the first loop, Peter even comments on Loop 2 that "the snow is just right". However, on Day 2 the conditions for skiing get worse, and this is noted in a number of ways by Peter as they warily approach the playground on foot carrying their skis and poles (see Excerpt, next page).

After rain and near freezing temperatures, the surface has mostly refrozen into ice. The parent and child tentatively walk from the house to the site along an icy path, carrying their skis and poles. Thus, before they even start on the track proper, Peter and Anabel are orienting in different ways to the current snow conditions in

push	stress
°glide°	low volume
:	stretching of prior syllable
par-	cut-off
↑ ↓	high or low pitch at the start of the following segment
(1.5)	timed pause in seconds and tenths of seconds
[ ]	beginning and end of overlap
=	latching (no break)
( )	dubious hearing/unsure transcription
(( ))	transcriber's comment

### Excerpt – Day 2/arrival: 'is it slippery'

1 Peter: and then we shall have to go over the bri:dge  
2 (1.2)  
3 Peter: might be a bit icy: on the bri:dge  
4 ((Peter slips))  
5 Anabel: i think you should co:me on the sno:w  
6 ((Peter walks off the path onto the snow))  
7 (4.5)  
8 ((Peter glances at Anabel, who looks at Peter))  
9 (4.5)  
10 Peter: y'see there's still sno:w the:re  
11 (1.0)  
12 Peter: it'll just be a bit more slippery: (.) toda:y.  
13 (5.5)  
14 ((Peter glances at Anabel trailing behind))  
15 (10.0)  
16 ((Peter crosses the bridge carefully))  
17 Peter: okay, ((Peter turns to see Anabel at the bridge))  
18 the track's still the:re.  
19 Anabel: is it slippery:?  
20 Peter: no it's not too: slippery the:re.  
21 Anabel: pardon  
22 Peter: it's not too slippery on the bridge  
23 but there's a bit of ice:  
24 ((Anabel walks over the bridge and arrives at the place))  
25 ((Peter turns to look at the playground))  
26 Peter: see there's=  
27 Anabel: =there there is a tra:ck  
28 Peter: yeah (0.5) just abou:t  
29 ((Peter puts Anabel's skis down on the old track))  
30 Peter: it's going to be very slippery:  
31 (1.5) ((Peter puts his own skis down next to the track))  
32 Peter: the ice: °on: the tra:ck°  
33 (2.5) ((Anabel steps out of ski binding))  
34 Peter: so let me- ((Peter bends down next to Anabel))  
35 (25.0) ((Peter fits Anabel's left boot to binding))  
36 Anabel: is it gonna be slippery:  
37 Peter: yeah (.) it'll be so- more slippery than yesterda:y.  
38 ((Peter fits right boot into binding on first go))  
39 Peter: °there°  
40 (6.0) ((Anabel steps forward on the old track))  
41 Peter: you see, (.) can you feel it being slippy=  
42 =it'll be fa:st coming dow:n.  
43 Anabel: ¡huh: [↑ya: ]  
44 Peter: [it'll be]  
45 (1.0)  
46 Peter: well luckily we made a tra:ck  
47 (1.5)  
48 Peter: 'coz no:w we have a tra:ck.  
49 ((Peter adjusts binding))  
50 ((Anabel steps forward on the old track))

anticipation of their skiing. First, Peter orients Anabel to the observable and inspectable features of the site as they approach it. This is done in the form of an observation and an assessment, both in relation to a gloss on what was experienced yesterday, e.g. “there’s *still* snow” (line 10) and “a bit *more* slippery” (line 12) [my emphasis]. Second, Anabel requests a confirmation from Peter of his situated assessment of the snow condition in the context of crossing a foot-

bridge (lines 19-23). Third, as they prepare for skiing by putting on their skis, Peter makes relevant again a reformulated (re)assessment of the conditions (lines 30-32), constituting this as an ongoing process of assessment and attentiveness to the conditions as they walk through and over the snowscape. Fourth, as they complete the preparatory stage, with Peter fixing the last boot to the binding on Anabel's ski, Anabel asks again about the slippery conditions (line 36). Some of the questions and statements have been about the quality of slipperiness in relation to a future action (*is going to be* or *will be*) – namely, to ski. The assessment of this quality is repeatedly bound to the activity and in anticipation of it. Fifth, as they step out on the old track, Peter asks Anabel to assess the feeling of the snow as a practical, embodied, tactile experience (line 41): it can be felt as well as known in advance by visual inspection. The caregiver frames the experience as a touch/response-feel (Norris 2012), e.g. a property (“being slippery”) of the snow that expresses itself (a response that is felt) when one pushes against it (a touch) with the skis while stepping forward. During this excerpt, we can see that Peter and Anabel are collaboratively rendering the snowscape sense-able and readable, both to gain access to the site by walking and to anticipate the activity of skiing.

Much time is spent on Day 2 learning about and calibrating the new snow conditions. What we can hear on many occasions is that Peter (and Anabel) repeatedly orient to both:

1. the conditions now, which are dynamically changing (in contrast to the steady state in the past).
2. the latent track (e.g. the trace of the track from previous days), which is always skied for another-first-time.

Thus, the practical issue of the quality of the snow in relation to human movement is replayed by both Peter and Anabel in their preparation for skiing on the second day. Moreover, it is returned to again and again over the course of the five days, as Peter and Anabel walk over, inspect and render the amorphous snowscape and the ambivalent space of the playground into a learnable environment with teachable objects in which skiing can take place. For example, the parent invokes categories and qualities that are rendered

Figure 1: Testing the snow's slipperiness as she walks on the snow"



visible or can be felt in the embodied practice of walking over the surface of the snow.

On Day 4, the track is again in poor condition after a stormy, wet night. Peter is adjusting Anabel's ski bindings ready for the first loop of the track. As Anabel stands in her skis on the icy track, Peter, who is not yet on the track, asks "is it slippery" (see the comic transcript in Figure 1, previous page).

Anabel reports that it is not (at least not much) slippery, and then she initiates, in an experimental mode, her own practical 'procedure' to 'test' the snow and thus determine its slipperiness. She steps forward and brings her skis together side-by-side on the track and moves them quickly back and forth while standing still, using her poles to support her. The skis slip and slide underneath her. In surprise, she quickly acknowledges in response to Peter's original question that the track is indeed slippery, "oh yea- ye::s", and Peter confirms. As the days progress, we see a shift from explicit calls to sense the snow, especially what is visible and inspectable, to feeling the snow as an embodied experience in the action of walking to the site and skiing itself.

### **Making tracks in the snow**

As they gradually inhabit the amorphous geography of the snowscape, a practical infrastructure for mobility and learning is developed and maintained in situ. Over the course of five days, as the track is reterritorialised, the parent attends and attunes the child to a number of features of the track, including its authenticity, as they walk to the site and prepare to ski. Much like the footprints in the snow in Peter Høeg's novel, the track serves as a delicate material archive – a trace of past actions, activities and events – in terms of its brief history of use. In their study, Waitt, Gill, and Head (2008, 47) note that "the regular, repetitive weaving through the familiar crisscrossing paths, and the ability to view the land from a variety of perspectives, enables the walker to move through, and to territorialise the reserve as 'their' place." In this case, great effort is spent at the site in order for it to be (re)territorialised despite the vagaries of the weather. On occasions, Anabel takes part in the search for signs indicating the legibility of the geography of the site, learning to demonstrate her competence in reading the snowscape. For example, in the Excerpt given earlier, Peter walks over the bridge,

quickly surveys the site, and draws attention to the visibility of the track – it is inspectable from their current location – that they made for the first time the day before: “the track’s still there” (line 18). After Anabel has walked over the bridge, Peter turns to look up the site again, and begins: “see there’s...” (line 26), upon which Anabel says “there there is a track” (line 27), attempting to demonstrate a competence that Peter displayed just a minute ago. One might argue that Anabel is doing ‘being’ a good apprentice. Peter acknowledges the visible trace of the track, though it is just noticeable, and in this case just about skiable, to which he adds that “it is going to be very slippery” (line 30). As a result, Peter and Anabel mutually construct a practice of ‘reading’ the snowscape in terms of its history and its ski-ability, to which they return each day as they approach the site on foot.

### Conclusion

This article has demonstrated an analytical concern with actual, mundane practices that negotiate and maintain the geography of the snow surface as traces of past action and as conditions for future action. The calculation of the snow’s affordance for low friction sliding on its surface is a complex science, but for these walkers/skiers their feeling for the snowscape, and their ability to ‘read’ it, is calibrated to their concerns. We have seen how snow can be talked about, how it can be handled and how it can be felt in motion. Indeed, the participants make use of practical ‘tests’ for sensing the snow while walking and preparing for skiing. For example, they can stand on the track surface and slide the skis back and forth or prod the snow. Much as for the protagonist in *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*, these feelings for snow are action-directed, in the sense that they only make sense in their anticipation of cross-country skiing in this environment.

This study is based on a mobile ‘active participant’ ethnography that enables particular insights into the cultural meanings and social interactional practices of this family at this, for them, historic site. Although it is a single case study, following a practitioner and a learner in instructional moments was a good way to get access to salient practices. The study informs our understanding of transient and ephemeral geographies in which participants ‘walk’ on skis

with a situated material-spatial awareness of the unpredictable terrain within a nexus of social and cultural practices. It demonstrates the importance of empirical studies of the (transient) surfaces and materialities in and over which walking as an embodied and social practice is undertaken. It contributes as well to the need to investigate children's and not just adult walking practices, to understand what pedestrian mobility means in a child's everyday life (Horton et al. 2013) and how children are made mobile (Kullman 2010).

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### Notes

- 1 In the original language of the novel (Danish): “*At læse sneen er som at høre musik. At beskrive hvad man har læst, er at forklare musikken skriftligt*” (Høeg 1992).
- 2 The US English translation of the Danish title *Frøken Smillas fornemelse for sne* of the book and the film was not quite the same as the UK version’s *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow*, which is arguably closer to the original.
- 3 “*Når man er vant til at lege i sne, sætter man ikke sådan spor, for bevægelsen er uøkonomisk, som dårlig vægtoverføring op ad bakke på langrendsski*” (Høeg 1992).