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## 1 Introduction: Demonstratives: Patterns in Diversity

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*Stephen C. Levinson*<sup>1</sup>

This book is an in-depth look at demonstratives in 15, nearly all unrelated, languages (see Table 1.1 below). Demonstratives are, of course, the little words (or morphemes) like *this* and *that* in English, which serve, in their central function, to pick out a referent in the speech event.<sup>2</sup> Demonstratives have played a crucial role in linguistic and philosophical thought, but monographic treatments are rare (see Hanks, 1990; Diessel, 1999), and what we know about them cross-linguistically is limited by the paucity of details found in the average grammar of a language. This volume tries to put this right, by examining demonstratives in depth across the 15 languages. A special feature of this collection of studies is that they have used as part of their analysis precisely the same field instrument, thus providing a *tertium comparationis*, or a grid for precise comparison, of a kind that has never been utilized before. The studies have each been conducted in the field with multiple participants, providing much richer data than is commonly found in language descriptions. This allows us to offer some generalizations about the underlying distinctions found in demonstrative systems with a new certainty. The authors have gone on to supplement this comparison point with observations of their own, derived from long-term investigation in the field. The volume offers a corrective to a large number of preconceptions found in the linguistic, anthropological, psychological and philosophical literature.

This introduction has two major components. A section on preliminaries sketches the state of the art as reflected in the literature from linguistics to brain science. It draws out some of the main issues that make demonstratives so theoretically important, explicates many of the theoretical distinctions that have been made and provides some of the main results from contemporary

<sup>1</sup> This introduction has benefitted substantially from elaborate notes on the chapters made by Sarah Cutfield, and from a short draft by Michael Dunn. I am grateful to Gunter Senft, Harald Hammarström, David Peeters, Niclas Burenhult, Penelope Brown and others for comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> In this introduction the term *demonstrative* refers in the first instance to the pronominal or adnominal forms, while adverbs like *here* and *there* are termed *demonstrative adverbs*. The demonstrative paradigm of any particular language may include additional elements like anaphoric terms.

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research. The second section of the introduction turns more centrally to the business of this volume, explaining the central task used to structure the studies. A substantial subsection draws together the findings from the separate studies and offers some strong generalizations that have emerged from this collective exercise.

## 1 Preliminaries: This Volume in Context

### 1.1 *The Importance of Demonstratives*

Demonstratives like *this* and *that* are within the top 20 most frequent words in English and are among the most deeply conserved and ancient words in languages (Pagel et al., 2013); indeed, their etymology can rarely be traced (Diessel, 1999, but see Hellwig, this volume; Rosés Labrada, 2015). Demonstratives are also among the earliest words learned by children, and often the first closed-class opposition (Clark, 1978; Tanz, 1980). In acquisition, they follow the earlier use of pointing with which they become associated, pointing marking the initiation of systematic intentional and referential communication, with shared attention focused on a third entity (Tomasello et al., 2005; Liszkowski et al., 2012). The association with pointing makes crystal clear that demonstratives have as one of their most important functions a focusing of joint attention on an object in the environment. This makes them a kind of ideal model system for the study of language use: a single word and gesture can function as a full referring act, with all the complexities of the joint attention, common ground, multimodality and pragmatic integration involved in more complex utterances (Clark et al., 1983). Demonstratives and pointing may also be thought of as an ancient substrate of language, closely allied with animal communication systems which are always concerned with the here and now, showing little of the ‘displacement’ typical of human language (despite which they figure only rarely in discussions of language origins).

Demonstratives have also played a critical role in our theory of language. They form part of the deictic field, that is, those expressions in a language that are built for contextual resolution, by reference to the situation of speaking. The deictic field is often divided into the semantic domains of space, time, person, discourse and social dimensions, covering not only demonstratives but also temporal expressions like *now* and *tense*, personal pronouns like *I* and *you*, anaphoric or related expressions, and honorifics (Levinson, 2004). Each of these domains makes essential reference to the context of utterance – one can’t resolve *Now you do this!* without seeing who was addressed when with what demonstration. Deixis poses fundamental problems for understanding the semantics of natural languages and consequently has greatly exercised

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philosophers of language. The tendency has been to conceive of semantics as specifying the states of affairs that match descriptions, with the contribution each linguistic expression makes to that specification being systemically explored. But deictic elements like demonstratives clearly do not play a direct role in that specification – instead, they point to dimensions of the context of utterance which have to be imported to complete the description. A great deal of thought in philosophy and formal semantics has gone into conceptualizing the mechanisms involved, with meaning and reference relativized to context (see, e.g., Braun, 2015 for review), so that *You made this* can be explicated as, say, ‘Anne E. Smith made the indicated painting on or before 7th May 2017’. From the point of view of a cognitive theory of language, this is problematic, because it may not conform to the thought the utterer had in mind when he spoke (perhaps he thought the painting was a photograph and that the maker was called Alice). This dilemma has never been satisfactorily resolved in the theory of semantics (Levinson, 2004). In addition, the paradoxes of self-reference (as in *This statement is false*) have teased philosophers for two millennia. Deixis is what makes languages special and especially complicated compared to the artificial languages of logic and computation because the incorporation of contextual factors into referential language produces a hybrid system which resists any easy theoretical reduction.

Demonstratives have always been taken to be the prototype elements of *deixis* (the term comes from the Greek for ‘pointing’) and have played a key role in semantic theory. It is therefore surprising how relatively little direct exploration of demonstrative semantics and use has been undertaken in any specific language (with exceptions noted below; see also Weissenborn and Klein, 1982; Senft, 1997; 2004; Levinson and Wilkins, 2006). Another gap has been systematic comparison of demonstrative systems across languages, taking into account the details of how the semantics and usage vary across languages. This volume aims to at least partially fill these gaps.

How does one recognize a demonstrative in an unfamiliar language? Largely by function: demonstratives are specialized to refer by exploiting aspects of the context of the speech event to which they direct attention, and hence they often expect a corresponding gesture. It is actually quite difficult to specify the function exactly. Diessel (2006) suggests the function can be specified as (a) indicating the location of a referent relative to the deictic centre, and (b) coordinating speaker and addressee attention on that referent. The two conditions are inter-related: if either (a) or (b) is successful, the other condition is likely to be met, and thus there are two routes to referent identification. Note that although we have a preconceived idea of the core function of demonstratives, namely drawing attention with a gesture to a physical referent in the vicinity of the speech event, the function needs to be generalized to non-material referents and non-gestural usages as in *this city* or *this strange smell*,

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where the demonstrative ‘locates’ the referent in the presumptive common ground of mutually assumed entities. Or if you and I are at a restaurant table with a candle in front of us, *this candle* coordinates attention on a mutually manifest entity (Smith, 1982) without the need for gesture or location information. In many languages there is rich information about the qualities of the referent (e.g. in Goemai, this volume, about the position and support of a referent) which may obviate locational specification. And in many languages, as reviewed below, there may be special forms reserved not for drawing attention to a referent, but for exploiting mutual awareness of it.

Even if we take the key prototype of demonstrative function as an expression with a gesture drawing attention to something in the environment, that alone will not suffice to individuate demonstratives, for it turns out that many definite referring expressions can be used in just such a way (as in *What a peculiar man* said pointing at a man). So demonstratives are also identified by being closed-class items that form small contrastive sets, with distinct properties of morphological combination and distribution in a clause. The form and syntax of demonstratives are of course language specific, and many details of this sort will be found within this book. Thus, it is the combination of distinctive function and a relatively small closed-class set of terms that enables recognition of a demonstrative category cross-linguistically.

### 1.2 *The Form and Syntax of Demonstratives*

The place of demonstratives in the pronominal field of a language varies according to whether a language has third person pronouns proper or just uses demonstratives instead, and in the latter case according to whether there are also dedicated anaphoric pronouns (not aligning with the personal pronouns), and so whether demonstratives are also employed for that function. Bhat’s (2004; 2013) typological survey of pronouns suggests that less than half of all languages have third person pronouns clearly modelled on first and second pronouns; and a third of languages base their third person (anaphoric) uses on demonstratives, sometimes derivationally, or by using a specific demonstrative (often the remote one) as an anaphoric pronoun.

Diessel (1999) provides a useful overview of the morphology and syntax of demonstratives based on a balanced sample of 85 languages. Demonstratives may be free or bound forms or clitics, they may inflect for case, or agree in gender, with a tendency for adverbial forms to be less bound and less inflected. The traditional division of demonstratives into three subclasses, demonstrative pronouns like *this*, demonstrative adjectives or adnominals as in *this book*, and demonstrative adverbs like *here* (location) or *thus* (manner) generally holds up cross-linguistically, to which a subclass of presentationals (as in French *voilà!*) is often added. Diessel (1999) also makes a case for a rarer additional category

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of ‘demonstrative identifiers’ occurring in minimal clauses serving to introduce a referent (glossing, for example, as ‘This is . . .’). In addition, there are verbs of ‘doing like this’ in many languages (Guérin, 2015). These different subclasses can be distinguished on distributional grounds, pronominals constituting an NP on their own, while adnominal demonstratives combine with a nominal phrase to constitute an NP. In about 70 per cent of languages, the pronominal and adnominal stems are the same in form (Diessel, 2013a), but in the rest they differ. Typically, pronominal and adnominal forms will differ in root form, in inflectional possibilities or syntactic distribution. Nevertheless, in some generative accounts they are both conceived to be determiners regardless – intransitive determiners in the case of demonstrative pronouns, and transitive ones in the case of adnominal ones (Abney, 1987; see Diessel, 1999: 62–71 for discussion). This raises the question as to exactly how demonstratives are to be distinguished from definite articles. Lyons (1977) has suggested that definite articles are just demonstratives unmarked for spatial distinctions, for example. But as we will see, many of the systems described in this book have neutral or unmarked demonstratives which contrast strongly in form and function with definite articles in the language in question (see, e.g., the chapter on Tzeltal). Once again, the crucial difference is semantic – the distinction between an instruction to find the referent in the context of the speech event (demonstratives) versus an instruction to find it in the universe of discourse (definite articles), a distinction often reflected in form and always in function.

The demonstratives surveyed in this book have quite different formal properties. Some are affixes as in Chukchi, which, when attached to a pronominal root, make a demonstrative pronoun, and to an adverbial or place root or simply a locative case, an adverbial. Others, as in Tzeltal and Yucatec, are circumclitics with very complex co-occurrence with stems. Some of the demonstrative roots are adverbs, which then derive pronouns, as in Jahai. Many demonstrative adnominals inflect for case, number, gender, animacy and the like, and a wide range of such types can be found in this volume.

### 1.3 *The Semantics of Demonstratives*

We have pointed out that deictic expressions in general get their interpretations from the context of the speech event – *I* refers to the current speaker, *now* to an interval including the time of speaking and *here* to a location including the place of speaking (Bühler’s [1934] 1982 *origo*). In that respect such expressions are variables waiting for further specification from the environment – they are themselves referentially under-specified. The same holds for demonstratives: *this* or *that* are instructions to find the referent in the context but give little clue about how to do this – there may be some spatial opposition (a point we will return to), and obviously identification will be

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much helped by a pointing gesture (and occasionally, in languages like Goemai, this volume, where demonstratives contain classifiers based on the referent's specific properties). In general, then, demonstratives, as with other deictics, work by being semantically general to a point that they invite the recipient to use contextual clues to find a definite interpretation. In *I've hurt this finger*, it is the vacuity of *this* that directs visual attention to the speaker's hands. Similarly, *This smells bad* may refer to whatever the speaker is holding up to her nose, or to the room we just walked into, or whatever is plausible in context. The kind of semantics built into demonstratives is therefore necessarily shallow.

How then is the referent recognized by the recipient? Quite largely just because a demonstrative by convention indicates that the speaker warrants that the addressee can find the referent in the context, given whatever semantic properties the particular demonstrative requires the referent to meet and other signals like gaze and gesture. How should the addressee find the referent, given the relative semantic vacuity of the demonstrative? In just the same way that Schelling Games are resolved (Schelling, 1960), by working out what the speaker thinks that the addressee thinks the speaker supposes to be the salient object of attention in the domain (see, e.g., Clark, 1996). This reflexive reasoning is reflected in the activation of the frontal lobes and the attentional and 'theory of mind' neural networks during demonstrative use (Peeters, Chu, et al., 2015).

But important clues to the identity of the referent lie not only in the demonstrative chosen but also in the contrastive items *not selected*, and here the principles of semantic and pragmatic oppositions become salient: if *that* is used, the implication is that some crucial properties for the use of *this* did not obtain. Those properties may be built into the demonstrative semantics (e.g. *this* may specify spatial proximity), or they may come about by pragmatic obviation (see section 3 below): for example, *that* may not actually specify spatial distance but be neutral for distance, but because *this* was avoided (which may imply spatial proximity), *that* will pick up the complement of possible referents.

In this sort of way, understanding the precise semantics of demonstratives is important for understanding how they function. Where (as mostly) there are contrastive items, these must somehow divide the space of possible referents. One obvious way of doing this is by spatial zones, e.g. distinct radii around the speaker, but spatial zones can also be specified around the addressee, or around the joint space occupied by speaker and addressee. The following figure shows an idealized model of radial categories around the speaker (here the deictic *origo*, Bühler (1982 [1934])), a model that seems to be presumed in many grammatical descriptions. This volume throws considerable doubt on whether any language actually has a system like this.

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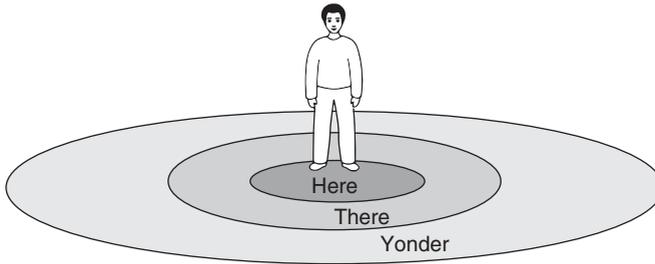


Figure 1.1 Idealized model of speaker-anchored radial spatial categories

In addition to horizontal proximity, more rarely the vertical dimension may be used to carve the search space into higher versus lower zones. These will give restricted search domains for the referent. Less obvious ways of narrowing the search domain are also possible. For example, a contrast can be made between things that are already in our joint attention, as judged by gaze, for example, and things that are now in my attention but not yet in yours. Such systems have been described for Japanese and Turkish (see, e.g., Özyürek, 1998; Küntay and Özyürek, 2002, 2006). Another distinction which occurs is between referents visible to the speaker or recipient or both versus those obscured. Many systems sometimes also specify properties of the referent, such as gender or animacy. Building on earlier work by Anderson and Keenan (1985), Fillmore (1997) and others, Diessel (1999) provides a useful overview of the kinds of contrasts that have been reported in grammars of 85 languages that span many major language families. Hanks (2009) provides a more systematic review of the underlying semantical concepts, noting that systems elaborate on variants in the *origo* or ‘indexical ground’, variants in the mode of access to the referent and various properties of the referent itself. This book supplements earlier work by going into much deeper detail on the actual nature of the contrasts encoded, albeit in a relatively small sample and with restricted methods.

Recently, there has been extensive debate on what might be called the ‘spatial bias’ in the description of demonstrative systems (Hanks, 2005; 2011). This (alleged or real) bias is the presumption that spatial distinctions, usually in terms of distance from the speaker, form the primary semantic axis of contrast between demonstrative items. This bias is reflected in descriptive grammars, where without much investigation demonstratives are labelled as ‘proximal’, ‘distal’, ‘medial’ or the like. Earlier surveys and typologies have reflected this bias in the grammatical descriptions (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Lyons, 1977; Anderson and Keenan, 1985; Diessel, 1999; Dixon, 2003). Hanks (1990; 1992; 2011) points to much more subtle interactional factors

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lying behind some systems, and rather than thinking of the distinctions being organized as constraints on search domains, he emphasizes modes of conceptual access to referents and ways of directing attention – the different modes of perception (vision, audition, etc.), inference and retrieval from memory or discourse. On this analysis, the deictic field naturally extends to anaphora and textual reference (or to endophora as well as exophora), and to an ethnographic understanding of what makes referents salient in a context (Hanks, 1990). Hanks (2011) also notes that the spatial bias has tended to be associated with an egocentric or speaker bias, and that the addressee's access to the referent can be at least as important – the one must signal but the other must grasp, and some demonstrative systems clearly utilize a distinction about where the addressee's attention currently is. Hanks argues that the *origo* or deictic centre, even in what are described as speaker-centric systems, may be much more open, in fact unmarked, and may routinely be addressee transposed, or inclusive of both speaker and addressee (experimental work on Spanish using similar methods to those pioneered in this book substantiates this: Coventry et al., 2008, and Jungbluth, 2003; see also Peeters, Hagoort and Özyürek, 2015 on Dutch).

Hanks' (1990; 2005) work on Yucatec Maya, based on interactional observation, makes a compelling case for dethroning spatial distinctions (but see Bohnemeyer, this volume, on the same language). There is no doubt that an ethnographically grounded interactional perspective, sensitive to social boundaries, is essential to understanding tokens of usage. But Enfield (2003, and this volume), using interactional records, shows that in the case of Lao the same methods substantiate a spatial analysis, albeit a surprising one, in which a spatial sphere of activity or attention is crucial for a distal demonstrative, while the contrastive alternate is not a proximal demonstrative but one unmarked for location. In general, the degree to which spatial coding is crucial seems to be a language-specific matter. But what is clear is that the spatial spheres involved will always be pragmatically elastic. Here, recent work in psychology and the neurosciences is pertinent. Kemmerer (1999) carefully considered the possibility that the proximal/distal distinction so often reported in descriptions of demonstratives maps onto a neurologically determined distinction between peripersonal space and extrapersonal space (a distinction reflected in patients with spatial neglect) but rejects it on the basis that demonstrative use is far more flexible, and many demonstrative systems seem to make a three-way distinction. Coventry et al. (2008), however, show that in both English (a two-term system) and Spanish (a three-term system) usage is indeed sensitive to the peripersonal domain (roughly one's sphere of reach), and moreover, when one extends the peripersonal reach by giving participants a stick, the proximal domain increases accordingly! In English (but not in

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Dutch, see Peeters, Hagoort and Özyürek, 2015) the association of *this* with proximity of referent to speaker is strong enough under conditions of joint attention to elicit an N400 (a neural marker of integration difficulties during interpretation) where there is a spatial incongruency (Stevens and Zhang, 2013). Many papers in this volume report a specific notion of proximity which seems to coincide with the reaching zone, and within which proximal demonstratives may be obligatory (see discussion below and Peeters et al., 2014). And much recent experimentation supports a deep conceptual connection between spatial cognition and demonstratives (see, e.g., Coventry et al., 2014; Bonfiglioli et al., 2009). The discussion of the importance of spatial distinctions is, then, by no means over, and the chapters in this book continue the discussion.

The number of distinctions made in a demonstrative system has often been used as an organizational framework for description and typology, especially for demonstrative pronouns and adnominals (Frei, 1944; Anderson and Keenan, 1985; Diessel, 1999; Dixon, 2003). Although Anderson and Keenan (1985) describe a number of systems as having four or more degrees of spatial distance (up to seven in the case of Malagasy), Fillmore (1982) and Diessel (1999) are rightly sceptical. Nevertheless, the *World Atlas of Language Structures* provides some frequencies for the number of spatial distinctions in adnominals, with *c.* 5 per cent of languages having four or more such distinctions (Diessel, 2013a). Hanks (2011) notes that some complex systems resist a simple radial treatment in distance from ego, requiring instead, for example, notions of laterality or exteriority (areas outside the primary space, as in West Greenlandic; see also Jahai, this volume), or distinct indexical grounds or *origos*, or the kind of interactional factors mentioned above. Whatever the basis of the distinctions, it is important to note that demonstrative pronouns, adnominals and adverbs may make different numbers of cuts (Hanks, 2011). English makes a binary opposition across all three grammatical sub-domains, but many languages have richer distinctions, whereas Tongan distinguishes four demonstratives in the pronouns and only two in the adnominals (Diessel, 2013a). Where the number of distinctions is the same but the forms are different across all these grammatical classes, we have a special type of lexical organization, where a parallel series of semantic oppositions is pursued across a number of form classes – a semantic template or ‘semplate’ (Levinson and Burenhult, 2009). All these paradigm patterns are of considerable interest, and they appear to be very stable over long periods of time, offering a window on long-range language relationships (ongoing work by Nick Evans and Simon Greenhill).

We return below to the semantics of demonstratives in the light of the chapters in this volume.

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#### 1.4 The Uses of Demonstratives

The analysis of demonstratives is much complicated by the fact that they tend to get used for many different functions, some beyond strictly deictic uses, such as tracking referents in discourse. The following diagram (from Levinson, 2004) displays a complex taxonomy of different uses. A first cut can be made between the deictic and non-deictic uses, of which anaphora is the most important: *that man* has a different role when used to point someone out than it has when embedded in a text like *I was introduced to Mr Little: That man was to have a huge influence on my fortunes*. The distinction is usually made more coarsely in terms of *exophoric* (external to the text) versus *endophoric* (text-internal) uses, but, as Fillmore (1997) pointed out, one needs to distinguish anaphora, where a term simply picks up the same reference as a prior term, from discourse deixis, where a term refers to a chunk of discourse itself, as in *Bloop! It sounded like that*. There are additional non-deictic uses like the empathetic *that goddamn son of a bitch* (see the chapter on Dalabon, this volume, and Naruoka, 2006) or the recognitional uses (Himmelmann, 1996) as in *Do you remember that wonderful holiday in Morocco?*

Within the exophoric uses, one needs to distinguish those expressions (gestural uses) that require a gesture (as in *This eye hurts*) from those that don't (symbolic uses as in *This room is beautiful*). Notice that, contrary to some remarks in the literature (e.g., Diessel, 2014), many uses of demonstratives do not require gestures, and much of this book is concerned with those uses. Where gestures occur, the kind of gesture required may vary, from a head nod or lip point, to a marked gaze, to a manual point, or to a demonstration (*This finger hurts*). The shape of the hand and its orientation can also be

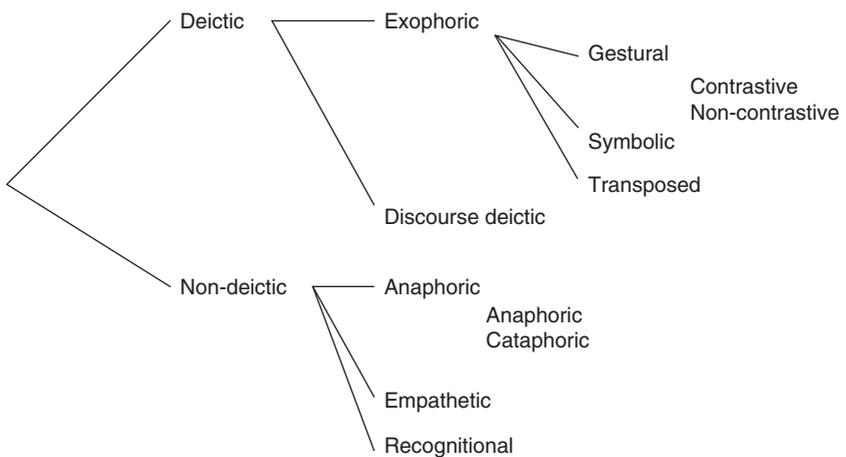


Figure 1.2 The distinct uses of demonstratives (after Levinson, 2004)