

## **Social interaction trumps spatial distance: Preliminary evidence from Yapese tripartite person-based deixis**

Recent laboratory research in psycholinguistics offers robust support for what has come to be known as the *spatial distance effect*, viz. the finding that the accessibility of entities has a strong positive correlation with their imagined spatial distance from the current deictic center (see e.g. Rinck & Bowers 2000). This effect, however, is not echoed in the use of deictic demonstratives to refer anaphorically to entities previously mentioned in discourse.

Strauss (2002) shows that for English, recently activated discourse entities are more likely to be referred to by distal than proximal forms, and proposes that the English proximal is dispreferred because it conveys “ownership” of the named entity by the speaker rather than by the conversants as a whole. Similar results obtain for Dutch (Piwek & Cremers 1996).

Unlike English and Dutch, the tripartite person-based deictic systems found in a number of Oceanic languages offer contrasts in both the social and spatial domains. The speaker proximal/ hearer proximal alternation involves contrast along the interpersonal dimension while the distal term introduces a purely spatial contrast. Recent commentary on the asymmetry between speaker proximal and hearer proximal terms (especially the papers in Senft 2004) suggests that such systems are fertile ground for testing Strauss’ hypothesis.

If Strauss is correct, we should expect to see the hearer proximal, which mitigates speaker ownership but preserves proximity, as the preferred term to indicate endophoric salience. In the current study, two lines of preliminary evidence emerge from a small corpus of Yapese texts (c. 7 000 words) to suggest that this is a viable hypothesis.

First, I present evidence to suggest that hearer proximal terms require a higher minimal degree of accessibility (measured in terms of Gundel Hedberg & Zacharski’s (1993) Givenness Hierarchy) than do either speaker proximal or distal terms.

Second, I examine uses of the hearer proximal form *qer* ‘here near you’ at key points of episodic structure of Yapese narrative. I propose that this form is strategically exploited by narrators to point toward the shared storyworld at particular intervals in which the listener is encouraged to pay close attention. The use of the hearer proximal form neatly combines both spatial proximity and shared ownership of the text.

## References

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