

## **‘Proximal’ and ‘distal’ demonstratives in Dutch spoken dialogues: a cognitive approach**

In this contribution, we will examine the differences in use between distal and proximal demonstrative terms (e.g., singular “this” and “that”, and plural “these” and “those” in English). In our study, we will take distance from the traditional view that the labels proximal and distal reflect the linguistic codification of the spatial concepts of nearby and faraway, respectively. Instead, our analysis will be based on cognitive notions, such as attention, accessibility and importance. The basic idea behind this is that space has to be allocated in memory for various types of entities and that accessibility of the entities decreases as the mental distance grows. Entities may be available in various context types, such as the previous discourse, long-term memory or the perceivable world around us.

We will speak of a demonstrative noun phrase, or demonstrative in short, if the noun phrase contains a demonstrative term, functioning either as a determiner or as a demonstrative pronoun constituting the full noun phrase. The main hypothesis is that proximal demonstratives are preferred to refer to entities with low accessibility and/or high importance, and that distals are preferred in reference to entities with high accessibility and low importance.

We address the problem through a corpus-based quantitative study of the deictic use of demonstratives in Dutch. Two types of dialogue were considered: a. same-time, different-place telephone dialogues between a naive computer user and an expert user (10 dialogues), and b. same-time, same place dialogues between an instructor and a builder of a Lego-blocks construction (10 dialogues). In contrast to the first dialogue type, participants in the second dialogue had access to a shared work space: both builder and instructor could point at and observe objects at a foundation plate. In the first type of dialogue, problems were discussed with respect to computer network connections.

The telephone dialogues contained 507 demonstratives: 39 proximals and 468 distals. We compared these demonstratives with 93 instances of initial demonstratives from the construction dialogues (27 proximals and 66 distals). The study suggests that the distal–proximal distinction indeed corresponds with use of the proximal for intensive/strong indicating and the distal for neutral indicating, but that the relation between proximals and importance has to be rejected. We compare our findings with empirical findings on the use of English demonstratives and argue that, despite some apparent differences, Dutch and English demonstratives behave roughly similarly though not identically. Finally, we put our findings into context by pulling together evidence from a number of converging sources on the relationship between indicating and describing as alternative modes of reference in the use of distal and proximal demonstratives. This will also lead us to a new understanding of the folk-view on distals and proximals as distinguishing between nearby and faraway objects.

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