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Vantage Theory and the use of English demonstrative determiners with proper nouns

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Abstract

This article discusses some apparently paradoxical behavior of the English demonstratives *this/these* and *that/those* as determiners of proper nouns and as metaphorical signals of epistemic and affective stance within the proximal–distal opposition. It is argued that the apparent paradoxes are actually cases of shifting perspectives or points of view on the part of the speaker and that Vantage Theory provides an elegant and motivated account of otherwise perplexing behavior. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Vantage Theory (VT) is based on the tenet that categorization is an essential aspect of human cognition and language use. MacLaury (1995, 1997, 2002) developed VT as an approach to handle color categorization in his work on Mesoamerican languages. He considers color categorization to be analogous to the construction of a point of view, or a "vantage," in physical space and time. Reminiscent of prototype theory, MacLaury proposes that this is accomplished by considering varying degrees of similarity and difference of a stimulus with respect to a set of coordinates, or mental points of reference. An important feature of VT is its focus on the notion of coextensivity, i.e. the property of category overlap. MacLaury claims that judgments of categorization in a situation of possible category overlap are essentially points of view, or vantages. VT also goes beyond the common, general reference to the notion of prototype in linguistic analysis by spelling out a coherent and detailed set of formal constructs and relations to account for linguistic categorization. It also formally accounts for the possibility of shifting vantages within some linguistic or discourse unit.

Recently, VT has begun to be expanded (viz. this special issue as well as *Language Sciences* 24 (5–6)) to handle a variety of phenomena, ranging from grammatical (e.g. Allan, 2002; Głaz, 2002) to discourse (e.g. Fabiszak, 2010), and within fields as varied as second language acquisition (e.g. Pishwa, 2002) and sociolinguistics (e.g. Adachi, 2002).

Given the fundamental position of the space–time continuum metaphor within VT, it seems especially relevant to consider how it can handle spatio-temporal deixis and metaphorical extensions thereof as a contribution to this enterprise. The present article focuses on some apparently paradoxical behavior of the English demonstratives *this/these* and *that/those* as determiners (Dem) of an NP with a Proper Noun (PN), and argues that a VT-inspired approach offers both a more rigorous and a more explanatory framework than previous treatments of demonstratives to account for the phenomena.

2. The problem

PNs, as opposed to common nouns (CN), are generally taken to have definite and unique reference, but in actual English discourse, they can co-occur with the definite proximal *this/these* and distal *that/those* determiners. Although these deictic determiners generally convey an overt or implicit sense of contrast by virtue of their opposition, they can occur with PNs even where no such literal opposition of referents is meant. For example, the sentence in (1) is from a genuine personal letter sent with a newspaper clipping on the life and recent death of a person who was unknown to the letter writer. The facts about the letter-writer's state of knowledge and intent were ascertained by actually asking her.

(1) Not sure if you knew *this Roger Gates* or not.

The letter writer sent the article to her brother because Roger Gates and her brother had attended the same high school during the same period, and she thought that her brother, who now lives in another state, might have known him and therefore be interested. Nothing in the linguistic or situational contexts suggests that one referent is being contrasted with another of the same name.

Likewise, in example (2), there is nothing in the entire novel from which this example is taken that would imply a contrast with another Luke:

(2) "*That Luke* is one hell of an actor," Margery said, as they strolled to the lobby. "He's got quite a future." (Viets, 2005, p. 146)

This behavior would seem to be semantically paradoxical, but only if discourse context and personal attitude are not taken into account. Thus, I argue that the choice of *this/these* vs. *that/those* expresses both a discourse perspective and a personal stance or point of view, i.e. two major vantages, on the part of the speaker, the latter comprising two subvantages: affective, reflecting an emotional state, and epistemic, relating to state of knowledge, in addition to the literal, physically-based proximal vs distal distinction. I suggest that VT offers an especially useful perspective for handling the interrelationships of these factors and resolving the seeming paradoxical behavior of pairing a demonstrative determiner with a proper noun with unique reference for a given context.

3. The data

A total of 400 Proper Noun Phrases (PNP) with demonstrative determiners (Dem) were found and analyzed in their discourse contexts. A few examples were observed in spontaneous speech and immediately recorded verbatim with a description of the situational and linguistic contexts. I collected other examples by hand from novels and other written materials which I read over the course of several years, recording all relevant instances. The novels included 25 American mystery novels (by 22 different authors) and 25 British mystery novels (by 19 different authors) which I read in entirety. Some examples were collected from non-mystery novels, also read in entirety. This allowed for a detailed, discourse and content-based examination of the forms in focus here. The choice of mystery novels as a major data source was motivated by two factors. First, I had become aware of the issues that DemPNPs pose through my own pleasure reading in this genre, and had kept track of where they occurred. Since my reading was actually for its own sake, I originally processed the