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Pre-semantic pragmatics encoded: A non-spatial account of Yurakaré demonstratives

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Abstract

This paper offers a non-spatial procedural account of demonstratives in Yurakaré (isolate, Bolivia). The proposal is based on a quantitative analysis of a corpus consisting of video data from an interactive problem-solving task, the Family Problems Picture Task (San Roque et al., 2012). On the proposed account, the demonstratives' semantics encode the pragmatic processes involved in reference resolution. It is argued that this analysis offers a more adequate account of the corpus data than a spatial analysis. The proposed account supports the view that both the truth-conditional content and the non-truth-conditional pragmatic effects of the demonstratives are derived through pragmatic inference. In this way, the paper contributes to our understanding of the semantics-pragmatics interface, lending support to the idea of a pre-semantic pragmatics (e.g. Levinson, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Recanati, 2004; Korta and Perry, 2008, 2011; Huang, 2013; Lücking et al., 2015) and the inferential nature of truth-conditional meaning (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2004).

Keywords: Demonstratives; Pre-semantic pragmatics; Procedural meaning; Semantics–pragmatics interface; Yurakaré

1. Introduction

One of the influential accounts of demonstratives analyzes them as deictic elements encoding the distance of a referent from the speaker or another deictic center (e.g. Lyons, 1977:646; Fillmore, 1982:48; Anderson and Keenan, 1985:280; Diessel, 1999:35–36). However, recent research shows that such a spatial analysis of demonstratives cannot capture all their uses in interaction (e.g. Enfield, 2003; Hanks, 2005; Cutfield, 2011). This is also true for the Yurakaré (isolate, Bolivia) demonstratives, as will be argued in this paper.

Abbreviations: 1, first person; 2, second person; 3, third person; ABL, ablative; ADAP, adaptive; ADV, adverbalizer; ATT, attention; BEN, benefactive; COM, comitative; COMM, commitment; DCSD, deceased; DEM, demonstrative; DIR, direction; DS, different subject; DSTR, distributive; FUT, future; INS, instrumental; INTSUBJ, intersubjective; JUS, jussive; LOC, locative; MEA, measure; NEG, negation; OBJ, object; PL, plural; POSS, possessive; POT, potential; PROH, prohibitive; PROPN, proper name; PSUP, presupposition; REA, realis; REF, referential; REP, reportative evidentiality; RES, resignation; SBJ, subject; SG, singular; TOP, topic; UV, uncertain visual evidentiality; VPL, verbal plural.

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Yurakaré has a three-term demonstrative system with the forms *ana*, *ati* and *naa*. Examples (1)–(3) from the Dobes-Yurakaré Archive (van Gijn et al., 2011) show some uses that are in principle compatible with a spatial account with the semantics *ana* 'speaker-proximal', *ati* 'addressee-proximal', and *naa* 'distal'.

(1) *nëmmuy* *ana* *ta-n-pëjta-ø=ja* *mala-ø*
simply DEM 1PL.OBJ-BEN-put-3SG.SBJ=REA go.SG-3SG.SBJ
'She just put this (the camera) for us and left.'
(290906_convI)

(2) *papi* *ma-müta-yu* *ati-w*
Papi 3PL.OBJ-pull_out-PROH DEM-PL
'Papi, don't pull those out!'
(290906_convI)

(3) *nij* *tütü-ø* *naa=chi* *poyo*
NEG be-3SG.SBJ DEM=DIR seat
'Don't they have a seat over there?'
(Conversation-NL)

In Example (1), the speaker and her sister are sitting inside a house where they are being filmed by a video camera. They start talking to a group of people who pass by the house. The speaker explains to one of them that the author put the camera into the room and then left them there, using the demonstrative *ana* to refer to the camera. The demonstrative could well be interpreted as 'speaker-proximal', because the speaker is in the room with the camera and the addressee is outside. In Example (2), the speaker is telling her son not to pull out the objects he is playing with. To refer to the objects, she uses the demonstrative *ati*. This use is consistent with an 'addressee-proximal' analysis because the demonstrative refers to an entity close to the addressee. In (3), the speaker is talking to her sister who is sitting next to her, wondering whether the owners of a neighboring house have a seat to offer to their guests who have just arrived. She uses *naa* to refer to the place that is at some distance from both speaker and addressee, which is compatible with a 'distal' analysis of *naa*.

The goal of this paper is twofold: First, it is argued that a non-spatial procedural semantics provides a more appropriate account of the uses of the Yurakaré demonstrative in interaction than a spatial semantics. The argument is based on a corpus of data from an interactive problem-solving task, the Family Problems Picture Task (San Roque et al., 2012).

The second goal of this paper is to make a contribution to the debate about the semantics-pragmatics interface. Looking at the uses of the demonstratives in interaction, it becomes clear that reference resolution relies to a large extent on pragmatic inference, just like the identification of other effects that may be conveyed by their use. Moreover, the basic semantics proposed for the demonstratives explicitly makes reference to contextual information, thus presupposing pragmatic inference as part of reference resolution. The paper thereby adds to the growing body of evidence for a pre-semantic pragmatics (e.g. Levinson, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Recanati, 2004; Korta and Perry, 2008, 2011; Huang, 2013; Lücking et al., 2015), calling into question the classical Gricean (1989 [1975]) input–output model of the semantics–pragmatics interface. The analysis is also compatible with many ideas of relevance theory (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2004).

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, the demonstrative system of Yurakaré is introduced. Section 3 discusses the theoretical background, including the semantics–pragmatics interface, the conceptual-procedural distinction, and previous accounts of demonstratives. The data and methods of analysis are presented in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the proposed semantics and pragmatics for the Yurakaré demonstratives. In Section 6, it is argued that proposed analysis offers a better account of various patterns in the data than the spatial account on the basis of a comparison of the two. In Section 7, it is concluded that both truth-conditional and non-truth-conditional content are derived through pragmatic inference. It is furthermore suggested that the proposed analysis can potentially be extended to other languages.

2. The demonstrative system of Yurakaré

Yurakaré is a language isolate spoken in central Bolivia by an estimated number of 2000 speakers. The Yurakaré people live in small communities mostly along the rivers. Their territory is spread out across a relatively large area. The Yurakaré language is endangered due to a severe break in intergenerational transmission. For a full reference grammar of the language, see van Gijn (2006). A comprehensive ethnographic study is provided by Hirtzel (2010).

Diessel (1999:4) distinguishes four possible syntactic functions of demonstratives: pronouns, determiners, adverbs, and identifiers. In Yurakaré, all three demonstratives can occur in the first three of these functions (see van Gijn, 2006:129–133). Some of the forms are summarized in Table 1.