

Semantic domains of demonstratives and articles: A view of deictic referentiality explored on the paradigm of Croatian demonstratives



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Abstract

We argue that the meanings of demonstratives and articles can be analysed in terms of a combination of the spatial domain and a small set of semantic domains. We propose that deictic terms have a ‘fast semantics’ in the sense that they get their meaning in the course of the communicative act, as a result of an interaction between the interlocutors, which ultimately leads to referential anchoring. We focus on the semantics of demonstratives, presenting a case study of the very rich paradigm of Croatian demonstratives. We submit that articles refer to an ‘epistemic’ domain that forms part of the semantic space of the common ground that is built up during a discursive act. Finally, we compare the semantics of deictic expressions with the specificatory and predicative functions of adjectives.

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1. Introduction: demonstratives, articles and fast meaning processes

Words are said to be deictic if they have an identifiable semantic meaning but their denotation varies depending on contextual facts such as place, time or speaker.¹ This is in contrast to other word classes where the words have meanings that are less dependent on the context.

Gärdenfors (2014) argues that the meanings of many open class words, such as adjectives, verbs and prepositions can be described in terms of *regions* of a single semantic domain. For example, ‘red’ refers to a region of colour space, ‘push’ to a region of vectors in force space, and ‘near’ to a region of physical space.

It has been claimed that deictic expressions require a particular semantic treatment. The main goal in this paper, however, is to argue that the single domain thesis can be extended to deictic mechanisms. In our view, the distinction to be drawn is not between the semantics of deictic and non-deictic expressions, but rather between fast and slow semantic

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¹ Bühler (1934) writes that deictic expressions necessarily depend on the speaker.

processes. We will focus on the semantics of demonstratives, but also argue that the semantics of articles shares a parallel semantic structure. We submit that the meanings of demonstratives and articles can be analysed in terms of a combination of the spatial domain and a fixed set of semantic domains. For example, the demonstratives ‘here’ and ‘there’ refer to regions of physical space, while ‘this’ and ‘that’ refer to a combination of physical space and the object category space. The domains that are used are those that are connected to the ‘core knowledge’ structures: space, objects, actions and numbers (Spelke, 2000, 2004).

The basic communicative function of demonstratives and articles is to help achieve joint reference amongst interlocutors by directing referential processes towards the discourse referent in the external environment or in the mutually shared mental space (common ground). In the terminology of Warglien and Gärdenfors (2013), *referentiality* means that interlocutors achieve a “meeting of minds” on an object, a person, a place, or some more abstract entity.² If the referential entity is an object (or an event) located in the shared visuo-spatial environment of the interlocutors, referentiality often builds on joint attention (Tomasello, 1999). Such joint attention can be established via gaze following or some form of pointing. Diessel (2012:11) writes that establishing joint attention is “one of the most fundamental functions of human communication, providing a foundation for the organization of verbal interactions, the structuring of discourse, and the diachronic evolution of grammar”. If the entity is not present, some symbolic form of expression is required (Gärdenfors, 2003).

In the following section, we first introduce the distinction between fast and slow semantic processes (Gärdenfors, 2014). In section 3, we present our theses and discuss the notion of a semantic domain. We propose that deictic terms belong to ‘fast semantics’ i.e. that they get their meaning in the course of the communicative act, as a result of an interaction between the interlocutors, which ultimately leads to referential anchoring. We argue that fast semantic processes apply to Bühler’s (1934) *Zeigwörter* (pointing words), and try to show that there exists a semantic continuity from pointing gestures to speaking (section 4).

Departing from a general discussion of the semantics of demonstratives (section 5), we present a case study of the very rich paradigm of Croatian demonstratives (section 6), bringing out the semantic domains lexicalized by the various elements of the paradigm. We then extend our analysis to articles (section 7). We submit that articles refer to an ‘epistemic’ domain that forms part of the semantic space of the common ground that is built up during a discourse (Clark, 1992). In the final part of the paper, we compare the semantics of deictic expressions with the specificatory (attributive) and predicative functions of adjectives, and propose that the specificatory use of adjectives shows close similarities with the semantics of deictic expressions.

2. Slow and fast meaning dynamics

The fundamental role of human communication is to affect the state of mind of others – bringing about cognitive changes. Warglien and Gärdenfors (2013) present a semantic theory based on “meetings of minds”. A meeting of minds means that the representations in the minds of the communicators become sufficiently compatible for them to reach the goals that prompted the communication.

On the basis of this theory, Gärdenfors (2014) distinguishes two basic types of meetings of minds: one *slow* and one *fast*. The slow one concerns how a community over time adjusts their uses of words, gestures, etc., so that they obtain relatively fixed meanings within the community that are largely independent of any particular communicative context. The slow process applies to most content words.

The fast process concerns establishing a shared world – *common ground* – that becomes mutually manifest during a dialog or a similar exchange of communicative acts and then building referentiality on this common ground. Several researchers (e.g. Stalnaker, 1978; Clark, 1992; Pickering and Garrod, 2004) have emphasized that human communication to a large extent relies on the interlocutors’ sharing a common ground, that is, shared or overlapping mental spaces that set the frame for unique referential identification and more general meaning constructions.

In the fast process expressions obtain their meanings during a communicative interaction. Such a process sometimes functions without the aid of language. As an example, consider *declarative pointing* (Bates, 1976; Brinck, 2004; Liszkowski et al., 2007; Gärdenfors and Warglien, 2013). This process consists of one individual pointing to an object or location and, at the same time, checking that the other individual (the ‘addressee’) focuses her attention on the same object or location. The addressee, in turn, must check that the pointer notices the addressee attending to the right entity. This “attending to each others’ attention” is known as *joint attention* (Tomasello, 1999) and it is perhaps the most fundamental form of a meeting of minds via communication. Apart from pointing and other non-linguistic gestures, fast meaning processes can also be realized by verbal means, in particular by the use of deictic words. The best examples are demonstratives, which is not surprising as these words are, indeed, the most universal and the most immediate verbal correspondences to the pointing gesture (Diessel, 1999). We shall return to this class of expressions in section 5.

² This is sometimes called referential anchoring.

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