

Language Subjectivity Through English Demonstratives

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Abstract

English demonstratives function dynamically as the thread through their deictic usage. They characterize language subjectivity with its wide use in the subcategories of deixis, in so far as it reflects the psychological characteristics of human mind. Locutionary subjectivity of self-expression epitomizes demonstratives and contributes to the language phenomenon.

Key words: demonstratives; subjectivity; self-expression; egocentricity

1. Introduction

Demonstratives mainly consist of the demonstrative pronouns *this/ these, that / those* as well as demonstrative adverbs *here* and *there* (Lyons, 1995, p.302-303), while the demonstrative usages as determiners and pronouns are focused here. They have always been part of the underpinnings for deixis study from ancient Greece to modern linguistics. Although they have been approached from the philosophical perspective and descriptive perspective, egocentricity of them is highlighted as the essential characteristic. Russell expounded that all indexicals or egocentric particulars can be translated into expressions containing *this*, where the latter referred to a subjective experience (cited in Levinson, 1987, p.57). Levinson (1995, p.63-64) concluded that it is generally true that deixis is organized in an egocentric way, which is the case with demonstratives. That is, they are anchored to specific points in the communicative event, and the unmarked anchorage points, constituting the deictic center, are typically assumed to be as follows: 1) the central person is the speaker, 2) the central time is the time at which the speaker produces the utterance, 3) the central place is the speaker's location at utterance time or coding time, 4) the discourse center is the point which the speaker is currently at in the production of his utterance, and 5) the social centre is the speaker's social status and rank, to which that status or rank of addressee or referents is relative. His gloss of egocentricity covers the demonstratives from the basic spatial-temporal-personal respects to the derivative usages of them, which becomes the standing-point for the research of their subjectivity.

Demonstratives are the stronghold of deixis due to its patent flexibility to facilitate our interaction, but on the other hand, the flexibility and simplicity contribute to its subtlety for our study. Their usages on many occasions fall out the traditional truth-conditional semantics, because they cannot be fully accounted for by the truth value. Nonetheless, the contextual parameters, in particular the speaker's subjective involvement or calculation in the utterance should be better evaluated so that demonstratives can be further approached.

2. Subjectivity in the Dynamic Functions of Demonstratives

2.1 Survey of Demonstratives Usages

Demonstrative determiners or pronouns of the two-term opposition between *this/ these* and *that/those* are the most obvious deictic terms in English, and the fundamental uses of the two pairs are in location reference. Locations can be specified relative to the reference point which the current speaker occupies (Saeed, 2000, p.174). Furthermore, items proximal to the speaker or the ego are often described as *this/these*, whereas items distal to the subjective entity or the ego *that/those*:

e.g. 1) *This is the Summer Palace.*

2) *Look at that pigeon over there.*

We can visualize that a guide indicates the Great Wall to the tourists at the gate of it by uttering (1), while the speaker of (2) indicate certain distance between self and the referent.

The plasticity of demonstratives is self-evident in the extensions, that is, they are often transferred as a metaphorical shift from the more concrete domain of physical space to the more abstract domains, which are defined localism (Saeed, 2000, p.177-178). Take the temporal subcategory for example:

3) *That year was much colder than this one is.*

This example also demonstrates that the deictic center in the temporal coordinates of the speaker, which transpires that the speaker's anchoring point in coding the message about time is now.

The calculation of proximal-or-distal social relations is in analogy to that in spatial and temporal dimension in communication, while it is somewhat covert for the measure of social distance among the interactants. Nevertheless, linguists like Brown and Levinson (1987) have suggested that interactants inevitably calculate their social distance in communication events as a significant variable for redressive politeness strategy. For instance, in the case of a first meeting for introduction *this* is often employed to introduce the other two parties, which has somehow been our formula based on politeness or the intention to relieve the strangeness and build the rapport. The complicated facts demonstrate that the shift from *that* to *this* is presumed to show empathy, which is termed *empathetic deixis* by Lyons (1995). Admittedly, it is beyond the scope of truth-conditional semantics because locutionary subjectivity complicates people's calculation in using the demonstratives.

In addition to the basic subcategories where demonstratives are widely used, discourse has also been intersected with the demonstrative pronouns or determiners. In general, *this* indicates the forthcoming portion of the discourse while *that* signals the foregoing part of the discourse. It appears that the speaker or the writer unfolds the event by means of the logical sequence. Moreover, the anchorage points of demonstratives in discourse suggest the subjective ordering of them in our minds.

Anyhow, the subject-object binary rationalism cannot exclude the subjective self-expression by utterance, which is termed deictic readjustment (Wu, 2003, p.408) and more concerns about the subjectivity in speech events can promote our understanding of them from more varied perspectives.

2.2 Dynamic Subjectivity

Subjectivity itself functioned prominently but pejoratively over the long history, even Chomsky flawed formal semantics seriously both theoretically and empirically by their failure to give due weight to the phenomenon to subjectivity (Lyons, 1995, p.336). The assertion of Cartesian rationalism is objectivity prejudiced against subjectivity, which plays down the non-propositional component of language. However, language is simply not an instrument for the expression of propositional thought. Functional linguistics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics all have challenged absolute objectivism and highlighted that languages not only express the proposition but also the thinking entity's or speaker's ideas, feelings and attitude (Shen, 2001, p.269). Lyons (1995, p.337) subsumed the ideas into post-Cartesian dualism. Subjectivity is not the so-called unscientific and untestable mentalism in the empiricist tradition, whereas the term subjectivity denotes the property or set of properties of being either a subject of consciousness, i.e., of cognition, feeling and perception or a subject of action or agent (ibid). Locutionary subjectivity, i.e. the subjectivity of utterance contributes to the distinction between the internal subjective self, ego and the external non-ego, or non-self at different levels of language, and demonstratives are encoded with subjectivity in use. The locutionary agents more often than not express himself or herself by means of demonstratives, namely self-expression in the use of language. In addition, self-expression cannot be simply reduced to the expression of knowledge of propositional knowledge and beliefs. The inadequacy of truth-conditional semantics for the inability to handle the phenomenon of subjectivity leaves us much scope to approach from other different perspectives.

3. Subjectivity Study from Non-truth-conditional Perspectives

3.1 Pragmatic Perspective

Levinson (1987) and Saeed (1995) both have emphasized the concept of grammaticalization in their works, and Traugott investigates subjectivization from the diachronic point of view and posits that it reflects the evolution from semantics to pragmatics. Besides, meaning is increasingly reliant on the speaker's attitude to the proposition and she emphasizes the repeated process of pragmatic inference for the subjective expressions.

Pragmatic parameters are involved in interlocution for the understanding of meaning while conversational implicature is calculated from the contextual factors. Grice proposed Cooperative Principle (CP) and the corresponding maxims for inferencing. Demonstratives have revealed the grammaticalized features in the dynamic extension of use. *This* usually refers to the referent proximal to the locutionary agent's location as well as the closeness in psychological distance (Yule, 1996: 13) and the physical closeness has been grammaticalized in other respects in the deictic field. The interlocutors tend to readily understand the subjectivized expression for politeness, intimacy or other reasons, as can be illustrated in the forthcoming example:

e.g. (4) *This/ That was a lovely party.*

(5) *This/ That is the man I could rely on.*

The two compliments of the same subject can be differentiated in so far as the degree of appreciation by *this* and *that*. *This* conveys the affirmative attitude to a greater extent than does *that*. The subjectivized use of *this* is generally not unusual, while the subjectivity encoded in *that* is inclined to undergo more tests in inferencing. Anyhow, the dynamic use of demonstratives in a sense can predict the grammaticalization of their use.

Traugott (1995) advocates that any grammaticalization likely involves subjectivizations and interlocutors communicate with their construal of the objective circumstances, which is the realignment of meaning.

3.2 Functional Perspective

Halliday (1994) has proposed the three metafunctions of language: ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning. The sociological perspective of the theory is grounded on the interrelation between language and context for the construal of meaning which is the choice. Demonstratives can contribute to all the three functions in utterance and text for the speaker's communicative intentionality.

It can be exemplified in (4) and (5): first, *this* and *that* both play the role as the Subject at the level of interpersonal function whereby the predominance of the demonstratives is self-evident with regard to the grasp of the clause and clause complex. Second, in the relational process in terms of ideational function, *this* and *that* both are the Carrier of the Attributes, while the apparently identical attributes are evaluated quite differently for the sake of distinct carriers, which demonstrates the extraordinary status of demonstratives to diffuse the meaning. Third, *this* and *that* are the prominent part of the theme, which is the starting point of information transmission. The three metafunctions are intermingled in the same element of the two examples to specify its importance; thereby the interlocutors can attach more importance to it for the patent

subjectivity. The dynamic extension of the demonstratives is illustrated in the personal perspective. The preceding examples demonstrate how the speaker encodes his thought and judgement of the possible into language, which should be decoded by the listener by means of contextual factors and inferencing. As a matter of fact, it is a complicated process from mind to the realization by wording. In addition, the functional approach to the wording concerning the three metafunctions reflects that language is a choice on the grounds of coordination of mind, interpersonal exchange of information and textual effects, which in a sense validates the subjectivity of utterance, i.e. locutionary subjectivity.

Apart from that, their flexible use in discourse is emphasized from the perspective of cohesion, which is the representation of the coherence. The demonstratives as one of the cohesive devices are considerably convincing examples of the thread of subjectivity through the speaker's interaction or the writer's scheming of the message, which is crucial for the understanding of the interlocutors' intentionality.

3.3 Cognitive Perspective

As spatial descriptions especially the deictic demonstratives are concerned, their dependence on the relative position and the viewpoint of the speaker is salient. Moreover, the nonspatial use of demonstratives based on our knowledge, belief and attitudes as well as spatial-temporal location reveals the perspective of our construal operations. The philosophical notion of situatedness as the closest cognitive property to perspective suggests that location must be construed broadly to include temporal, epistemic and cultural context as well as location (Croft and Cruse, 2004, p.58). Demonstratives, as the derivative source of other extended usages, are designated the subject's situatedness in the scene. In other words, one layer of conceptualization displayed by them is relative to the situatedness of the speech act participants.

According to Croft and Cruse (2004, p.62), subjectivity refers to how one conceptualizes a scene that includes the speaker herself or himself. From a communicative perspective, we are situated as participants in the speech event, which defines out spatial-temporal coordinates and our roles in the speech event. Subjectivity penetrates the demonstratives in the epistemic and empathetic respects. These construal operations in interaction on the other hand reinforce the existence of subjectivity of utterance.

Human perception and image schematic structure as well as the interactive characteristics of language underlie the deixis. It is assumed that there is a unified conceptual centering of events in reality and egocentricity modeling of reality has priority over other elements of the speech situation.

4. Conclusion

English demonstratives are characteristically dynamic, which have been extended beyond the spatial scope to other deictic fields with great flexibility. Their use invalidates the denial of language subjectivity and verifies the significance of the inherent subjectivity of demonstratives for its variations in use. The exploration of subjectivity can be approached from the pragmatic, functional and cognitive perspectives, each of which reflects the dynamic subjectivity of demonstratives in certain distinctive aspects. They contribute to the study of the language phenomenon on the grounds of the correlation between mind and language, which are the new vantage points to reevaluate demonstratives and possibly the gateways to language study.

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