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From pointing in space to pointing in language: A cognitive semantics of demonstratives and articles

Abstract:

The basic distinction for demonstratives concerns location in space. All languages seem to have a binary distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’ or a ternary distinction between ‘here’, ‘there’ and ‘yonder’ (Diessel 1999). Some languages only include demonstratives for location, but many languages use them for other domains, for example ‘this’ and ‘that’ for objects.

In the central part of the paper we argue that the semantics of deictic expressions can be based on a theory of mind that enables the communicative partners to adopt the perspective of another person. This view is taken to anchor the hypothesis that demonstratives stem from the pointing gesture (a precursor of language) while, at the same time, demonstratives represent the possible source of lexically coded joint attention elements that drive the emergence and development of language (e.g. articles).

We argue that demonstratives originate in the locational meaning and are extended to other domains by metaphorical extensions. We have performed an analysis of Croatian demonstratives that form a very rich system (Gärdenfors and Brala 2018), including not only the domains of location and object, but also path, time, manner, size and other properties, and even discourse properties. We study in which ways the different semantic categories of meanings expressed by different demonstratives in the Croatian language map onto the system of different word types, i.e. grammatical categories in language (thus providing further arguments for some grammaticalization theories).

As regards articles, they have historically evolved out of demonstratives. We argue that semantically determiners function as demonstratives ‘pointing’ metaphorically to an epistemic domain created by the knowledge of the interlocutors. This domain emerges from two basic distinctions: (1) Whether the speaker S can uniquely identify the referent or not (specificity); and (2) whether the speaker believes that the hearer H can uniquely identify the referent in the S-H shared universe of discourse (common ground) or not (definiteness). We take definiteness and specificity to be intrinsically linked to the identifiability of the referent in the universe of discourse by the discourse participants. Combining these two dichotomies generates a 2-by-2 grid that represents a minimal structure of the epistemic domain. In English, and many other languages with articles, the definite article ‘the’ only refers to the case (specific, definite), while the indefinite ‘a(n)’ refers to the three other cases. Other languages have other combinations of articles and may rely on further distinctions of the knowledge of the interlocutors.