

Semantic aspects of the referring expressions, *this*, *that*, *the*, and *it*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to capture some semantic functions of the referring expressions, *this*, *that*, *the*, and *it*. These expressions are examined under three conceptual dimensions: a) markedness, b) proximity, and c) familiarity. For markedness, *this* and *that* are considered to be more marked than *the* and *it* because of their deictic function. Moreover, *this* is more marked than *that* due to its limitedness in space range. Regarding proximity, *this* refers to things closer to speaker whereas *that* denotes ones farther away from them both physically and psychologically. As for familiarity, *that* often establishes common understanding among participants while *this* expresses relative newness. Discussions accompany various examples, and it is hoped to provide useful information on semantic features of the expressions for English learners who wish to go beyond prescriptive grammar.

- (1) a. What's *this*, a note from Steve? (TV show *Wings*)
b. ?What's *it*, a note from Steve?

The speaker of (1a) is holding a piece of paper, which they assume is a note from Steve. *This* in (1a) can receive stress since it entails a contrastive tone because of its deictic function whereas *it* in (1b) cannot receive stress because it is too exhaustive, leaving no room for other options. In other words, the referent of *it* is already understood. Therefore, question (1b) is highly unlikely. Now, consider the opposite case.

- (2) a. Genie: Three wishes to be exact. And ix-nay on the wishing for more wishes. That's *it*–three. (Movie *Aladdin*)
b. ?That's *this/that*–three.
- (3) a. Rachel: Alright thanks, oh Ross could you stop by the coffee house and get me a muffin?
Ross: Sure what kind?
Rachel: Umm let me think...What do I want, what d-o I w-a-n-t...
Ross: Please take your time, it's an important decision. Not like, say, I know! deciding to marry someone, this is about a muffin.
Rachel: Blueberry.
Ross: Blueberry *it* is.
Rachel: Thanks. (TV show *Friends*)
b. ?Blueberry *this/that* is.

In (2), substituting *it* with *this* or *that* creates a bizarre utterance as shown in (2b). The reason for this is most likely concerned with the specifying function of *this* and *that*, as explained in Morris (1993): “The use of either ‘this’ or ‘that’ would have resulted in an unwanted effect of particularization” (p.216). Genie, the speaker of (2a), intends to make a final statement, which is incompatible with a contrastive or specific sense associated with *this* and *that*. Likewise, Ross in (3) makes sure that Rachel's choice is blueberry and nothing else.

Yet another example to illustrate a difference between the marked deixis and the unmarked non-deixis is the following:

- (4) “The brigadier and his wife had no children,” said Edward Hebbinge. “I think,” he added fairly, “you could say that that was the real trouble.” “*This* happens,” said Sloan. “*It* doesn't usually make for trouble on its own.” (Mystery novel *Passing Strange*, p.48)

The use of *this* in (4) is marked in that it indicates a change of status. More specifically, Sloan takes over the role of Edward Hebbinge, who initially brought the information that the brigadier and his wife had no children. The use of *this* here breaks up the flow of the conversation and draws special attention. *It happens* cannot indicate such a change since *it*, being the most general and neutral, is used to keep the flow. The

use of *it* in the following sentence is a good illustration of this point. There is no speaker change, and utterances are desired to proceed smoothly, and thus substituting *it* with *this* here would cause an unwanted effect.

So far, I have discussed the deictic/non-deictic distinction in terms of markedness, concluding the former as more marked and the latter as less marked. The next question is what makes *this* more marked than *that* and what makes *the* more marked than *it*. In order to see the difference of the first set, *this* and *that*, consider (5).

- (5) a. How's *that* throat? (Lakoff, 1974, p.351)
b. How's *this* throat?

One possible context for (5) may be a dentist situation where a doctor says the sentences in (5) to their patient. It is much easier to picture the situation where the doctor says (5a) than (5b). The reason seems to be attributed to the difference in proximity between *this* and *that*. The throat, belonging to the patient's body, is located in some distance from the doctor. Therefore, it is more natural to use the distant deixis *that* than to use the proximate deixis *this*. The doctor could say *this throat* in a situation where the patient is a small child and they are holding them in the arms. Apparently, the context for *this* is more restricted, and therefore more marked.

The second set is *the* and *it*. They are both non-deictic and considered as relatively unmarked. The question concerns what makes *the* carry a more marked flavor. The following example may be helpful to discuss the difference between the two items.

- (6) "I daresay," said Sloan briefly, "*that reel* wasn't meant to be found at all."
"No sir." "Ten to one someone hoped that they would get a chance to put *it* back where they found *it*," said Sloan, half his mind on something else. (Mystery novel *Passing Strange*, p.91)

The italic *it* in (6) refers to the reel previously mentioned. Actually, the reel has already been considerably discussed in the story before the scene described in (6). The use of *it* in (6), therefore, is the most natural in the context since, as discussed above, *it* maintains the flow of the conversation, and also the referent of *it* is usually in focus or a topic (Gundel, *et al.*, 1993). If the full noun phrase, *the reel*, is used in either of the positions of *it*, the speaker is assumed to have a special purpose of doing so, most likely, the purpose of reminding the audience of what *it* refers to. If it is not the case, the full noun phrase would be merely redundant, and virtually, the substitutions in both positions would be highly unacceptable as in (7).

- (7) ?"...they would get a chance to put *the reel* back where they found *the reel*,"...

It can be concluded, then, that *the NP* is more informative or more explicit than *it*, and using *the NP* over *it* is often an indication of a special purpose. In this sense, *the* is more marked than *it*. The following is an

example where speaker uses a full noun phrase over a pronoun for a special purpose:

- (8) Phoebe: Hey...Ooh, how's Hilda? Is she working out?
Rachel: Ohh, *my new assistant* is working out, yes.
Joey: Was she happy you gave her the job?
Rachel: Oh, *my-my new assistant* was very happy that I hired *my new assistant*. (TV show *Friends*)

In (8), Rachel's friends, Phoebe and Joey, assume that Rachel hired Hilda as her assistant. The truth is that she did not hire her, but instead, she hired Tag because she found him cute. She is embarrassed about it and tries to hide the fact that she hired him by avoiding using a gender-specific pronoun. This is apparently a marked case.

Proximity

It was briefly discussed in the section above that the deixises *this* and *that* differ in proximity. Borrowing Lyons' (1975) semantic features, *this* is characterized as [+proximate] and *that* as [-proximate]. Consider the following example.

- (9) Chandler: Hi! Hi. Okay, there was a slight mix-up at the jewelry store, the ring you're about to propose with was supposed to be held for me. So, I'm gonna need to have *that* back. But, in exchange I'm willing to trade you *this* beautiful, more expensive ring.
Ew.
Phoebe: Wow! I would trade.
Customer: It is beautiful, but I'm gonna use *this* one. Now, if you'll excuse me.
Chandler: No-no! This is my fiancé and her heart was set on *that* ring. You don't want to break her heart now do you?
Phoebe: Yeah, do you want to break a dying woman's heart?
Customer: You're dying?!
Chandler: Yeah, she's dying.... Of a cough apparently.
Phoebe: Yes, and it is my dying wish to have *that* ring. See, if I'm not buried with *that* ring then my spirit is going to wander the nether world for all eternity....
Chandler: Okay, that's enough honey! (TV show *Friends*)

In (9), Chandler and Phoebe have a ring, and Customer has another, and all the characters stick to using *this* to refer to their own and *that* to refer to the other's. This clearly reflects a spatial difference between *this* and *that*.

Besides the difference in space, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) points out a temporal difference between

the demonstratives with the example of *this morning* referring to today and *that morning* indicating either a past or a future distant morning. These spatial and temporal differences are rather physical. Demonstratives have also been studied in relation to “the assumed psychological and social relations between writer and addressee” (Maes, *et al.*, 2022, p.2). One of such studies is Chen (1990), who discusses the function of *that* being “to signal the emotional distance between the speaker and his referent” (p.148). Following this path, an assumption for proximity in this paper is posited as follows: the proximity distinction between *this* and *that* is realized both physically and psychologically. The following examples illustrate more of psychological distance.

(10) *That* asshole Cheney is trying to fuck over the Obamas. (Doran and Ward, 2015, p.63)

(11) Rachel: Well, you’re lucky you never met *that* bitch Sharon Majesky. (TV show *Friends*)

(12) Joey: Yeah but we won’t be able to like get up in the middle of the night and have those long talks about our feelings and the future.

Chandler: Not once did we do *that*. (TV show *Friends*)

In (10), *that*, working together with the swear word *asshole*, represents the speaker’s negative evaluation on Cheney. Similarly, in (11) Rachel’s hatred towards Sharon Majesky seems to almost push her away with the use of *that*. In (12), Joey is overly sad about his best friend and roommate Chandler moving out. Chandler is more calm about it and uses *that*, which “serves to distance what it evokes from the speaker’s sphere of interest by situating it outside of the conversational locus” (Morris, 1993, p.214). In contrast, the following example with *this* entails psychological proximity.

(13) Chandler: Guys? I’ve got something important to tell ya. Guys? Guys?! I’m gonna ask Monica to marry me.

Joey: I think we gotta end the freeze out.

Ross: Wait a minute, is *this*, is *this* for real?

Chandler: Yeah, check out the ring.

Joey: Oh my God!!

Ross: So you two are really serious?!

Chandler: Yep, pretty much.

Ross: You-you’re gonna get married?! I mean... We’re gonna be brothers-in-law! (TV show *Friends*)

In (13), Ross is excited to hear the news that his best friend Chandler is going to propose to his sister Monica. By using *this*, Ross seems as if he takes the news from Chandler and situates it in his proximate position. The use of *this* here, instead of *that*, which might have been appropriate since the source of the news is the other speaker, Chandler, makes the referent more personal. Viewing examples (9) to (13), it seems to be proper to conclude that the sense of [± proximate] associated with *this* and *that* is operative in

a psychological sense as well as in a physical sense.

Familiarity

The last conceptual dimension to be considered is familiarity. Specifically, *that* is proposed to be more familiar, and *this*, less familiar. In relation to the proximity characteristics discussed in the section above, there is an issue to pay special attention to as Lakoff (1974) notices: "... it seems at first hard to see why the distancer *that* establishes solidarity and implies shared emotions" (p.353). Lakoff, then, provides the following solution: "... spatial *that* establishes a link between speaker and addressee: ... speaker and addressee are assumed to share a previously-built up reaction, so the subject must be one that is culturally (or idiosyncratically) assumable as well-known" (p.353). The examples below manifest this argument.

- (14) For *those* inquiring minds who keep asking, here it is. Yep–Scott is officially ONE! (Blog post, *For those inquiring minds...*)
- (15) Robert: Listen, I was wondering if you were doing anything tomorrow night.
Rory: Oh. Um, I don't know. Why?
Robert: Well, it's Finn's birthday. He's having a party. Lots of booze, no food whatsoever.
Rory: Ah, *that* Finn. (TV show *Gilmore Girls*)
- (16) Joey: Yeah but we won't be able to like get up in the middle of the night and have *those* long talks about our feelings and the future.
Chandler: Not once did we do that. (TV show *Friends*)

Example (14) is highly cultural. The phrase *inquiring minds* has been almost like a cliché to refer to nosy people ever since some tabloid newspaper writer started to use it as some sort of a catch phrase. The use of *those*, for which I do not make any substantial distinction from *that* in this paper except that they differ in number, is possible in (14) without a specific referent in the preceding discourse because of this shared knowledge about the phrase. In (15), receiving Robert's description of Finn's party, Rory recognizes who Finn is and expresses her familiarity with him using *that*. Example (16) is the same dialogue as example (12) in the previous section. Here, the use of *those* in Joey's words is focused: Joey talks as if he and Chandler habitually have long talks in the middle of the night, and that is a shared fact. *That*, therefore, serves to convey some distance both physically and psychologically from one point of view, but from another point of view, it functions to refer to familiarity.

In contrast, *this* is generally less familiar than *that*. To see this point, consider the following examples.

- (17) I see there's going to be peace in the mideast.
This Henry Kissinger really is something. (Lakoff, 1974, p.347)
- (18) Rob: I cannot believe *this* Paul guy when he said he was born in 2001.
(Naturally occurring data)

Example (17) is pragmatically natural when it is uttered in the period shortly after Henry Kissinger comes to play a role in the political world. This constraint in time attributes to the use of *this*, which denotes relatively new familiarity. A similar use of *this* is found in (18), where the new student Paul is mentioned as *this Paul guy*. Rob was surprised to hear how young Paul was. If Paul had not been new in class, Rob wouldn't have said *this Paul guy*, but would have simply said *Paul*. Given the examples (14) to (18), the familiarity assumption with respect to *this* and *that* is expected to hold for a large number of other instances.

So far, *this* has been described as less familiar than *that*. Although this characteristic is surely observed, *this* often not only just gives a referent a less familiar flavor, but also represents recent occupancy in speaker's mind. Taking (17) as an example, the speaker is not very familiar with Henry Kissinger, and at the same time, Henry Kissinger seems to be one of their top interests at the moment. Similarly in (18), Rob's mind might be currently occupied with the new student Paul. The sense of recent occupancy seems to be shared by the so-called indefinite or cataphoric *this*. Consider the following examples.

(19) Pedro: I got a present for you, Jim. A bag of the finest dope in Manhattan.

You know, me and you, like old times.

Jim: I can't.

Pedro: Come on. It would be dynamite.

Jim: I got *this* thing to do. Why don't you come check it out?

(Movie *The Basketball Diaries*)

(20) Genie: Let's make some magic! How about it? What is it you want the most?

Aladdin: Well, there is *this* girl...

Genie: Wrong! I can't make anybody fall in love, remember?

Aladdin: But, but, Genie, she's smart and fun and...

Genie: Pretty?

Aladdin: Beautiful! (Movie *Aladdin*)

This thing in (19) and *this girl* in (20) are both first mentioned items. Since this use of *this* can be replaced by the indefinite article *a*, it is called "indefinite" or since it does not refer backward but forward, it is named "cataphoric." The indefinite *this* is different from the "less familiar" *this* in that the former does not have a referent in previous discourse while the latter does. The referent may or may not be explicitly stated, and when it is not, it is usually commonly recognizable among participants. Even though these two types of *this* have the apparent difference, the examples in (17) and (18) have something in common with those in (19) and (20): they all show recent occupancy in speaker's mind. That is, speaker's current mind seems to be quite occupied by *thing* in (19) and *girl* in (20), both of which occur with *this*. Furthermore, recent occupancy typically shows vividness or emphasis. This flavor seems to be conveyed by all of the last four examples. It is worthy to mention that the distinction between the "less familiar" *this* and the indefinite *this* described earlier can be neutralized if one takes the view that speaker does not bring a

totally new topic using the indefinite *this* but rather refers back to the topic or issue already in their mind. The following diagram helps to illustrate this discussion.

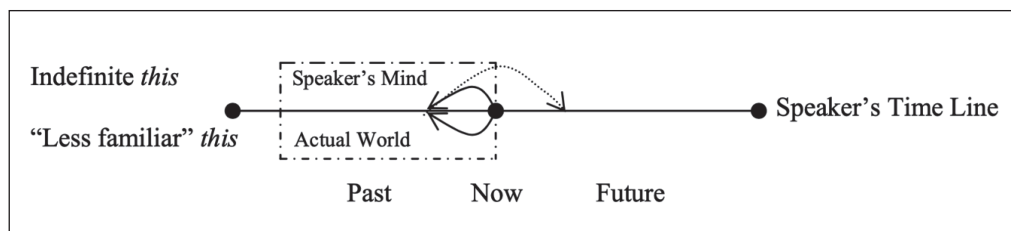


Figure 2. The Representation of Indefinite *this* and “Less familiar” *this*

After all, it is suggested that the indefinite or cataphoric *this* has no distinctive separation from the “less familiar” *this*.

Conclusions

I have presented in this paper three assumptions regarding the referring expressions, *this*, *that*, *the*, and *it*: 1) in terms of markedness, *this* is the most marked, followed by *that*, *the*, and *it*, which is the least marked, 2) in terms of proximity, *this* is proximate and *that* is distant physically and psychologically, and 3) in terms of familiarity, *that* is more familiar than *this* in that *that* denotes more widespread shared knowledge among participants while *this* is associated with relative newness. It is also suggested that the indefinite *this* is anaphoric in terms of referring back to an entity in speaker’s mind, and thus it is similar to the “less familiar” *this*, which has a referent in previous discourse.

The examples taken from movies, TV shows, novels, blogs, naturally occurring data, and previous literature are given to support these assumptions. They turned out to be quite decent—perhaps decent enough to be handed down to learners of English who wish to acquire natural English. However, they are by no means final statements about the referring expressions. Continuous work on testing them with further examples is expected to reveal which is a stronger force when they are competing.

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