

## **Thinking Back on the Deixis Research: What Does It All Mean?**

In thinking about the presentations I have made at the International Linguistics Association (ILA) over four decades, I have become aware of how they have marked a certain evolution not only in my understanding of deixis theory but also in the design and implementation of empirical research that attempted to confirm various aspects of this theory with respect to spatial and temporal deixis. I will briefly characterize what the four presentations dealt with before I move on to the fifth presentation—the one I am now making—which uses five distinct perspectives to place the research in a larger framework.

### **First Presentation at ILA in the Early 1970s**

I was invited to make this presentation soon after I began teaching at Columbia University—Applied Linguistics at Teachers College and Hausa at the School of International and Public Affairs. In the first year that I was teaching Hausa, there were speakers of other West African languages (Igbo and Ashanti) in the class. Their presence led to a serendipitous discovery that, in many ways, was the catalyst for all the subsequent explorations in spatial and temporal deixis. In speaking Hausa, these speakers used cognitive imagery in sharp contrast with what I was accustomed to using in speaking English—and, alas, which I was transferring to Hausa. They viewed a reference point without any intrinsically marked orientation—for example, a small rock—as ‘facing away’ and thus would describe a stick on its far side as *gaba* ‘in front’ of the rock. In contrast to the use of such *in-tandem imagery*, I transferred *mirror imagery* from English to Hausa, viewing the rock as ‘facing toward’ myself and hence describing the stick on its far side as *baya* ‘behind, in back’ of the rock.

The following summer I headed for West Africa, where I conducted bilingual research with Hausa (and Djerma) speakers at a French-speaking secondary school in Niamey, Niger, confirming that they, not surprisingly, used *in-tandem imagery* just like the speakers of Igbo and Ashanti (Hill, 1974). This research was soon duplicated, indeed amplified, in an exemplary study by Tijjani Isma’il at an English-speaking secondary school in Kano, Nigeria. The first presentation at ILA reported on this research with particular attention to certain sociolinguistic patterns that emerged: for example, female students making greater use of *mirror imagery* when speaking English.

This presentation also made reference to an article that I was writing with Bob Allen that was subsequently published in the journal *Lingua* (1976). When Bob first heard about how I was using markedness theory in deixis research to show how a language user's spatial location can be viewed as unmarked, since it is not represented by any overt marking (i.e.,  $\emptyset$  representation), he suggested that we write a joint paper that would explore the parallelism between an unmarked home base in physical space and in syntactic space: in the former such a base is the language user(s)'s position, in the latter it is the subject position in languages such as Turkish whenever a target for  $\emptyset$  is readily available in the communicative environment.

### **Second Presentation at ILA in the Early 1980s**

The second presentation dealt with an emerging body of research that was focused on the use of in-tandem imagery by speakers of English in the Western hemisphere whose ethnocultural heritage could be traced to West Africa. This cultural continuity was documented most powerfully in research conducted by Sheila McKenna (1985) in secondary schools in metropolitan New York. In addition to showing greater use of in-tandem imagery by African American students, her research uncovered a number of intriguing sociolinguistic patterns: there was, once again, greater use of mirror imagery not only by female students but also by students—male as well as female—who remained in school for a longer period of time.

### **Third Presentation at ILA in the Late 1990s**

I was invited to make the third presentation after I had begun to spend time in the People's Republic of China and had become aware that in-tandem imagery is, in fact, far more widely distributed than I had realized. This presentation reported on two bodies of bilingual research: (1) a study conducted by Yang Wei (1996) among university students in Hangzhou, China, and (2) a study conducted by Jianguo Ji (1998) among Chinese immigrants in New York City. Both studies documented a greater use of in-tandem imagery, especially when Chinese was being spoken.

In both studies, gender differences again held up: Chinese women, whether in China or New York City, were more likely than men to use mirror imagery, especially when speaking English. There were other intriguing sociolinguistic patterns associated with greater use of this imagery: for example, in China an urban background rather than a rural one and in New York City a longer stay rather than a shorter one. It was this new research that led to using the concept 'structured heterogeneity' (Labov, Weinrich, & Herzog, 1968) to make sense out of various sociolinguistic

patterns: namely, variation is basic to language use, but it is highly structured in its distribution among language users.

#### **Fourth Presentation at ILA in 2004**

When I was invited to make a presentation at the annual ILA conference whose theme was “multiple literacies,” I attempted to bring together ‘deixis’ and ‘digital literacy’. I drew on basic Gricean principles to explore the ways in which deixis functions in the real world as well as in the virtual world that we increasingly inhabit. In making this presentation, I used PowerPoint slides prepared by Eric Larsen that took advantage of the dynamic features fundamental to digital literacy. When preparing a version of the presentation for publication in the journal *Word*, I found that print literacy could not readily accommodate the dynamic features, so I was forced to substantially rework the presentation. To give some idea of the transformation, 100 distinct visual displays represented in 48 slides were reduced to 13 distinct visual displays represented in 8 figures. Such discontinuity in the use of graphics is symptomatic of the radical ways in which the dynamic frames associated with digital technologies are transforming the static ones associated with print literacy. This contrast between ‘static’ and ‘dynamic’ is fundamental to making sense of the research that has been conducted on spatial and temporal deixis.

#### **Fifth Presentation in 2010**

Having highlighted significant developments over four decades, I would now like to draw on five distinct perspectives that can help us place this research in a larger context.

- (1) From a methodological perspective, the research used the stability of human anatomy in order to make reliable comparisons in spatial and temporal deixis across languages.
- (2) From a sociolinguistic perspective, the research added semantic variables to the lower level ones (e.g., phonological) that had been traditionally used to describe different patterns of language use (e.g., male vs. female patterns in gender research).
- (3) From a psycholinguistic perspective, the research helped to integrate semantics and pragmatics by delineating the ways in which speakers of any language shift back and forth between mirror imagery and in-tandem imagery, which can be viewed as a unified system, according to crucial features in the communicative environment (Hill, 1999).
- (4) From the perspective of applied linguistics, the research contributed to educational discourse by providing a framework for delineating ambiguities in text structure that

complicate young children's interactions with standardized tests of reading comprehension. (Hill & Larsen, 2000).

- (5) From a sociopolitical perspective, the research documented 'structured heterogeneity' in various societies around the world and hence provided a framework that could be used to demonstrate a deeper unity that underlies cultural differences.

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A moment for the brief speculation that I promised in the abstract—If I am still around in the second decade of this century and am invited back to make another presentation, I would like to address the problem of why it is so difficult to use language to provide an explicit description of the immediate physical space that we occupy. As far as I can understand this problem, it seems to arise from our deeply programmed instincts that drive us to use various kinds of deictic reduction in providing such description. I would like to talk just a bit about how such reduction operates when we have to put into words what we are looking at. We all know how difficult it can be to translate from the system that governs perception to the one that governs language.

An interesting question to be addressed is whether digital technologies will provide increasingly refined graphic resources that encourage us to altogether bypass language—or at least to severely limit it—when we communicate about an immediate physical world. Even now I am aware of the diminished role that language often plays when I receive emails from friends who wish to convey what they are seeing as they travel. At times, the email is simply a sequence of digital images accompanied by little or no commentary, apart from a banal formula in the heading—'Wish you could be here'.

No matter how brilliant these digitally enhanced images may be, I must confess to a longing, nourished by the hugely talented travel writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for words that would help me understand just how my friends are seeing what they are looking at—hopefully, this longing will not diminish, but perhaps even grow as digital technologies provide us more refined ways of seeing what we are looking at.

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