A (Morpho) Phonological Typology of Demonstratives: A Case Study in Sound Symbolism

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Abstract : In this paper, a (morpho)phonological typology of proximal and distal demonstratives is proposed. Only the most basic proximal ('this') and distal ('that') forms have been considered, potential more fine-grained distinctions based on proximity are not relevant to our discussion, nor are the other functions the discussed demonstratives may have. The sample comprises 82 languages that represent the linguistic diversity of the world's languages, although the study is not based on a systematic sample. Four different major types are distinguished; (1) Vowel type: front vs. back; high vs. low vowel (2) Consonant type: front-back consonants (3) Additional element –type (4) Varia. The proposed types can further be subdivided according to whether the attested difference concern only, e.g., vowels, or whether there are also other changes. For example, the first type comprises both languages such as Betta Kurumba, where only the vowel changes (i 'this', a 'that') and languages like Alyawarra (nhinha vs. nhaka), where there are also other changes. In the second type, demonstratives are distinguished based on whether the consonants are front or back; typically front consonants (e.g., labial and dental) appear on proximal demonstratives and back consonants on distal demonstratives (such as velar or uvular consonants). An example is provided by Bunaq, where bari marks 'this' and baqi 'that'. In the third type, distal demonstratives typically have an additional element, making it longer in form than the proximal one (e.g., Òko òne 'this', ònébé 'that'), but the type also comprises languages where the distal demonstrative is simply phonologically longer (e.g., Ngalakan nu-gaʔye vs. nu-gunʔbiri). Finally, the last type comprises cases that do not fit into the three other types, but a number of strategies are used by the languages of this group. The two first types can be explained by iconicity; front or high phonemes appear on the proximal demonstratives, while back/low phonemes are related to distal demonstratives. This means that proximal demonstratives are pronounced at the front and/or high part of the oral cavity, while distal demonstratives are pronounced lower and more back, which reflects the proximal/distal nature of their referents in the physical world. The first type is clearly the most common in our data (40/82 languages), which suggests a clear association with iconicity. Our findings support earlier findings that proximal and distal demonstratives have an iconic phonemic manifestation. For example, it has been argued that /i/ is related to smallness (small distance). Consonants, however, have not been considered before, or no systematic correspondences have been discovered. The third type, in turn, can be explained by markedness; the distal element is more marked than the proximal demonstrative. Moreover, iconicity is relevant also here: some languages clearly use less linguistic substance for referring to entities close to the speaker, which is manifested in the longer (morpho)phonological form of the distal demonstratives. The fourth type contains different kinds of cases, and systematic generalizations are hard to make.

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