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DEIXIS AS THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

Pablo Kirtchuk

In 1987 I began to work on Pilagá, an Amerind language spoken in North-Eastern Argentina and soon became aware of the crucial importance of deictics in this language – and in general (Kirtchuk-Halevi 1993; 1994; 2000). In Pilagá,, before selecting a noun, one must determine the spatial position and configuration of its referent relatively to oneself, and communicate it by linguistic means, namely by a deictic morpheme preceding the noun. Thenceforth I proceeded to an analysis of deictic demonstratives in a variety of languages from different families and types, which led me to some unexpected conclusions: deictic demonstratives are the only truly universal linguistic category, they have little in common with nouns at any level, they probably are at the origin of the language faculty, and from a communicative as well as from a cognitive point of view, deictics represent the smallest units.

Let us have a look at some deictic demonstratives, both actual and reconstructed (all correspond, roughly to 'this' and 'that', with gender; number and case distinctions):

Deictic demonstratives: A sample

Hebrew (Bibl.) m. ze, f. zo:-t, pl. 'el-l-e; m.(ha:-)hu,f. (ha:-)hi, pl.m. (ha-)he-m, f. (ha-)he-n

(M.) m. ze, f. zo:(-t), pl. 'el-l-u: ; m. ha:-la /

ha:-la-z(e), f. ha:-la-zo:, pl. ha:-la-l-u:

(Cont.): preceedings + .sg.f (ha-)zot-i

Aramaic m. dᵉna, f. da, 'el-(le), pl. 'il-l-en;

Syr. m. ha-n, f. ha-da, pl. ha-l-l-en

Arabic m. ha:-δa:, f. ha:-δi-hi, pl. ha-'u-la:('i),

m. δa:-(li)-ka, f. ti-l-ka, pl. 'u-la:-'i-ka

A.South Arab. m. δ-n, f. δ-t, pl. 'l-n / 'l-t

Ge'ez m. ze(tu), f. za:(ti), pl. 'el-l-u(tu) /

'el-l-a:(tu)

Akkadian: m. <u, f. <i, pl. m. <u:-nu, f. <i:-ni, rel. <a

1.Proto-Semitic ***'V, h/<V, δV, lV** (Kienast 2001)

Greek	m. ‘ο, n. το, f. ‘η; pl. τοι, τα, ται ; du. τω
	ε–κει □ there, ε–κεινοσ ‘he, that, augment for past tenses (=far deixis)’
Latin	h-i-c, hoc, h-a-c; i(-s-te)/a, i(-d), i-ll-e/a (cf. i-bi:)
French	ce, ce-ci/là, ce-lui-ci/là; cette, ce-(e)lle-ci/là,
Gothic	i(-s); sa, θa-ta, so; pl. θai, θo, θos
Sanskrit	sa, tad, sa:, pl. te, ta:, ta:s, du. ta:, te:, te: (i-ha < *i-dha ‘here’);
	an-< *e ‘that (obl.)’
Slavic	tu, to, ta; pl. ti, ta, ty; du. ta, te:, te:
Lithuanian	tas, ta; pl. tie, tos
Lydian	-i(-s)
Hittite	ka:- ‘this’ , cf. Palaic ka-, Lith. <i-s (< *ki-/ke-, Greenberg 2000)
	si ‘3sg.’

Proto-Indo-European ***so , tod, sa: ; pl. toi, ta:, ta:s; du. to:, toi, toi**

***is, id, i: ; pl. eyes, i:, iyas** (Szemerenyi 1978)

***s/tV, *i / *e ~ *o; n.nom.acc.sg. *i-(d), m./n. gen. *e(-syo)**

e/o ‘3sg.’ (Greenberg 2000)

Uralic:	Hungarian	e-(z) ‘this’, a-z ‘that’; i/e-(tt) ‘here’; -t ‘acc. < def. < dem.’
	Udmurt, Mordv	tu/to ‘that’, te ‘this’, so ‘that’
	Finnish	han (<san) ‘3sg.’
Altaic:	Turkic	-(s)i (3sg.poss.suff.); Sagai i-da ‘here’; Chuvash –(s)i ‘the’
		a-n- ‘that’, Vl/n ‘3sg.’; Yakut ta (3poss.)
	Mongolian	i-mada (3sg.dat.)’ *i- (3sg.nom.); e-ji ‘to do this’, te-ji ‘to act thus’, je-ji ‘to do what?’; te(-re) ‘this’, e-ne ‘that’

Tungus, Manchu i (3p.), *e-(-ri) 'this', Evenki e-duk (3dat.), e-li: (3loc.), e-le 'here', ta- 'that'

Pan-Altaic *i (3p sg.), -ki 'that which'

Korean-Japanese-Ainu:

Korean i 'this', i-mi 'now', -i 'nom.', ke/ko 'that', /e 'iste'

Japanese i-ma 'now', to 'that', (k)-o-no, (k)-o-re 'this', (k)a-re, (k)a-no 'that', ko-ko 'here'; Old J. si/so '3sg.'

Ainu i (3sg.poss/obj.); e-ne 'thus'; a(-ne) '3sg.' tara-an 'that there', te 'here', ta-p 'this', sa-ta 'here'

Yukaghir te-n 'this', a-n 'that', Kolyma a-da 'there, thither', tun 'this', tan 'that'

Gilyak ty/tu; hi (<si) 'hic', ku 'iste', a 'ille'

3.Proto-Eurasiatic ***sV, tV, * i, *k-i~ k-e 'this',*a~*e/i 'that'**
*ti/te 'this' tu/to 'that' (Greenberg 2000)

Quechua k-ay 'hic', /-ay 'iste', /a-q-ay 'ille'; p-ay (3sg.)

Guaraní ko-a 'this', a-mo 'that'

Pilagá ða, ^{n}di, ^{n}do, na,ñe, ka

4. Proto-Amerind ***kV 'hic', *t/dV, *pV, *mV, *nV, *i- (3p.)** (Greenberg 1987)

5. Basque (abs.) ho 'hic', ho-ri 'iste', ho-ra 'ille'; pl. ho-k, ho-riek, he-iek
(erg.) ho-ne-k, ho-rre-k, ha-re-k; pl. ho-ek, ho-riek, he-iek

Let us now resume the different characteristics of prototypical demonstratives and nouns.

Prototypical demonstratives

Phonology: monosyllabic

Morphology: non-analyzable (not even in root-based languages, cf. Semitic)
not categorically transferable by derivation save exception
not subject to declination
form conglomerates (even in non-composing languages, cf. Semitic)

Paradigmatics: specific, open-cum-closed paradigm, expands but only within itself

Syntagmatics: may behave differently than noun determinants

Syntax: definite; often subject

Semantics: quasi void

Pragmatics: vital; context-depending

Information role: topic

Synchrony: universal, exist independently of grammatical constraints

Diachrony: primary

Diaglottics: seldom borrowed

Function: refer to extra-linguistic (+ to discursive) entities = monstration (+ anaphora)

Prototypical nouns

Phonology: polysyllabic

Morphology: analyzable (especially in root-based languages)
categorically transferable by derivation
subject to declination
behave in accordance with the language's morphology

Paradigmatics: an open paradigm

Syntagmatics: behave as determined or determinant

Syntax: non-definite; often object

Semantics: complex

Pragmatics: not indispensable; context-free

Information role: focus

Synchrony: exist depending on gramm. constraints (verbo-nominal opposition)

Diachrony: secondary

Dia-glotics: often borrowed

Function: refer to linguistically construct entities = conceptualization

Until now we have dealt with synchrony and diachrony. Two indispensable additional viewpoints are ontogeny and phylogeny. In other realms of science, the first is a condensed, high-speed model of the second. Now the cognitive domain and language are the most distinctive properties of Mankind. In consequence, there is no reason to suppose that evolution in this domain, as well as in that of language as a whole does not reveal parallels at both levels of emergence.

As for ontogeny, the question is whether at all stages, including in the idiolect of a very young infant (< Lat. *in-fa(ns)*, 'non-speaking'), in the process of language acquisition and of linguistic self-expression, conceptualization precede monstration, i.e. 'pointing at'[1]. When dealing with phylogeny and ontogeny, these terms denote functions, not categories morpho-phonologically codified in an identical manner as in the adult mother tongue of the infant (François 1980: 259). The question is not whether in infant language the nominal expressions of adult language appear before pronominal ones, equally codified, but whether the functions fulfilled by each category emerge in the presupposition order sustained by linguistics until now. When a very young infant utters the sketch of a linguistic form it is an act of communication in context, and that that sketch does not represent a concept ('noun') but a concrete referent in the immediate context defined by the personal, spatial and temporal coordinates (common nouns function as referential proper nouns, cf. Coseriu 1981: 19). In this sense, whatever the linguistic utterances of the infant acquiring language (say, until age 1), they are deictic.

The same holds for phylogeny. Linguistics is not free to ignore the origin of language just as physics and biology are not free to ignore the origin of the universe and life respectively. From this viewpoint the question of the order of appearance of nouns and 'pronouns' in language is not a false, nor a superfluous problem. Science can formulate hypotheses and confirm them or falsify them even on objects whose size, too small, or whose distance, too great, prevent us from direct observation. Languages and the language faculty are objects at least as concrete as black holes or cosmic radiation. It is relevant to ask if in the history of human language, monstration, sufficient for

[1] This function remains that of deictics in adult-language as well; moreover, it reflects in the definite articles, descended of deictics in all languages which possess such articles.

communication in context, preceded categorization, abstraction and memorization, necessary, among other things, for communication out of context. A recent book (Givón and Malle [eds.] 2002) devoted to this aspect fails to give satisfactory answers; the problem seems to be their basic assumption that the emergence of language is parallel to that of denotation, which in my mind is impossible on anatomic and physiological grounds. MacWhinney (2002 : 233) says 'only humans can use communication to construct a full narrative characterization of events occurring outside of the here and now'. That is the truth, but not all of the truth: even the most 'intelligent' apes are utterly incapable of deixis, namely communication occurring *here* and *now,* and that is precisely the difference between primates and hominids: language as we know it allows indeed communication out of context, but that is one of its most sophisticated stages and functions: if for Givón *et al.* the possibility of communicating out of context equals pre-language, then as far as I am concerned, there is a stage prior to pre-language which is the real origin of language, viz. communication in context by calling a fellow's being attention to a third entity, viz. deictic communication, first of all at the first value, etymological value of *pointing at,* to which no other animal than hominids has access. True, conceptualization distinguishes us from apes, but deixis does too, and as from every point of view deixis is prior to conceptualization, it follows that it is deixis that equals the origin of language. What Givón *et al.* call pre-language is at best pre-grammar, not pre-language. Pre-language as they view it contains already a symbolic component, while the true origin of langague contains only iconic components at their boldest expression: gestural-cum-vocal utterances, which later codify as deictic elements with no symbolic content whatsoever: only afterwards does the cerebral equipment necessary to deal with symbolic elements (memory, calculus capacity) emerge, probably as an autoipoietic evolutionary outcome (Maturana & Varela 1980, 1985) of the communicational needs fulfilled until then only in context, namely by deictic elements. This is also true in ontogenesis (Piaget, *passim*). Deixis is the first linguistic function both sufficient and necessary for communication, social by essence, and only from deixis can the other, more sophisticated functions of language, have developed, thus enhancing the evolutionary advantage of communication in context at will, to the tremendous communicative *and* cognitive device called human language at its present stage.

Those two distinct functions, whose expressions are marked by a strong iconic stamp - only the second one bearing a symbolic stamp as well - are by no means reducible to each other. The first necessitates practically no memory and no calculating power, *i.e.* very reduced brain capacities, whereas the second imply much of both. Deictics allows communication in context, where the referential center of both speaker and hearer is *ego, hic* and *nunc*, which links it both to phylogenesis and ontogenesis; conceptualization, on the other hand, allows communication out of context and reflects a much more advanced stage of brain capacities. Which means that deicticity is not only an essential property of language, but also that deictics probably preceded nouns in the history of language diachronically and are more central in the body of language in synchrony.

An analogy would be the reptilian brain, which is both more ancient and more vital, but also anatomically deeper in the skull than other parts of the brain. The result of this iconic relationship between function and location is that the reptilian brain is hidden by more recent and less vital structures, e.g. the cortex, the neo-cortex and the neo-neo-cortex, and that its simple and vital functions are considered as inferior to the far more sophisticated ones of the latter. It is, however, the reptilian brain that is permanently in charge of the vital functions even of the intellectually most developed individual of the most evolved species – the *Homo sapiens sapiens* – and ultimately those functions condition all the rest.

Likewise, deixis does not belong to the sophisticated, namely the logical, rational or symbolic part of language, used in an adult-like manner and even in written communication, but to the one that performs its most vital function: communication in context. It is deictic functions and morphemes that take in charge communication in highly spontaneous, emotional, vital circumstances, which mostly occur in dialogic contexts, in child language and in eminently oral circumstances.

Just as the reptilian brain and its functions cannot be subordinated to other brain's parts or functions, deixis and the morphemes which express it cannot be subordinated to other parts or functions of language, because it is primordial, anterior and more fundamental than any other linguistic function.

The ultimate consequences of this analysis point to deixis as the primordial and first linguistic function: deixis is at the origin of language faculty (Kirtchuk-Halevi, *op.cit)*. It originated in vocal expressions which accompanied gestures hence the simple phonetic structure of deictics to this day; then, as those vocal expressions proved sufficient, gestures became superfluous in most contexts. Yet, to this day, in infant language and also in adult language when necessary, deixis has both vocal and gestural manifestations. Jakobson (1966) is wrong when he affirms that deictics are merely 'shifters' which allow language to become discourse: it is the other way round; it is through deixis that discourse emerged in our species. Then, through conceptualization and grammaticalization, discourse created language along with the organs necessary for it. To put it in Lamarck's words endorsed by Darwin, here too 'la fonction crée l'organe'.

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