

## 41. Distance Contrasts in Demonstratives

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### 1. Defining the values

Demonstratives are deictic expressions such as English *this* and *that*. They indicate the relative distance of a referent in the speech situation vis-à-vis the **deictic center**. The deictic center, which is also called the **origo**, is roughly equivalent to the speaker's location at the time of the utterance. When *this* and *that* are used contrastively, *this* denotes a referent in relative proximity to the deictic center and *that* denotes a referent at a greater distance:

(1) ***This** is my pen and **that** one is yours.*

The English demonstratives express a simple distance contrast. However, the demonstratives of other languages are often more specific. They may indicate not only the relative distance of the referent to the deictic center but also whether the referent is visible or out-of-sight, at a higher or lower elevation, uphill or downhill, upriver or downriver, or moving toward or away from the deictic center (see Diessel 1999: ch. 3).

This map shows the number of **distance contrasts** that are expressed in adnominal demonstratives; the other deictic features are not shown on the map. That is, if a language employs, for instance, two demonstratives for proximal and distal referents and a third demonstrative for referents out-of-sight, it has been classified as a two-term language, i.e. the demonstratives for referents out-of-sight have been disregarded.

The map is restricted to **adnominal demonstratives** because in some languages pronominal and adnominal demonstratives do not express the same distance contrasts (see

chapter 42 for a detailed discussion of these two kinds of demonstratives). For instance, in Tongan (Polynesian), adnominal demonstratives express a two-way contrast between proximal and distal referents whereas pronominal demonstratives differentiate between referents that are near the speaker, near the hearer, and away from both speaker and hearer. In addition, Tongan has a neutral demonstrative that is only used pronominally (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Demonstratives in Tongan (Churchward 1953: 150–152)

Pronominal		Adnominal	
Neutral	<i>e</i>		
Near Speaker	<i>eni</i>	Proximal	<i>ni</i>
Near Hearer	<i>ena</i>	Distal	<i>na</i>
Away from Speaker and Hearer	<i>ia</i>		

Interestingly, if adnominal and pronominal demonstratives do not show the same distance contrasts, which is relatively uncommon, pronominal demonstratives tend to express a larger number of distance contrasts than adnominal demonstratives.

On the map, the distance contrasts of adnominal demonstratives are represented by five values:

@	1.	No distance contrast	7
@	2.	Two-way contrast	127
@	3.	Three-way contrast	88
@	4.	Four-way contrast	8
@	5.	Five (or more)-way contrast	4
total			234

Languages that do not indicate a distance contrast are languages in which adnominal demonstratives are **distance-neutral**. An example of such a language is German. Modern

German has two adnominal demonstratives that precede a coreferential noun: *dieser* and stressed *der, die, das*. Note that *dieser* does not contrast with *jener* as in older stages of German; like *der, die, and das*, *dieser* is synchronically distance-neutral.

Since the German demonstratives are deictically non-contrastive, one could argue that they are definite articles rather than demonstratives. However, for the purposes of this map German *dieser* and stressed *der, die, das* have been classified as demonstratives because of their pragmatic functions. Like distance-marked demonstratives, these expressions are commonly used to focus the hearer's attention on entities in the surrounding situation, which is not what speakers usually do with definite markers.

German may express a deictic contrast between two referents by adding the **adverbial demonstratives** *hier* 'proximal' and *da* 'distal' to the neutral forms:

(2) German

<i>Das</i>	<i>Bild</i>	<i>hier</i>	<i>gefällt</i>	<i>mir</i>	<i>besser</i>
DEM	picture	here	like	me	better
<i>als das da.</i>					
than	DEM	there			

'I like this picture better than that one (over there).'

The same strategy is used in other languages in which adnominal demonstratives are distance-neutral (e.g. French *ce N-ci* vs. *ce N-là*). In general, it seems that all languages have at least two adverbial demonstratives (or deictic particles) that indicate a distance contrast between two referents or locations, and if the adnominal demonstratives are distance-neutral, the adverbial demonstratives can be added to the neutral forms when it is necessary to differentiate between two referents.

In languages in which adnominal demonstratives express a two-way distance contrast, the demonstratives refer to

proximal and distal referents. Note, however, that in most of these languages demonstratives can also be used non-contrastively. For instance, in Modern Hebrew *ze* indicates a proximal referent when it is used in contrast to *hu* ‘distal’; but *ze* is also used in non-contrastive situations, where it is distance-neutral.

Other two term languages employ a special neutral term in addition to distance-marked demonstratives. For instance, in Lithuanian *šis* ‘proximal’ and *anàs* ‘distal’ are deictically contrastive and *tàs* is distance-neutral. Languages like Lithuanian have been classified as two-term languages because the neutral demonstrative does not add another distance contrast to the system.

## 2. Distance- and person-oriented systems

Languages in which adnominal demonstratives express a three-way contrast can be divided into two types: (1) **distance-oriented systems**, in which all demonstratives indicate the relative distance between the referent and the deictic center, and (2) **person-oriented systems**, in which one of the demonstratives denotes a referent in the proximity of the hearer (see Anderson and Keenan 1985). Hunzib (Daghestanian; eastern Caucasus) has a distance-oriented system including three adnominal demonstratives that indicate three different locations on a distance scale (see Table 2), and Japanese has a person-oriented system in which one of the three demonstratives refers to an entity near the hearer (see Table 3).

**Table 2.** Demonstratives in Hunzib (van den Berg 1995: 61)

	adnominal demonstratives
Proximal	<i>bəd</i>
Medial	<i>bəl</i>
Distal	<i>əg</i>

**Table 3.** Demonstratives in Japanese (Kuno 1973: 27)

	adnominal demonstratives
Near speaker	<i>kono</i>
Near hearer	<i>sono</i>
Away from speaker and hearer	<i>ano</i>

Languages having more than three adnominal demonstratives are almost always person-oriented; that is, they usually employ a special term for referents near the hearer. An example of a four-term system comes from Hausa (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Demonstratives in Hausa (Wolff 1993: 119–120)

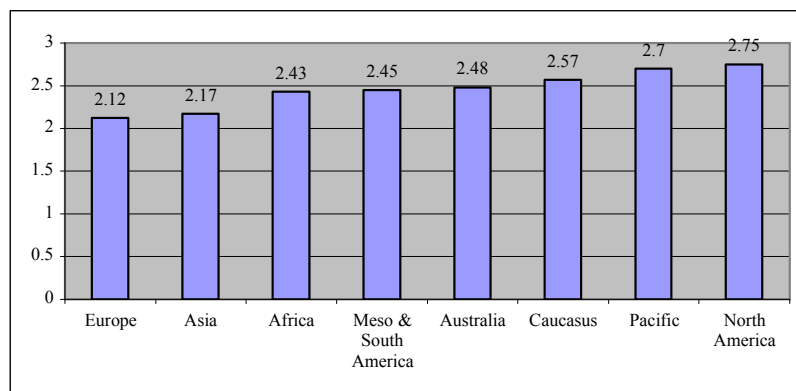
	adnominal demonstratives
Near speaker	<i>nân</i>
Near hearer	<i>nan</i>
Away from speaker and hearer	<i>cân</i>
Far away from speaker and hearer	<i>can</i>

### 3. Geographical distribution

The vast majority of the world's languages employ two or three distance-marked demonstratives: 54.3% of all languages shown on the map have adnominal demonstratives that express a two-way contrast between proximal and distal referents and 37.6% have adnominal demonstratives that differentiate between three referents. The majority of the latter have a distance-oriented system; that is, they distinguish between three different locations on a distance scale. Person-oriented systems seem to be less common: about two thirds of the three-term languages shown on the map have been classified as distance-oriented systems in reference grammars, and only one third as person-oriented.

One-term systems, in which adnominal demonstratives are distance-neutral, and larger systems having four, five, or more adnominal demonstratives, are cross-linguistically uncommon. Together they account for only 8% of the languages shown on the map. In contrast to the three-term systems, the four- and five-term systems are almost always person-oriented.

If we look at the areal distribution of the various distance systems, we find that two- and three-term systems are prevalent throughout the world. However, the occurrence of smaller and larger systems is restricted to certain areas. One-term systems occur quite frequently in Africa (Supyire, Koyraboro Senni, Koromfe, Kera), but they are also found in Europe (German, French) and Meso-America (Mam). Four- and five-term systems occur in three regions: North America (Koasati, Maricopa, Navajo, Tlingit, Quileute), Africa (Hausa, Iraqw, Somali, Malagasy), and the Pacific region (Kambera, Paakantyi, Asmat). Figure 1 shows the mean number of distance contrasts that are expressed by adnominal demonstratives in various parts of the world.



**Figure 1.** Mean number of distance contrasts in demonstratives

As can be seen in this figure, there are two areas where adnominal demonstratives express relatively few distance contrasts, Europe and Asia. Especially high is the number of distance contrasts in North America and in the Pacific. However,

overall the variation is relatively small across the different regions. It ranges from a mean distance contrast of 2.12 in Europe to 2.75 in North America; that is, the difference between the area with the fewest distance contrasts and the area with the most distance contrasts amounts to about 30%.

#### 4. Theoretical issues

The interpretation of the distance contrasts that are encoded by demonstratives crucially depends on the conceptualization of the deictic center. In a distance-oriented system, the deictic center is basically the same for all demonstratives. However, in a person-oriented system one has to distinguish between two different origos (Diessel 1999: ch. 3). The origo of the first and second terms is defined by the location of the speaker, excluding the location of the hearer, whereas all other terms relate the referent to a domain including both speaker and hearer. In other words, in a person-oriented system the deictic center is conceptualized in two different ways: it is the domain of the speaker alone (excluding the location of the hearer) for the first and second terms, and it is the common domain of speaker and hearer for the distal term(s). Thus, from a conceptual perspective, a person-oriented system with three distance terms is a variant of a distance-oriented system with two distance terms, in that the demonstratives of such a three-term system never distinguish between more than two referents, namely the deictic center (which is either the location of the speaker or the common domain of speaker and hearer) and the referent. Similarly, a person-oriented system with four demonstratives can be seen as a conceptual variant of a distance-oriented system with three distance terms. What this means is that with very few exceptions (notably the languages that have more than four adnominal demonstratives), languages do not invoke more than three different locations on the distance scale. For the great majority of the world's languages,

three appears to be the upper limit; there is very little cross-linguistic variation in this domain.