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The effect of visual accessibility, spatial opposition and contrast on the choice of exophoric demonstratives: an experiment in Estonian

Exophoric demonstratives are deictic expressions that help to identify the referent to the addressee in physical context (Halliday and Hasan 1967). It is widely held view that exophoric demonstratives are differentiated mainly on the basis of the location of the referent. In recent years there has been an increase of studies on the use of exophoric demonstratives and factors that affect the choice between proximal and distal demonstratives, but with contradictory results.

The aim of the study is to test the factors that are believed to have an effect on the choice of exophoric demonstratives. In Standard Estonian there are two possible demonstratives: *see* 'this' and *too* 'that' (Pajusalu 2009). The hypothesis of the study is that the choice between demonstratives is not affected only by the location of the referent, but by visual accessibility of the referent and need for contrast as well.

To test the affective factors which are associated with demonstrative selection, an experiment was designed based on earlier research (e.g. Diessel 1999, 2006, Piwek et al 2008, Coventry et al 2008, Jarbou 2010). For eliciting data, stimuli of spatial opposition, visual saliency and contrast was used. Selection and usage of demonstratives was explored in an artificial interactional situation consisting of pairwise building of pre-determined figures out of Lego blocks. The Lego blocks were placed on a large table in front of the participants. To identify whether the choice of the referent is affected by spatial opposition or other stimuli, the placement of the blocks varied, but the relative distance remained the same. Respondents were randomly allocated into pairs of instructors and builders. 24 pairs of students aged 16-19 were enrolled in the study. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were used to interpret the findings.

Preliminary results show that to indicate spatial opposition of referents, participants use proximal *see* 'this' for near referents and distal *too* 'that' for distant referents. For visually not salient referents, participants tended to use *see* 'this' (even for distant referents), rather than *too* 'that'. To contrast the referents, participants used *see* 'this' and pronoun *teine* 'other'. Thus, preliminary analysis suggests that not only the stimuli of spatial opposition plays a role in selection of the demonstratives, but visual accessibility of the referent and need for contrast as well. The experiment indicates that the use of other stimuli starts to interfere with demonstrative choice based on spatial opposition, a tendency which needs further research.

References

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