Demonstrative Shift and Proximal Markedness

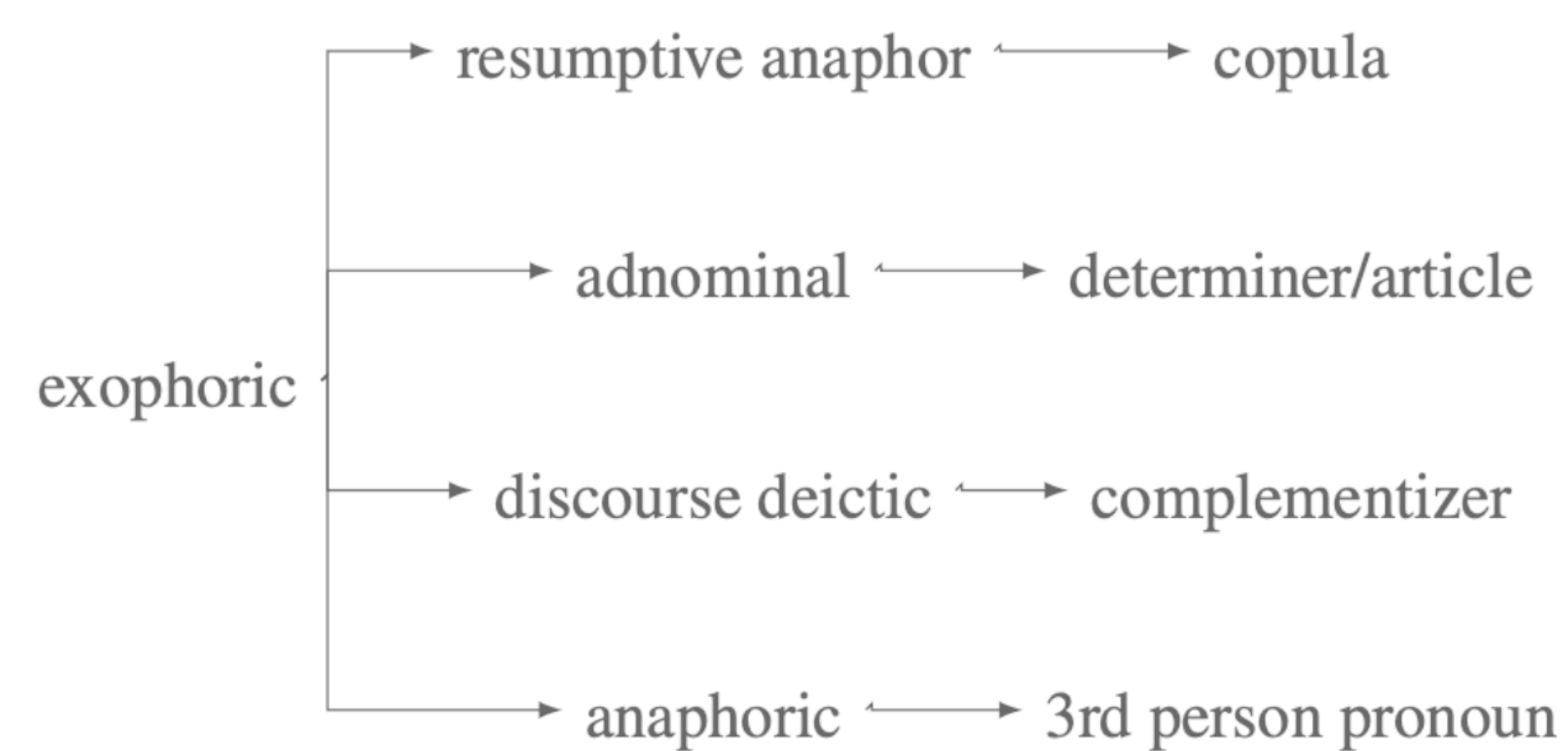Tess Monks and Kathryn Davidson

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Objectives

Semantic shift and grammaticalization processes have long been the focus of historical linguistic and language change scholarship. This research adds to these conversations by:

- Observing the synchronic characteristics that differentiate the demonstrative pronouns.
- Implementing a survey in English to observe **synchronic semantics of demonstrative pronouns.**
- Reanalyzing a definition of demonstratives such that they reflect the **difference in markedness in the lexemes.**
- Extending the potential of synchronic semantic definitions of pronouns such that they reflect their diachrony.
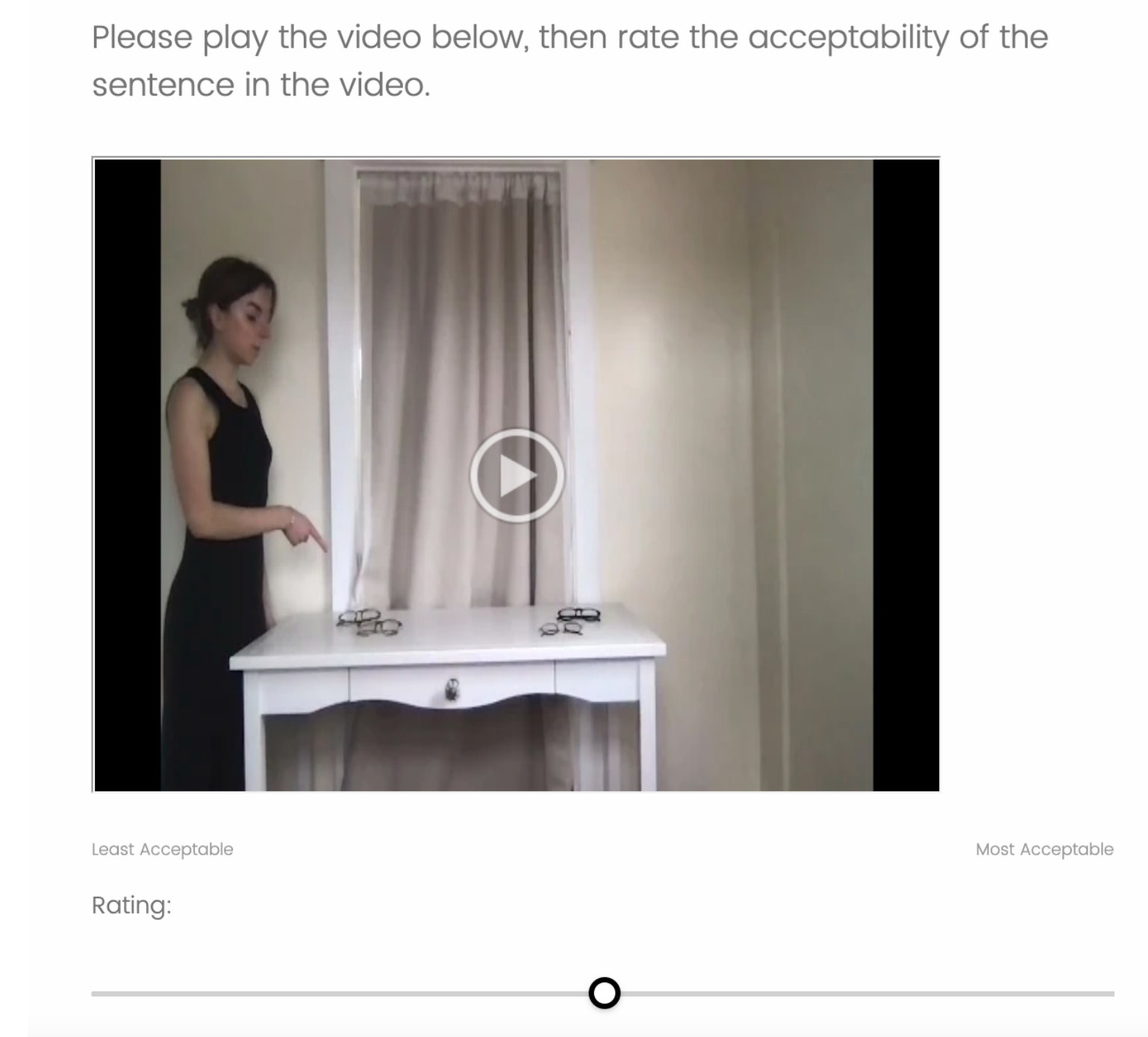
Introduction

Demonstrative pronouns (*this*, *that*) making exophoric reference appear in every language [1], and are involved in myriad grammaticalization clines [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6].

Each of the clines are unidirectional [7, 8], but the determination of which cline to travel is syntactically primed. Little attention has been paid to understanding **why the distal is commonly grammaticalized**. We suggest that there is an explicit **contrast of markedness** of the proximal demonstrative relative to the unmarked use of the distal, which drives its grammaticalization.
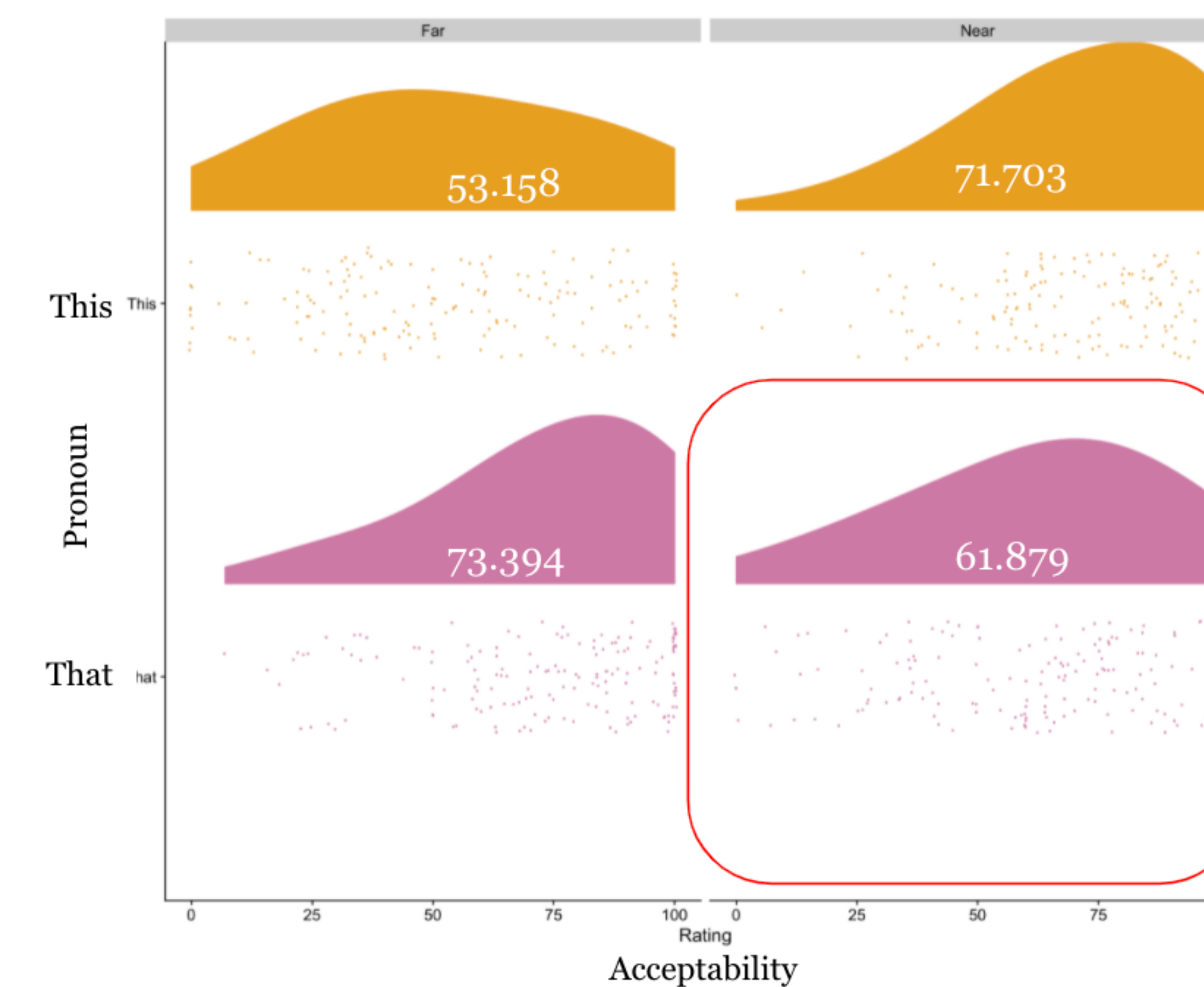
Survey

- 70 native speakers recruited through Prolific Academic
- 18 questions per survey, 2 surveys total
- Naturalness ratings prompted on a sliding scale
- 6 NP types and 6 pronoun-position pairings

Each video consisted of a 4 second video prompt with every commutation of pointing location and demonstrative pronoun represented, e.g.:

I like to wear that shoe *pointing far* **more than that shoe** *pointing far***.**

Main Finding

The mean rating for the 'matching' positions are similar. There was a significant drop in grammaticality for the proximal 'mismatch' (I like to wear this shoe *pointing far* more than this shoe *pointing far*.), as compared to the distal 'mismatch' (I like to wear that shoe *pointing near* more than that shoe *pointing near*.). These data show a potential link between markedness and availability for grammaticalization toward functional items.

Demonstrative Definition

$$\llbracket this \rrbracket = \lambda P. \iota x P_{w0}(x) \bigwedge at_{w0}(x)(l_n) \bigwedge speaker\ pointing$$
$$at_{w0}(l_n) \bigwedge close_{w0}(l_n)$$

$$\llbracket that \rrbracket = \lambda P. \iota x P_{w0}(x) \bigwedge at_{w0}(x)(l_n) \bigwedge speaker\ pointing$$
$$at_{w0}(l_n)$$

The reconfigured definitions for exophoric demonstrative reference include requirements for a unique referent, a specific location for deictic reference, a pointing action to accompany the deixis to that place, and an extra requirement for the proximal demonstrative to be close to the speaker.

Results

English speakers found the distal demonstrative preferable to refer to near positions relative to the speaker compared to proximal demonstratives to refer to far positions.

Mean ratings for the 'matching' positions:

that/far: **73.29** *this/near:* **71.60**

Mean ratings for 'mismatching' positions:

that/near: **61.78** *this/near:* **53.05**

Conclusion

The distal demonstrative grammaticalizes more frequently than the proximal demonstrative in languages with a bipartite system. The increased markedness and requirement for the referent to be near to the speaker causes fewer referents to be available for the use of the proximal. How close a referent must be to be proximal is highly dependent on the context of its use and is highly relative. Perhaps there is more flexibility for the distal demonstrative in what counts as distal compared to the proximal, which allows for increased frequency.

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