Multi-Value Distance Contrasts

Distance contrasts expressed in adnominal demonstratives were investigated. A three-way contrast in relation to the deictic centre was regarded as the minimum for being classified as a multi-value distance contrast, thus given a positive value, while a two-term system, like the one reflected by English ‘this’ vs ‘that’ was given a negative value. Pronominal demonstratives and referents out-of-sight were disregarded. Iranian Shughni, as seen in (1), displays (at least) a three-way contrast: one term (or set) is used with a referent proximal to the speaker (1a), a second for a medial referent (1b), and a third for a distal one (1c). All of these referents are visible to the speaker (and the addressee).

1. Shughni [sgh(a)] (Iranian)

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| a. | **jam** | aŋgixt | | daːrð | | kix-t. | | |  | |  | |
|  | prox.dir | finger | | pain | | do.prs-3sg | | |  | |  | |
|  | ‘This finger hurts.’ [Uttered as the speaker is pointing at her own finger.] (SHGa-DemLL:001a) | | | | | | | | | | | |
| b. | t͡ʃis | **dam** | | t͡ʃaŋgin | | | | tuː | | ðus=te | | t͡sa. |
|  | look.imp.sg | med.obl.f | | bug | | | | 2sg | | hand=on | | rel |
|  | ‘Look at that bug on your arm.’ [Uttered as the speaker is pointing at the addressee’s arm, who is sitting next to her.] (SHGa-DemLL:003a) | | | | | | | | | | | |
| c. | ʒiːwd͡ʒ-um | **wam** | tuːp | | amiːnat | | zeː-m. | | | | | |
|  | desire.prs-1sg | dist.obl.f | ball | | gift | | get.prs-1sg | | | | | |
|  | ‘I would like to have that ball.’ [Uttered as the speaker is pointing at a ball on the ground a few steps away from both the speaker and the addressee.] (SHGa-DemLL:005b) | | | | | | | | | | | |

Only a little less than half of the sample display multi-value distance contrasts. There are no obvious geographical correlations.

This feature deserves a more thorough investigation, as there are in many of the sample languages additional deictic parameters involved (such as emphasis, elevation and other geomorphic properties), as well as non-deictic distinctions expressed (such as case, number and gender) that make the analysis of the limited material extremely challenging. The present study should therefore be treated as preliminary in this respect.

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| Feature value | # of varieties displaying it | % |
| Present | 24 | 41 |
| Absent | 33 | 56 |
| Indeterminate | 2 | 3 |