Remarks on This and That*

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On Tuesday, when it hails and snows
The feeling on me grows and grows
That hardly anybody knows
If those are these, or these are those.
-A.A. Milne, Winnie-The-Pooh.

Last year[1] at this time I talked here about some of the rules governing politeness, and I pointed out that these rules, apparently pragmatic, had to be correlated and integrated with purely linguistic rules - had to deal with syntactic and semantic phenomena, as well as pragmatic. One reason for this was that a single device, such as question-intonation, might be used for very disparate uses - as a politeness-marker on the one hand, and as a means of sincerely indicating a desire for information on the other. Hence, one would need to invoke all aspects of the grammar, and all aspects of language use and intention, to describe what a particular form was doing in a particular context; what its range of usability was, and why.

I want to look, in some detail, at an interesting example of the relationships among the uses of a particular set of forms: namely, the demonstratives this and that. Everyone is aware, of course, that their use goes beyond their standard English-textbook definition as forms used to point to objects in the real world, and to indentify them as (literally) near to or distant from participants in a conversation. But what is interesting is the remarkable variety of ways in which these forms are used. It is the business of linguistic theory to identify these uses, say what they have in common and what distinguishes them from one another; provide rules generating each of them; and, most important, tell why this single set of forms is used in precisely these various ways, in English and in many other languages. I shall not attempt full answers to these questions now, but I think that a close discussion of the facts involved, and their significance, can bring us closer to eventual answers if only by forcing us to recognize the inadequacy of the theories we currently have to work with.

There are three major uses of the demonstratives this and that (including of course their plural forms these and those). First, there is their function as indicators of spatio-temporal deixis, as literal 'pointing' words. Secondly, there is their use in discourse deixis, or anaphora, referring back (sometimes forwards) to prior (or future) discourse. Both of these are well-recognized, and the relation between them seems fairly clear, metaphorically speaking. For we can talk about objects or events occurring before and after other events in time,[2] as well as discourse occurring before and after other discourse.

But there is a third way in which demonstratives, and many other types of words[3] whose principal sphere of usability involves spatio-temporal location, are used, in which the metaphor, if any, is harder to pin down: we can't quite figure out the relationship between the concepts. This is the sphere that we might characterize as emotional deixis.

In order to discuss and distinguish among these three types I will give a few examples of each of the uses of the demonstratives that I want to talk about here (there are others, of course). I will first talk about this, then that.

I. This

A. Spatio-temporal deixis

(1) This lollipop is for you, Melvin.

Here, an object is identified by the use of this as being near at hand, usually near to the speaker rather than the addressee if there is a distinction. This is, of course, within the realm of pragmatics, since we are dealing with real-world position as indicated by one's choice of a linguistic form. We have a fairly clear notion of the range of usability of the two forms, fairly simply statable. We may want to consider this use as exemplifying the 'basic' demonstrative, with the others perhaps to be derived from it by a process of metaphorization, or abstraction.

B. Discourse deixis

(2) Kissinger made his long-awaited announcement yesterday. This statement confirmed the speculations of many observers.
(3) Now this is what we must do: round up all the usual suspects,...

As the examples illustrate, English this may refer either to prior or subsequent discourse by one individual. In at least one language, Classical Greek, there are two distinct lexical items for these two uses: prior discourse will be identified as τοῦτο, subsequent as τόδε. Unlike the spatial this, which, since it is a pointing device, normally refers only to items literally in front of the speaker as he speaks, discourse-deictic this may refer to discourse either 'before' or 'after' it. Moreover, this use of this must refer back to an object mentioned specifically in the previous sentence, not merely one that is inferrable from it.

(4) I saw Fred in his new sombrero. This hat is really something.
(5) *I saw Fred in his new spring wardrobe. This hat is really something.

Another puzzling phenomenon that can be placed under this heading has been noted by J.R. Ross, who gives the following

examples:

(6) *Bill argued about appearing in this sentence in this order with Susan.
(7) (?) Bill argued with Susan about appearing in this sentence in this order.

Apparently the 'order' referred to by this must already have been established at the time this occurs in the sentence.

C. Emotional deixis

Under this rubric I place a host of problematical uses, generally linked to the speaker's emotional involvement in the subject-matter of his utterance. Since emotional closeness often creates in the hearer a sense of participation, these forms are frequently described as used for 'vividness.' And since expressing emotion is - as I noted last year - a means of achieving camaraderie, very often these forms will be colloquial as well. This is used for several reasons, all linked to the achievement of 'closeness,' like spatio-temporal this, in a rather extended sense.

1. One type of emotional-deictic this is used when the speaker wishes to allude to something, or someone, already mentioned, but outside the discourse proper. The speaker's use of this links his present thoughts to the previous mention of the relevant item. Its most natural use seems to be with proper names that the speaker expects the hearer to be familiar with. In one respect at least this use differs strikingly from this of normal discourse deixis: while this may be used in the latter only in case it was fully coreferential to something in prior discourse, in its emotional-deictic use this seems most normal when the relationship is inferential.

(8) I see there's going to be peace in the mideast. This Henry Kissinger really is something!
(9) ?The Secretary of State has made peace in the mideast. This Henry Kissinger really is something!

2. Another type of this seems to replace indefinites (a or one) in emotional-deictic contexts. There are two types:

a. Replacing a:

The apparently-definite demonstrative this may, in colloquial style, occur in contexts where, syntactically, the indefinite article is usually the only possibility, e.g. in sentences involving there-insertion or the/a warmth phenomena:

(10) There was this traveling salesman, and he...
(11) He kissed her with {this / an / *the} unbelievable passion

This seems to give greater vividness to the narrative, to involve the addressee in it more fully. But the device is only

available in colloquial contexts:

(12) There was {*this / a} tradition in Ancient Greece that the Trojans were descended from Dardanus.
(13) He bore his ordeal with {?this / a} most exemplary stoicism...

b. More or less parallel in meaning to the formal, or legalistic one, though usable in different speech styles:

(14) {This / *One} Fred Snooks turns out to have 24 cats.
(15) {One / *This} Fred Snooks was found to be in possession of dangerous drugs.

The use of this creates vividness, where one creates distance. Still an open question, however, is the distinction between sentences that permit either of these devices, and the more normal set that allows neither. One criterion seems to derive from the properties of indefinites in general: the noun referred to must not be one that is assumed to be known to everyone who participates in the culture. It is perhaps for this reason that its use is felt to be slightly contemptuous or insulting, conveying more or less strongly, 'This person is a nonentity.'

(16) ?This Richard Nixon is gonna get his.
(17) ?One Richard Nixon has been found guilty of six counts of income-tax evasion.

But that is only part of the solution (or it may be part of the problem). Compare:

(18) {*This / *One / ∅} Fred Snooks {is sitting in the kitchen. / is hereby charged with 10 counts of high treason.}

3. Probably a mixture of emotional and discourse deixis, this category includes cases where a person has been referred to in one sentence, and the next provides additional information about him pertinent to the subject-matter of the prior sentence.

(19) 'Don't lie to me,' said Dick. This was a man who had twice been convicted of perjury.

My attention was called to such sentences by a passage in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-5, which struck me as anomalous because the second sentence in no way reflected upon the subject matter of the first:

(20) "'Don't lie to me, Father,' said Barbara. 'I know perfectly well you heard me when I called.' This was a fairly pretty girl, except that she had legs like an Edwardian grand piano."
(K. Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-5, p.25.)

Here, Barbara's prettiness has nothing to do with her calling her father a liar, while in (19) the fact that Dick was found guilty of perjury is relevant to his calling his addressee a liar.

Thus, the emotional-deictic uses of this seem to reflect their relationship to the simpler spatial uses: closeness creates vividness, and 'closeness' of real distance is related to some notion of 'closeness' of subject matter, whether to speaker and/or addressee, as in the first type, or to a prior sentence, as in the third.

II. That

A problem we shall find in examining that is that, while its spatio-temporal uses are very nearly opposite those of this, its emotive uses are surprisingly close. While normally one cannot be substituted for the other, retaining the same connotations, they nevertheless are not as disparate as one might think. We can divide the uses of that among the same major categories we needed for this:

A. Spatio-temporal

That is used of an object far from the speaker, particularly when contrasted with another, closer, which is identified as this. That may have a referent nearer the addressee than the speaker, though not really distant from either, or one distant from both.

(21) That is the Statue of Liberty over there.
(22) Give me that filthy lollipop, Marvin!
Don't put it in your mouth!

B. Discourse

That is used in a fashion parallel to, but not identical with, this in its discourse-deictic uses.

First, that can be used by a speaker to comment on an immediately prior remark by another. This cannot be so used.

(23) Dick says that the Republicans may have credibility problems.
{This / That} is an understatement.

This may be used only if the two sentences are uttered by the same speaker.

Secondly, that has a more colloquial tone. This is one thing, anyway, distinguishing an utterance like (24), where this is not permissible, from one like (25), where it is.

(24) John likes to kick puppies.
{That / *This} man's gonna get his one of these days!

(25) John likes to kick puppies.
{That / This} man has been under surveillance by the SPCA for 5 years now.

I am quite sure that there is more than colloquialism at issue and that the collquial 'feel' is a secondary result. But at present I have no intuitions about what the primary difference may be.

That is used to refer back to prior discourse, parallel to this in (2). There seems, however, to be a subtle feeling in (2) that the speaker remains involved in his subject, and may well go on to say more about it. That, in (26), distances the speaker from Kissinger's report, making it less likely that he will expatiate on it:

(26) Kissinger made his long-awaited announcement yesterday. That statement confirmed the speculations of many observers.

Unlike this, that cannot be used for subsequent-discourse deixis. Compare (27) to (3):

(27) *That is what we must do: round up the usual suspects.

(Unless, of course, (27) is a recapitulation of a previously-expressed statement. In that case, that remains prior-discourse deictic, referring back to the previous statement of the issue.)

Parallel to this in sentence (4), that may be used to refer to an object in a prior sentence, and rather more naturally:

(28) I saw Fred in his new sombrero: That hat is really something.

An interesting difficulty has been pointed out to me, regarding the assignment of reference to the demonstrative. If the prior sentence contains a complex noun phrase (say, a complement or a relative clause) itself containing a simpler noun phrase, this or that in the next sentence will, ceteris paribus, be understood as referring to the larger NP. If, for syntactic or semantic reasons, only the simple NP may be interpreted as the referent, then it will be so understood.

(29) I read a story about the theory of evolution.
a {This / That} took a long time to gain popular acceptance.
b {This / That} took a long time to understand.
c {This / That} took a long time to read.

Since it is hard to imagine a story about the theory of evolution taking a long time to gain popular acceptance, this or that in (a) will generally be understood as referring only to the theory of evolution. In (c), for obvious reasons, only the reading where the demonstrative refers back to story...evolution is likely. The most interesting case is (b), which ought to be fully ambiguous between the (a) and (c) readings; but actually, I think that it is most apt to be interpreted parallel

to (a). I think the bias in favor of the (a) reading is even stronger with this than with that.

With concrete simple NP's, the bias in favor of (a) becomes even stronger.

(30) I told John a story about my TV set.
{This / That} impressed him mightily.

Here, I think that we can interpret either this or that only as equivalent to 'a story about my TV set.' (Substituting 'my heroism' creates the possibility of ambiguity again.)

C. Emotional deixis

1. The 'solidarity' types

These are perhaps the most curious semantically, since the distance marker that seems to establish emotional closeness between speaker and addressee. One such case is discussed by Fillmore: he points out that a garage mechanic might say (31) to a male driver, but not to a female driver, suggesting that that in (31) functions as a kind of indicator of male camaraderie.

(31) Check that oil?

Fillmore's attribution of 'solidarity' seems warranted here, the more so as a closely-related sentence, (32), seems to me usable, again, by a garage mechanic, but (33) rather than (32) would be the more likely utterance by a highway patrolman, writing out a summons, if we exempt the ironic-buddyship use parallel to the more clearly sarcastic (34).

(32) That left front tire is pretty worn.
(33) Your left front tire is pretty worn.
(34) (Reading name on license) We're going pretty fast, now, aren't we, Johnny? (Never having engaged in any of these forms of repartee, I cannot speak from direct evidence.)

A second use is that of sympathy, often seen in questioning about injuries and illnesses:

(35) How's that throat?

The that in these (second-person) cases does not correspond to a first-person this (or that, for that matter).

(36) {*That / This} throat's better, thanks.

More indication that it is some notion of camaraderie that is involved is that when a direction is sincere and given out of real desire to help, that may be used; otherwise not:

(37) Soak that toe twice a day.
(38) *Go soak that head!
(39) (Conspiratorially) Button that lip!

(40) *Shut that mouth!

That substitutes here for the second-person pronoun. Another possible substitute for some speakers is the definite article (so we may suspect that that in its emotional deictic sense is definite, where this was indefinite.)

(41) How's {the / your} throat?

In this case, both the and that seem colloquial, where your is not. Perhaps what's going on is that, by using your, the speaker explicitly calls attention to the fact that the infirmity is not his, and thus distances himself from it; but the and that are vague on this question and, hence, intimacy-creating. With your, that is, the speaker puts himself out of the picture; that, which implies that there is a relationship of some kind, even one of distance, between speaker and subject, or speaker and addressee, at least brings the speaker into the picture. The, similarly, implies that the speaker has thought about the infirmity before, and that it has been a matter of concern to him, since the is used of information the speaker assumes to be previously known.

This use of that seems also to require the physical presence of the noun so modified:

(42) I see that you lost {your / *that} leg in the war.

(43) If gangrene sets in, you'll lose {your / that} nose.

This use of emotional-deictic that is somewhat reminiscent of something found in many languages, namely an intermediate demonstrative, spatially in between 'this - related to me' and 'that - out yonder.' The intermediate form is most often translated as 'that near you, that of yours.' Spanish ése (vs. éste, aquél) and Latin iste (vs. hic, is/ ille) are examples of this type. Often, as in Latin, it acquires a contemptuous force: 'That thing that is far from me but related to you:'

(44) Quam diu etiam furor iste tuus nos eludet?
'How much longer will that madness of yours mock us?'

2. There is another form of emotional-deictic that in which the subject alluded to belongs neither to speaker nor addressee, but where that appears to establish emotional solidarity between the two by implying that both participants in the conversation share the same views toward the subject of the discussion:

(45) That Henry Kissinger sure knows his way around Hollywood!

As was true with emotional-deictic this, the subject-matter of the sentence must imply the attribute that the speaker and addressee are to react emotionally to. If what is being attri-

buted to Kissinger is emotionally colorless, that cannot be used in this sense.

(46) *That Henry Kissinger is 5'8" tall.

(Unless, of course, his being 5'8" tall is for some reason or other remarkable, admirable, or dreadful.)

Again it seems at first hard to see why the distancer that establishes solidarity and implies shared emotions. One way to look at the problem may be to say that spatial that establishes a link between speaker and addressee: it enables them to relate spatially to one another, through the intermediacy of the object alluded to. The same thing, perhaps, is happening here emotionally. Here too, speaker and addressee are assumed to share a previously-built up reaction, so the subject must be one that is culturally (or idiosyncratically) assumable as well-known.

(47) ?That Alexander the Great had some fantastic moustache!

This emotional use of that is, again, highly colloquial, and perhaps an Americanism. One particularly interesting use of it recurs many times in Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow. Its incessant use is given to only one character, Tyrone Slothrop, and he uses it, in many passages, above and beyond the call of colloquialism (although part of the reason it is attributed to him is precisely to represent a super-colloquial style of thought and speech; as a representative American, he speaks comic-book American English, with 'n' for and, dropped g's, lookit's, oboy's, and so forth sprinkled throughout his speech, his thoughts, and somewhat implausibly, even his letters). But he uses emotional-deictic that so often, and so oddly, that it transcends Americanism: we may well ask whether there is another reason for it. Now Slothrop in this novel represents the universal victim: he has been conditioned in infancy by a German Pavlovian so that wherever he has an erection, a V-2 bomb drops. As a result of this interesting coincidence, he is used as an experimental animal by the Allies, his own side. So Slothrop is very much alone, bewildered, and victimized. Now emotional-deictic that is a means of reaching out to other people, saying 'We share this - we're in this together.' It doesn't seem too unreasonable that this locution is given to Slothrop to symbolize his very real isolation, and his desperate attempt to find people to whom he can relate. Let us look at a couple of the relevant passages:

(48) [Slothrop thinking] Why didn't they keep him on at that nut ward for as long as they said they would - wasn't it supposed to be a few weeks? No explanation - just 'Cheerio!' and the onionskin sending him back to that ACHTUNG. The Kenosha Kid, and that Crouchfield the Westwardman and his sidekick Whappo

have been all his world for these recent days.... there were still problems to be worked out, adventures not yet completed, coercions and vast deals to be made on the order of the old woman's arrangements for getting her pig home over the stile. But now, rudely, here's that London again. (p. 114)

(The ellipsis is Pynchon's.) It is noteworthy that this use of that seldom occurs with inanimate proper names, like ACHTUNG (an acronym for an Allied research unit) or London. Yet it is twice so used here. Consider, too, another passage, later on, after things have really gotten terrible for Slothrop: here I will extract passages of Slothrop's thought and dialog from among that of several speakers, in a four-page spread:

(49) 'Come on, that octopus.'
'Tantivy, it was no accident. Did you hear that Bloat? "Don't kill it!" He had a crab with him, m-maybe inside that musette bag....'
'Sure, In that America, it's the first thing they tell you....'
'Didn't know you were so daffy about that golf!"
'Hmm. You must've got out by way of that Arnhem then, right?'
(pp. 192 - 5, passim.)

So it seems as though Pynchon is using emotional-deictic that purposely, to indicate Slothrop's highly extraordinary situation and state of mind.

A final fact of interest: emotional-deictic this and that are highly constrained in indirect discourse, like most exclamations, which also reflect the speaker's point of view. Thus, putting most exclamations into indirect discourse reduces the latter to semi-indirect discourse, a shadow-state between direct and indirectly reported speech.

(50) John said that wow, Bill was impressive.
(51) Harry said that never had he seen such an orgy.

Compare with these:

(52) Bill says there's {this / a} man you ought to meet.

(53) Bill says there's {a / ?this} man you ought to meet, but I really don't think much of Bill's taste.

(54) Dr. Gnox told Bill to soak {that / his} toe.

(55) Dr. Gnox told Bill to soak {?that / his} toe, and that's why we're suing him for malpractice.

In (52) and (54), where this and that are used, the speaker seems to be injecting his own emotional reaction into the re-

ported speech, at least going along with the reported speaker's assessment, sharing the vividness, or closeness, or sympathy, of the reported speaker. Where, for contextual reasons, this is unlikely, this and that are correspondingly out of place.

Also, interestingly, emotional-deictic that can never refer to the subject of the highest speech-act.

(55) ?I'm glad you asked me$_i$ about that$_i$ throat.

(56) I'm glad you$_i$ told me about that$_i$ throat.

(In (55), we are to understand the throat as belonging to the speaker of the sentence; in (56), it belongs to the addressee.)

My conclusions must perforce be not very conclusive. I have shown that there is a clear linguistic link between emotional, and spatial 'closeness' and 'distance': these are not mere accidental metaphors. And the rules that correctly predict the spatial uses of this and that should somehow also serve to account for their discourse and emotional uses. How this is to be done remains mysterious. And that's an understatement.

Footnotes

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[1] In R. Lakoff (1973).

[2] Cf. G. Lakoff (1972), for discussion of formal means of relating such concepts linguistically.

[3] Cf., for discussion of two verbs which share both spatial and emotional-deictic meanings, Binnick (1970).

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