Shughni demonstratives as markers of spatial and social distance

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The deictic system in Shughni, an understudied Eastern Iranian language spoken in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, displays a three-way speaker-centered spatial deixis, with proximal, medial and distal distances. An interesting feature of this system is that "social distance" seems to be necessarily encoded in the semantics of spatial deictic demonstratives.

This phenomenon, to my knowledge, has not been discussed in the literature on deixis. Although social deixis is ubiquitous in languages, it usually is separate from the spatial deictic forms. Examples of social deixis are honorifics systems such as those of Japanese and Korean, or the formal-familiar 'you' distinction in Romance and Slavic languages. More similarly to Shughni, some languages reuse their spatial deictic forms to denote social proximity or distance. For example, according to Schupbach 2013, Blackfoot uses its spatial demonstratives to express metaphorical distance.

Blackfoot metaphorizes spatial distance in order to express social distance, reusing an available metric for another type of distance, pragmatically given by the context. For example, a demonstrative DEM associated with a distance *d* (eg. proximal, medial or distal) would encode the following presupposition:

(1) [[DEM$_d$]] is defined iff the referent is at distance *d* to the speaker with respect to a contextually given metric *m*

Uses of a demonstrative of this type will depend on *one* contextually determined metric at a time. This is not exactly what happens in Shughni. Shughni demonstratives obligatorily encode both spatial and social distance at once. Consider the following examples:

(2) *A professor is standing right next to the speaker.*

#mam / dam profesor qate gap ða.
#prox / med professor together talk hit

'Talk to this professor.'

(3) *A baby is right next to the speaker (at the same distance as the professor in (2)).*

mam / #dam kudak qate gap ða.
prox / #med baby together talk hit

'Talk to this baby.'

Here we observe infelicity in (2), where the proximal demonstrative is incompatible with the expected social distance with the referent (except if one wants to express disrespect), and in (3), where the medial demonstrative is incompatible with the spatial distance of the referent. However, if we were to adopt (1) as part of the semantics of these demonstratives, we would expect felicity from the accommodation of the metric *m* to whatever is compatible with the context.

This means that both physical and social proximity must be encoded into the semantics of these determiners. My proposal for Shughni demonstratives includes the following presupposition:

(4) [[DEM$_d$]] is defined iff the referent is at distance d to the speaker with respect to m, where $m \in$ {spatial distance; social distance}

Instead of an undetermined metric as in (1), the metric is now *ambiguous* between spatial and social distance. In order to explain the infelicity of some examples, I argue that pragmatic processes disambiguate which metric is used. In particular, I suggest that the givenness of the referent of the demonstrative plays a role in the disambiguation, and is sufficient to account for the data:

(5) a. if the referent of the demonstrative is new information, encoding social information is preferred (because spatial information can be inferred from the context);
b. if the referent is given, spatial information is preferred (because social information is already known, while spatial information is subject to change over time).

In (2) and (3), the referent is new information, and therefore social information is preferred, which explains why the proximal determiner is incompatible with a socially distant referent. On the other hand, in the following examples (6) and (7), the referent is given information. Therefore, spatial information is preferred.

(6) *A professor is standing right next to the speaker.*

jam / #ed profesor baʃand gap ðid.
prox / #med professor intelligent talk hit.

'This professor speaks well.'

(7) *A baby is right next to the speaker (at the same distance as the professor in (6)).*

jam / #ed kudak baʃand gap ðid.
prox / #med baby intelligent talk hit.

'This baby speaks well.'

Discussion. This study of Shughni demonstratives points to the interest of considering a richer semantics to demonstratives, and their pragmatic interaction with givenness. This work is merely a gateway into understanding deictic systems of well-described languages, including English: "this kid" is better than "that kid" if talking of one's own.

Notes: This work is based on a series of elicitation sessions with one Shughni speaker. The Shughni deictic system has been described by Mueller 1996, but this characteristic was not discussed.

References

Mueller, K. 2015. Deixis in Shughni: Grammatical and semantic considerations. MA, University of North Dakota.
Schupbach, S. 2013. The Blackfoot demonstrative system: Function, form, and meaning. Dissertation, University of Montana.