

Anaphoric demonstratives in contexts with and without functional pressure

Two studies on the evaluation of references by student teachers

Adequate linguistic marking of references is considered a basic competence when writing texts. So that the reading process is smooth and unimpeded, readers are reliant on comprehensible reference marking that complies with conventions. One cross-linguistic convention is that the most economic referential means are preferred unless stylistic needs or text-grammatical requirements trigger the use of other referential means (cf. Ariel 1988). In German (and many other languages), the 3rd person personal pronoun is one such default option that is used especially in narrative texts to refer repeatedly to the current discourse topic (cf. Thurmair 2003). If a text has several potential antecedents, as in example (1), differentiation is necessary on a text-grammatical level.

- (1) Der Anwalt₁ sprach mit einem Klienten₂. Da {*er*_{1/2} / *dieser*_{*1/2}} nicht viel Zeit hatte, vereinbarten sie ein weiteres Gespräch für die nächste Woche.¹

‘The lawyer talked to a client. Since he didn’t have much time, they agreed to have another meeting next week.’

When the personal pronoun *er* (‘he’) is used, the preferred interpretation is that the lawyer is the one who did not have much time (Diessel 1999, p. 96), without, however, completely excluding the possibility of referring to the client. A demonstrative pronoun, in contrast, sends clear directions to recipients to focus their attention on a referent that has not been the centre of attention so far (cf. Consten/Schwarz-Friesel 2007, p. 282) and thus signals a topic shift (Diessel 1999, p. 96). According to Comrie (1997, p. 59), this excludes the topic as a possible antecedent (*der Anwalt* in example (1)).

Thus there is a functional division of labour between anaphoric personal pronouns and demonstrative pronouns: while personal pronouns are the economic, unmarked means for tracking already established topics, demonstratives are used to track non-topical referents.

The starting point and motivation for the current investigation are deviations in the use of the demonstrative pronoun *dies-* (‘this, these’) from this text-grammatical tendency as occurred in a gapped-text experiment with students (Bryant 2024) but which are also increasingly observed in academic assignments. In view of the fact that the context for using demonstrative pronouns in particular (as marked anaphors) is strictly regulated, it is surprising that they are extended to cover the functional scope of personal pronouns, which partly results in referential ambiguities. Bryant (ibid.) suspects that students who use demonstrative pronouns instead of personal pronouns do so because of an exaggerated sensitivity to register. The demonstrative pronoun *dies-*, which is found particularly in written language (Ahrenholz 2007), is considered to be a stylistically elevated pronominal referential default option by being more suited to the demands of an academic style of writing than the more commonly used personal pronoun.

¹ An excluded antecedent is indicated with an asterisk and a non-preferred one with a question mark.

To investigate the phenomenon of demonstratives being used in a non-conventional way, two studies were designed in which 76 (study 1) and 67 (study 2) students took part. The perspective of reception adopted for the studies should indicate whether, at least in reading comprehension, intuitions still correspond to the above-mentioned functional assignments. Short texts which had been manipulated in various ways should be evaluated using a 4-point Likert scale.

Study 1 covers texts with *two* potential antecedents. The pronoun is thus encumbered with a ‘functional pressure to disambiguate’ because the choice of pronoun affects the interpretation. The four conditions in study 1 are represented in the following table.

Conditions	Sample texts of study 1
1 PERS → topic	<p>Herr Kaya ist gelernter Maler. Heute hilft er seinem Sohn beim Renovieren. Er schaut sehr zufrieden auf die erste gestrichene Wand. <u>Der Sohn</u> ist auch begeistert.</p> <p>‘Mr Kaya is a trained painter. Today he is helping his son with the renovation. He looks at the first painted wall with great satisfaction. The son is also impressed.’</p>
2 DEM → non-topic	<p>Herr Kaya ist gelernter Maler. Heute hilft er seinem Sohn beim Renovieren. Dieser schaut sehr zufrieden auf die erste gestrichene Wand. <u>Herr Kaya</u> ist auch begeistert.</p> <p>‘Mr Kaya is a trained painter. Today he is helping his son with the renovation. This one looks at the first painted wall with great satisfaction. Mr Kaya is also impressed.’</p>
3 PERS → *non-topic	<p>Herr Kaya ist gelernter Maler. Heute hilft er seinem Sohn beim Renovieren. Er schaut sehr zufrieden auf die erste gestrichene Wand. <u>Herr Kaya</u> ist auch begeistert.</p> <p>‘Mr Kaya is a trained painter. Today he is helping his son with the renovation. He looks at the first painted wall with great satisfaction. Mr Kaya is also impressed.’</p>
4 DEM → *topic	<p>Herr Kaya ist gelernter Maler. Heute hilft er seinem Sohn beim Renovieren. Dieser schaut sehr zufrieden auf die erste gestrichene Wand. <u>Der Sohn</u> ist auch begeistert.</p> <p>‘Mr Kaya is a trained painter. Today he is helping his son with the renovation. This one looks at the first painted wall with great satisfaction. The son is also impressed.’</p>

The relevant elements are marked for illustrative purposes: the antecedent (topic or non-topic) and anaphor (PERS or DEM) are in bold. In relation to the underlined noun phrase, the previously constructed pronominal chain proves to be consistent or inconsistent. In condition 1 (PERS → topic), the personal pronoun refers to the established topic while in condition 2 (DEM → non-topic), the demonstrative pronoun refers to the second potential referent, or the non-topic. For these two conditions, there is an anaphoric match; for conditions 3 and 4, in contrast, there is a mismatch. In condition 3 (PERS → *non-topic), the last sentence and its underlined referent belie expectations of the topic as an antecedent and in condition 4 (DEM → *topic), the same is true for the non-topic as an antecedent. The pronominal chain constructed up to that point proves to be misleading, forcing readers to reanalyse the text. Following this, conditions 3 and 4 should be evaluated lower than conditions 1 and 2.

Study 2 makes use of texts with only *one* potential antecedent. In this case there is no functional pressure: using a demonstrative pronoun instead of the unmarked personal pronoun does not lead to a referential misinterpretation. As there is no functional pressure, the evaluation of pronominal uses which deviate from their unmarked use could now reveal stylistic preferences that were suppressed in the previous study for text-grammatical reasons. Study 2 also investigates whether the factor \pm animacy influences the acceptance of deviations from referential conventions. The short texts consist of three sentences, with example (2) standing for animate references and example (3) for inanimate ones: the first sentence introduces the referent, which is then referred to with a pronominal anaphor (PRONOUN) in the second and third sentences.

- (2) [Eine Polizistin]₁ sitzt allein im Dienstwagen. Bei laufendem Motor isst [PRONOUN]₁ einen Döner. Unruhig beobachtet [PRONOUN]₁ das Haus gegenüber.
 ‘[A policewoman]₁ is sitting alone in the patrol car. With the engine running, [PRONOUN]₁ is eating a doner kebab. [PRONOUN]₁ anxiously observes the house opposite.’
- (3) [Eine Jacke]₁ hängt draußen auf dem Wäscheständer. Im Wind trocknet [PRONOUN]₁ schnell. Gleich kann [PRONOUN]₁ wieder angezogen werden.
 ‘[A jacket]₁ is hanging outside on the clotheshorse. In the wind [PRONOUN]₁ dries fast. Soon [PRONOUN]₁ can be worn again.’

The study focuses on two independent variables: the first variable “pronouns” has four manifestations (PERS ... PERS, PERS ... DEM, DEM ... PERS, DEM ... DEM) while the second variable “referents” has two manifestations (animate, inanimate). In the table below, the four pronoun conditions are illustrated with sample texts for an animate referent.

	Conditions	Sample texts of study 2
1	PERS ... PERS	<p>Eine Polizistin sitzt allein im Dienstwagen. Bei laufendem Motor isst <u>sie</u> einen Döner. Unruhig beobachtet <u>sie</u> das Haus gegenüber.</p> <p>‘A policewoman is sitting alone in the patrol car. With the engine running, she is eating a doner kebab. She anxiously observes the house opposite.’</p>
2	PERS ... DEM	<p>Eine Polizistin sitzt allein im Dienstwagen. Bei laufendem Motor isst <u>sie</u> einen Döner. Unruhig beobachtet <u>diese</u> das Haus gegenüber.</p> <p>‘A policewoman is sitting alone in the patrol car. With the engine running, she is eating a doner kebab. This one anxiously observes the house opposite.’</p>
3	DEM ... PERS	<p>Eine Polizistin sitzt allein im Dienstwagen. Bei laufendem Motor isst <u>diese</u> einen Döner. Unruhig beobachtet <u>sie</u> das Haus gegenüber.</p> <p>‘A policewoman is sitting alone in the patrol car. With the engine running, this one is eating a doner kebab. She anxiously observes the house opposite.’</p>
4	DEM ... DEM	<p>Eine Polizistin sitzt allein im Dienstwagen. Bei laufendem Motor isst <u>diese</u> einen Döner. Unruhig beobachtet <u>diese</u> das Haus gegenüber.</p> <p>‘A policewoman is sitting alone in the patrol car. With the engine running, this one is eating a doner kebab. This one anxiously observes the house opposite.’</p>

With two personal pronouns, condition 1 represents a neutral pronominal chain (Thurmain 2003): there is a clear topic referent and, therefore, no functional reason to replace the unmarked personal pronoun (PERS) in either of the two PRONOUN positions with the marked DEM. The other three conditions are, therefore, considered to be marked. As there is no textual reason for markedness, these texts should receive a lower rating than the texts in condition 1.

With the two studies we can observe both contexts, i.e. with and without functional pressure, so that we can better understand any tendencies to substitute personal pronouns with demonstratives (in their potential development or extension) based on the reactions of those reading the texts. Assuming that the functionally unmotivated use of demonstrative pronouns (for stylistic reasons) initially appears in contexts *without* functional pressure, becomes increasingly “socially acceptable” here and is then extended to cover contexts *with* functional pressure, it would be expected that the texts which deviate from the referential conventions in study 1 will be evaluated lower than in study 2.

Conclusion and interpretation of the results

In study 1, in contexts with functional pressure, the specific functions of the two types of pronouns were considered and referential deviations were penalized, as expected, with a lower evaluation. In study 2, in contrast, all three pronominal chains which deviated from neutral, unmarked pronominal use (PERS ... PERS) were predominantly given positive evaluations, although the approval rate varied across the three conditions: DEM ... PERS > PERS ... DEM > DEM ... DEM. This confirms the expectation that in cases of functional pressure, the pronouns are used more conservatively, i.e. in accordance with their actual textual functions, than without functional pressure. An influence of the factor \pm animacy can only be determined when comparing the evaluations of the texts in conditions 1 (PERS ... PERS) and 3 (DEM ... PERS): the recipients only reacted differently to the two conditions in cases of animacy by evaluating condition 1 (PERS ... PERS) as being significantly better. In cases of inanimacy, the recipients did not distinguish between the conditions. This means that when tracking an inanimate referent, they find it equally good to refer to the entity introduced immediately before with PERS or with DEM.

At the end of the paper, the main findings from both studies are combined and discussed in relation to language teaching, language change and usage.

References

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