

This is what I'm talking about

A discussion of '**this**': how it is used and what it means

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1. Purpose

Descriptions of 'this' are clear about its role in terms of spatio-temporal reference.

Lyons describes it by saying, "'This' and 'here' refer to entities and places that are located in the place that contains the speaker (or to points or periods of time that are located in the period of time that contains the moment of utterance)." (Lyons 1995, 310) The following is an example of usage of 'this' as described above.

(1)*Example from an interview with 2 former college basketball players -*

<http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,465034458,00.html>

My daughter, Chanell, who actually plays at BYU — **this** year she couldn't play — she's made one road trip with the team **this** year.

Both instances of 'this' in the example above refer to a period of time (year) that is in the period of time that contains the moment of utterance. The year referred to is the same year in which the utterance takes place. These descriptions, however, are not at all as clear about its role when spatio-temporal reference is **not** involved. This discussion will describe the meaning of 'this' in these other cases.

2. Terminology

In this discussion, there will be 3 distinct labels for grammatical usage of 'this':

indefinite article, **demonstrative adjective**, and **demonstrative pronoun**.

'This' as an **indefinite article** is often referred to as "indefinite this". Usages will be labeled as indefinite article if 'this' is the referential part of a noun phrase that may be unknown to the addressee, as in the example below.

(2) *Example from an interview with Senator Joe Lieberman -*

<http://old.newhavenadvocate.com/articles/liebermanpast.html>

Do you want to be president?

I had to cross **this** threshold when I was being vetted for vice president, which is: Am I capable of doing that?

In the interview from which the example above was taken, there was no previous discussion of the threshold the senator mentions here. The referent was, at the time of reference, known to the speaker but not to the addressee. Used as such, 'this' will be labeled an indefinite article.

'Demonstrative adjective' will be used to label instances of 'this' that comprise only a referential part of a definite noun phrase, as in the example below.

(3) *Example from the basketball interview*

But at that time, there was not a lot of real media attention to **this** sport, like there is now.

In the definite noun phrase 'this sport' above, 'this' is referential and 'sport' is descriptive.

'Demonstrative pronoun' will be used to label instances of 'this' that are complete noun phrases by themselves as in the example below.

(4) *Example from the Brown Corpus*

This was the coolest, calmest election I ever saw

'Demonstrative' may be used generally to refer to both demonstrative adjectives and demonstrative pronouns. The most apparent distinctions to note are that the indefinite article and the demonstrative adjective vary in definiteness, and that demonstrative adjectives must have an accompanying descriptive element in the noun phrase while demonstrative pronouns cannot.

Four types of reference may also be discussed: **spatio-temporal** reference, **de re** reference, **anaphoric** reference, and **discussion** reference. Spatio-temporal reference is what is often called deixis, and is here defined as reference determined by relation to the location and time of the utterance. De re reference is defined here as reference to things independent from their roles in discourse. By this definition, spatio-temporal reference is a type of de re reference. For example, in example (1) above, the 'year' in question is identified by its temporal proximity to the time of the utterance. The relative proximity of the year in question to the time of utterance is independent from its role in discourse, making the reference both spatio-temporal and de re. Anaphoric reference is defined here as reference to arguments in discourse. As such anaphoric reference contrasts with de re reference. The final type of reference discussed here is **discussion reference**. This is defined as reference to discourse as its own unit. It is reference to the item of discussion at hand. It is reference not to a thing, like de re reference, but to the 'item of discussion' role that the thing happens to fill.

3. Hypothesis

'This' codes discussion reference whenever it does not code spatio-temporal reference.

4. Evidence from quoted text

The most compelling evidence for the hypothesis comes from examples such as the following, where the referent is never identified. The referent is an item of discussion in another discourse, real or hypothetical, that is essentially being quoted. The actual identity of the referent is always unknown to the listener. The only thing the listener knows about the referents is that they fulfill the role of item of discussion in the discourse being quoted. There are no previous or following arguments to which 'this' can refer, so it does not code anaphoric reference. There are no real things that the listener can "point to" as referents of 'this', so it does not code de re reference. 'This' instead consistently codes discussion reference.

(5) *Example from the basketball interview*

We didn't make it that year, we got into the tournament, but we got beat by Villanova in the first round. But the next year, he started talking about going to New Orleans - "We're gonna do **this**, and **this** is how it's gonna happen." And then the next year he talked about "It's in Albuquerque" and the next year, "It's in Seattle" and we actually ended up going three straight years.

In example (5), the speaker is paraphrasing something said previously by his coach. Exactly what 'this' refers to is never mentioned in the current discourse. In each instance in the example, 'this' can only be said to refer to an item of discussion in the discourse from which the quote is taken. The listener is not at all expected to identify the referent. The only thing the listener knows about the referent of 'this' is that it was an item of discussion in the quoted discourse.

(6) *Example from an online interview with Morrissey - <http://www.morrissey-solo.com/articles/02/11/12/067213.shtml>*

But when I became solo, I wanted to establish something, and for better or worse, I did. I wanted to take a solo leap and not just hide and pretend I was in the same situation. But you know, you can't really win- I mean if you do **this**, people say "Well, why didn't you do **this**?" and if you do **this**, they say "But yes, you should have done **this**!" so you think "To hell with it, really. Take me or leave me".

In example (6), as in example (5), the identity of the referent of each instance of 'this' is unknown, but in this case the referent is an item of discussion in a hypothetical discourse. In (5), it is presumed that in the previous discourse with the coach, the items of discussion could have been identified, but in (6) the items of discussions have never existed. They are not only unknown, they do not exist. Their role as items of discussion is the only identity they have. This is discussion reference at its most pure.

(7) *Example from the Morrissey interview*

But when we began to form The Smiths, everything happened incredibly rapidly...so rapidly that I scarcely had time to think. And it was just a matter of "Well, either you're ready to do **this** or you're not. Either you're prepared, or you're not. And, eh.."

In example (7), the speaker is paraphrasing his own past thoughts. It is presented as a discourse with himself. In this case, 'this' refers to an item of discussion in his inner dialogue, or what he was thinking about at the time. As with (5) and (6), the referent is never really identified. The listener only knows that 'this' refers to the item of discussion.

(8) *Example from the Morrissey interview*

Yes, unbelievably, em...when I was 12 I went to see the New York Dolls in Manchester and Roxy Music and...the New York Dolls didn't turn up because the drummer died the day before, but I was there from 8am, pressed against the door and then pressed against

the stage and then they made the announcement that the drummer had died, and all the audience began to weep and...so yeah, to be going to see people like that, and Lou Reed at the age of 12..and he wouldn't come on 'til midnight, and he was singing about heroin and transexuality and...I thought it was fascinating. And much better than the world that everybody else knew in Manchester. I thought **this** is really interesting, these people are interesting. It's eh..so...I was ready. I was ready for all that. I was ready for anything that was sort of..pushing people to question gender politics, or anything like that. Only because it was interesting.

In example (8), 'this' refers to the item of discussion in an inner dialogue, although no quotes are used this time. His thoughts are described by creating discourse with himself. As such, 'this' is never specifically identified. 'This' refers to the item of discussion, which in this case is what he was thinking about or talking to himself about. The referent doesn't need to be identified as anything other than that which fills the item of discussion role.

(9) *Example from an online interview with William Gibson -*

<http://www.craphound.com/nonfic/transcript.html>

WG: For me, it's just experimental, it's process rather than result. I'm only able to get a handle on what I've been doing -- in terms of my whole life, but particularly in terms of my writing -- I can only do it in retrospect. Moving forward in the process, if someone comes in and says, "What are you doing," if I'm honest, the answer is, "I don't know. But I'm doing **THIS**, don't know why."

In example (9) as in example (6), the referent of 'this' is the item of discussion in a hypothetical discourse. It has no identity other than its role as an item of discussion.

(10) *Example from an online interview with Mary Nash Stoddard -*

<http://web2.iadfw.net/marystod/brown.htm>

when I called the Chronic Fatigue Hotline in 1987, they said to me Chronic Fatigue symptoms can be changed by changing your diet. I said, well, what does that mean? They

said, do **this**, **this** and **this** .. and eliminate artificial sweeteners. Then, I said: Oh, you mean saccharin and Aspartame? They said: No, saccharin's okay. So, they knew back then that it caused Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

In example (10) it is clear that the speaker does not think it's important for the listener to identify the referents of 'this'. The speaker could presumably have stated the other things she was told to do, but they were omitted intentionally. Each instance of 'this' refers to an item of discussion, and that is all the listener needs to know. Discussion reference is all that is needed or desired by the speaker. De re reference here would have been superfluous.

5. Evidence from introduction phrases

'This' is often used to introduce new items of discussion. This supports the hypothesis that 'this' codes discussion reference because, like the examples in section 4, when 'this' is used to introduce an item of discussion the referent is unknown to the listener at the time of utterance. In each of the examples below, at the time of utterance the only thing the listener knows about the referent is that it will be a future item of discussion. It therefore codes discussion reference because 'this' can only refer to the referent's role as an item of discussion. The referent has no identity at the time of utterance other than its role as an item of discussion.

(11) Example from the basketball interview

The difference is that he played 39 minutes in the game and I played seven. That's where the difference is in the scouting reports. The thing that I remember most is that they were a really good shooting team and defensively, we really had to pay attention to the perimeter guys who could shoot the ball really well. We knew that they had a post player

that was pretty skilled in the high post and a player who was pretty physical in the low post. That's what I kinda remember the scouting report as. I've done 500 scouting reports since then, so it's kinda hard to go through it all. I do remember **this** — early in the year, I remember seeing them somewhere. The ACC was experimenting at that time with the three-point line, and it was only used in the ACC conference, and I remember halfway through the league, that a couple of guys on North Carolina State that were leading the country in three-point shots got hurt. I don't remember if it was Dereck (Whittenburg) or Sidney (Lowe) who got hurt

In example (11) the speaker spends a lot of time listing things he remembers before he says, "I do remember this", but it is important to note that none of these previously mentioned memories are the referent of 'this'. It is instead reference to the memories he will talk about next. Their identity is still unknown to the listener. 'This' must code discussion reference because until the speaker recounts the memories to which he refers, the memories have no identity to the listener other than their role as an item of discussion.

(12) Example from the basketball interview

I mean, the incredible thing was the letters in the mail that we got. And a lot of them weren't even basketball-related. It was more like life-related. People were looking at the whole journey. One I remember is that a lady had her husband on a respirator in the hospital — Jimmy V. read **this** to us. He was in a coma. She wasn't a basketball fan — she knew nothing about basketball — but he loved watching basketball, college basketball. So, she'd go the hospital, he'd be laying there in a coma, and she'd have the TV on and she'd turn to a college game, and it would usually be us playing in the tournament. She had to make a decision whether or not to disconnect her husband from the respirator. So, she writes us a letter saying we gave her — seeing us play and seeing us come from behind and win these games as an underdog — gave her the reason to hope and believe that her husband would get better.

In example (12), 'this' refers to what the speaker is about to recount. It is a future item of discussion. The referent is not fully identified until numerous sentences later. The listener is therefore not expected at the time of utterance to make a direct association between 'this' and its referent. The only association expected is between 'this' and its referent's role as a future item of discussion. 'This' therefore codes discussion reference.

(13) *Example from the Call Home English Corpus - en_4074.txt*

570.13 575.81 A: but before I saw &Neil again, he went to a conference in &Rochester and {inhale} there

576.29 579.54 A: **this** was a big issue among the people who were doing this work, was,

580.27 585.61 A: that their models couldn't show this as a driven frequency, yet their experiments showed it

(14) *Example from the Call Home English Corpus - en_4145.txt*

581.65 587.72 B: But then I figured, well, I'll just go through the nine months of pregnancy and then the baby will die when it's born. You know.

587.73 588.54 A: If it's like that.

588.95 589.20 B: yeah.

589.14 596.42 A: yeah, we had this friend. **This** is not supposed to scare you, it's just because it was on the topic. But, %um, but, the baby died at like eight and a half months.

(15) *Example from the Brown Corpus*

A11 0630 The detailed rundown on the Kansas City scoring in the sixth went

A11 0640 like **this**: Lumpe worked a walk as the first batter to face Hyde

A11 0650 and romped around as Siebern blasted Hyde's next toss 415 feet

A11 0660 over the scoreboard in right center. #CAREY SINGLES# Carey singled

A11 0670 on a slow-bouncing ball to short which Robinson cut across to field

A11 0680 and threw wide to first. It was ruled a difficult chance and a hit.

(16) *Example from the Brown Corpus*

A22 1310 The officers gave **this** account: Thomas early Sunday went
A22 1320 to the home of his uncle and aunt, Mr& and Mrs& R& C& Thomas,
A22 1330 511 Blanche St&, ~NW, looking for his wife, Margaret Lou
A22 1340 Thomas, 18, and their 11-month-old baby. The younger Thomas
A22 1350 ripped a screen door, breaking the latch, and after an argument struck
A22 1360 his uncle with a rock, scratching his face. He also struck his aunt
A22 1370 and wife, and during the melee the baby also suffered scratches.

In examples (13), (14), (15), and (16) as in examples (11) and (12), 'this' is used to introduce a new item of discussion. Reference is made to the item of discussion before the item is itself mentioned. At the time of utterance, "item of discussion" is its only identity. It therefore cannot be either de re or anaphoric reference. It is instead discussion reference.

6. Evidence as an indefinite article

As an indefinite article, 'this' primarily contrasts with the indefinite article 'a(n)'. Its use is generally considered colloquial and is therefore only common in spoken English. The primary difference often noted between them is that the 'a(n)' is sometimes completely devoid of a known referent, while 'this' always involves a referent that is at least known to the speaker.

(17) *Example from the interview with Morrissey*

Well, we don't really need **a** producer

In the example above, 'a' does not code reference to any specific producer, only to a category.

(18) *Example from the interview with Morrissey*

So both the labels pounced on me and said they had made **this** financial investment and I, as a solo artist, must honour it.

In example (18), 'this' codes reference to a specific financial investment known to the speaker though as yet unknown to the hearer. This, however, is not a satisfactory description of the difference, because there are also cases where 'a(n)' is used to code reference to something known to the speaker but not the hearer.

(19) *Example from the interview with Morrissey*

Well, originally, Johnny and I had signed **a** contract with EMI which was never fulfilled

In example (19), 'a' codes reference to a specific contract known to the speaker though as yet unknown to the hearer. Wright and Givón made a quantitative comparison of indefinite 'this' and 'a(n)' with a known referent. (Wright and Givón, 1987) They found that the referent of indefinite 'this' had consistently greater thematic importance than the known referent of 'a(n)'. They did this by counting subsequent references to the same referent.

These findings support the hypothesis that 'this' codes discussion reference. Since 'this' codes discussion reference, "this financial investment" in example (18) can be restated as "the financial investment that we are, were, or will be discussing". It is not de re reference to the financial investment itself, but reference to its role as an item of discussion. Items of discussion are the things the speakers talk about, so it is logical that they would have more subsequent references than other referents just as Wright and Givón found to be the case with indefinite 'this' in their study.

(20) *Example from the interview with William Gibson*

I think I knew that it started Johnny Mnemonic was coming out and I realised that all the kids that worked in 7-11 knew more -- or thought they knew more -- about feature film production than I did. And that was from reading Premiere, that was from **this** change that came from magazines that treat their readers as players. Magazines that purport to sell you the inside experience. I realised that everyone in Western society, in some weird way, believes that they've had the experience of producing feature films. You can get in a cab in Vancouver and the 20-year-old driver speaks more knowingly of Michael Ovitz than anyone in the industry. They just know! And it's perhaps not unhealthy.

In example (20), 'this', as an indefinite article, is used to refer to a change that the speaker is about to talk about. The identity of the change is unknown to the listener at the time of utterance. The listener only knows that it is a future item of discussion. It is therefore an instance of discussion reference.

7. Universal application

There are many instances where 'this' has a readily identifiable referent at the time of utterance. In these instances, discussion reference may not be the only valid description, but it is always at least one of the valid descriptions. Discussion reference also has the distinction of being a valid description that is universally applicable across all instances of 'this' that do not code spatio-temporal reference.

(21) *Example from the Brown corpus*

A35 1330 in an elementary school system or in the Civil Service. Much has

A35 1340 been made of the fact that major Catholic institutions now guarantee

A35 1350 firm tenure. **This** is a significant advance but its import should not

A35 1360 be exaggerated. When a man invests a block of his years at a university
In example (21), 'this' could be said to refer to the preceding proposition or to the fact
stated by the preceding proposition. However, it can also be said to refer simply to the
role of this fact as an item of discussion. Both are valid, but only the latter description fits
all uses of 'this'. In data collected for this study, every instance (other than spatio-
temporal) of 'this' encountered can be described as coding discussion reference.

8. Contrast with 'that'

Even when the referent of 'this' is readily identifiable, it is sometimes in
complementary distribution with 'that' and as such must be distinguished. Identifying
'this' as coding discussion reference distinguishes them quite effectively. As a
demonstrative adjective, 'this' is primarily in contrast with the demonstrative adjective
'that'. In spatio-temporal reference, the distinction between the two is clearly one of
proximity.

(22) Example from the Brown corpus

The abuse of the process may have constituted a contempt of the Criminal court of
Cook county, altho vindication of the authority of **that** court is not the function of **this**
court.

In example (22) above, the speaker (a judge) uses 'this' to refer to the court where he is
located and uses 'that' to refer to a court where he is not located. The difference is one of
relative proximity. When relative proximity is irrelevant, then, what is the difference
between these two demonstrative adjectives?

(23) Example from the basketball interview

We were scared — I'm going to tell you the truth, we were afraid. We were excited to be there. But there was a little fear involved because, whenever I talk about **this** team, I always say that they were like an NBA team masquerading as a college team. They had some incredible talent on **that** team — Benny Anders, Michael Young, of course, Akeem (he later changed the spelling to Hakeem) Olajuwon and Clyde. There was a reason why they were No. 1 — awesome, awesome talent, awesome team.

In example (23) above, 'this' and 'that' both refer to the same team. There cannot be difference in spatial proximity or temporal proximity, because they refer to the same team. In fact, if both terms can be used to refer to the same thing, the choice to use one over the other cannot be based on any quality of the referent itself. The distinction must be somewhere else. There doesn't appear to be any emotional attachment change from one sentence to the next, so emotional proximity doesn't explain the difference either. The most notable difference between the two is their roles in the discourse. 'This' is used to refer to the team he talks about, and 'that' is used to refer to the team he is describing. 'This' is used for reference at the discussion level, and 'that' is used for reference at the level of the thing itself. Thus it is valid to describe 'this' in example (23) as a demonstrative adjective that codes discussion reference.

(24) Example from the basketball interview

There are a couple of things that I think as it has gone from year to year to year that have made the game a lot more famous or infamous or whatever. The fact that when Jimmy V. actually got cancer and died — that great personal feat for him. Then the college coaches around the country started the foundation to try and raise money to fight the disease — I mean, Jimmy's legacy is **this** game. A big part of his legacy is **that** national championship game. I think that has brought a lot of notoriety in the basketball world, as far as remembering the game itself, because every year there is the Jimmy V. Classic

and there is a golf tournament and there are a lot of things. When you think of Jimmy Valvano, you think of North Carolina State beating Houston.

In example (24), as in example (23), 'this' and 'that' both have the same referent. Once again, since both demonstratives are be used to refer to the same thing, the choice to use one over the other cannot be based on any quality of the referent itself. It is valid to describe 'this' in example (24) as discussion reference to the game he was talking about or the item of discussion. As such, there is a difference between 'this' and 'that' that is not based on any quality of the referent itself and the validity of the description is reinforced. The validity of the hypothesis that 'this' codes discussion reference is also reinforced.

9. Conclusion/Summary

'This' codes spatio-temporal reference or discussion reference. Discussion reference is reference to a thing's role as an item of discussion. That 'this' codes discussion reference is manifested most clearly by its use in quotation to refer to things that have no identity other than as an item of discussion. It is also manifested by its use in introducing referents whose identities are not yet known. Describing 'this' as a word that codes discussion reference is universally applicable to instances of its use, excepting only cases where it codes spatio-temporal reference. This description also efficiently explains the unresolved distinction between 'this' and 'that'.

References

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