

Challenging theory: Spatial deixis in Nivkh

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Linguistic typology is known to be a very effective tool for analysing particular languages. On the other hand, almost every newly described language presents some data that can hardly be satisfactorily described within the scope of existing theoretical schemes. These uncomfortable and exceptional facts are the best testing ground for a theory, in the words of McGregor (2002: 130). Rare theory, however, is able to accommodate all empirical facts from a wide variety of languages; rather, a theoretical model should be constructed in such a way that would allow, if necessary, its potential expanding in different directions. Nevertheless, in search of universals typologists sometimes forget about caution and start to draw final theoretical conclusions basing on representative, but still limited language data. As a result, not infrequently descriptive linguists run into language facts that are inconsistent with a theory and contradict its claims.

As an illustration of such cases, the paper examines some typological generalisations for spatial deixis in the light of the deictic system of Nivkh (Paleosiberian, isolate), a moribund language spoken in the Far East of Russia. Nivkh deictic system is organised hierarchically and may be divided into primary and secondary systems, both of which are distance-oriented.

The semantic basis of a primary deictic system is a five-term contrast along the horizontal dimension of the distance to the speaker. The space around the speaker is divided into quite easily identifiable radial areas: once the object or place is located in one or another area, it can be referred to by a demonstrative with the corresponding deictic root, cf. (1–2). The system is not sensitive to the position of the addressee, which is unusual cross-linguistically, since according to Diessel (2005: 6), “the four- and five-term systems are always person-oriented, i.e. one of demonstratives denotes a referent in the proximity of the hearer”.

The secondary deictic system is based on a three-way distance opposition and is encoded by suffixes. Its deictic centre is the initial border of the spatial area set up by the primary deictic system, cf. (3–4).

As a whole, primary and secondary systems display a contrast of 15 distance categories and clearly challenge another theoretical view that “there are never really more than three [distance categories]” in language deictic systems (cf. Fillmore 1982: 48–9).

Focusing on a particular issue of deixis, this paper shows possible implications of language description for linguistic theory and once again emphasizes the importance of careful language-particular scrutiny and cross-linguistic breadth in attempts to establish universal tendencies.

References

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(1) *Figure 1: Deictic roots of Nivkh demonstratives*

€ ‘proximal area’) ‘close area’) ‘medial area’) ‘remote area’) ‘distal area’
tu- *hu-* *eγ-/e-* *au-/a-* *aiγ-/ai-*

(2) a. Object demonstrative pronouns, referring to persons or things:

tud ‘this one (proximal)’, *hud* ‘that one (close)’, *eγd* ‘that one (medial)’, *ayd* ‘that one (remote)’, *aiyd* ‘that one (distal)’, *kud* ‘that one (invisible)’.

b. Locational demonstrative pronouns, referring to places:

tus ‘this precise place (proximal)’, *hus* ‘that precise place (close)’, *eγs* ‘that precise place (medial)’, *aus* ‘that precise place (remote)’, *aiys* ‘that precise place (distal)’.

tukř ‘a place located in the direction toward a proximal area’, *hukř* ‘a place located in the direction toward a close area’, *ekř* ‘a place located in the direction toward a medial area’, *akř* ‘a place located in the direction toward a remote area’, [?]*aiķř* ‘a place located in the direction toward a distal area’.

c. Demonstrative determiners:

tuy ‘this (proximal)’, *huy* ‘that (close)’, *eγy* ‘that (medial)’, *ayy* ‘that (remote)’, *aiyy* ‘that (distal)’, *kuy* ‘that (invisible)’.

(3) *Figure 2: The structure of Nivkh locational demonstrative pronouns encoding a secondary deictic system*

€ ...) ...) ‘close location’ ‘medial location’ ‘distal location’) ...) ...
 DEICTIC.ROOT-*s* DEICTIC.ROOT-*z-ŋa* DEICTIC.ROOT-*z-ŋa-jo*
 DEICTIC.ROOT-*kř* DEICTIC.ROOT-*kr-ŋa* DEICTIC.ROOT-*kr-ŋa-jo*

(4) *Table 1: Nivkh locational demonstrative pronouns*

	SPATIAL AREA AROUND THE SPEAKER	TYPE OF LOCALISATION	LOCATION RELATIVE TO INITIAL BORDER OF A SPATIAL AREA		
			close	medial	distal
1	proximal (root <i>tu-</i>)	precise place place in direction	<i>tu-s</i> <i>tu-kř</i>	<i>tu-z-ŋa</i> <i>tu-kr-ŋa</i>	<i>tu-z-ŋa-jo</i> <i>tu-kr-ŋa-jo</i>
2	close (root <i>hu-</i>)	precise place place in direction	<i>hu-s</i> <i>hu-kř</i>	<i>hu-z-ŋa</i> <i>hu-kr-ŋa</i>	<i>hu-z-ŋa-jo</i> <i>hu-kr-ŋa-jo</i>
3	medial (root <i>eγ-/e-</i>)	precise place place in direction	<i>eγ-s</i> <i>e-kř</i>	<i>eγ-z-ŋa</i> <i>e-kr-ŋa</i>	<i>eγ-z-ŋa-jo</i> <i>e-kr-ŋa-jo</i>
4	remote (root <i>au-/a-</i>)	precise place place in direction	<i>au-s</i> <i>a-kř</i>	<i>au-z-ŋa</i> <i>a-kr-ŋa</i>	<i>au-z-ŋa-jo</i> <i>a-kr-ŋa-jo</i>
5	distal (root <i>aiγ-/ai-</i>)	precise place place in direction	<i>aiγ-s</i> [?] <i>ai-kř</i>	<i>aiγ-z-ŋa</i> [?] <i>ai-kr-ŋa</i>	<i>aiγ-z-ŋa-jo</i> [?] <i>ai-kr-ŋa-jo</i>