

SWAHILI DEMONSTRATIVES: EVALUATING THE VALIDITY
OF COMPETING SEMANTIC HYPOTHESES*

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Swahili demonstratives *h-* and *-le* have traditionally been analysed to mean "proximity" and "non-proximity" respectively. However, this analysis fails in that it can only account for a small part of the distribution of these forms in actual texts. This paper suggests that meanings dealing with the speaker's relative concentration of attention on a referent are better able to account for the actual distribution of these forms. To validate this claim we will (1) show the relation of proximity to noteworthiness and thus explain the same range of data as the proximity hypothesis; (2) uncover other factors, e.g. new items, thematically important items, that override proximity and show their relation to noteworthiness to explain data not accounted for by the proximity hypothesis.

Standard Swahili is traditionally described as having three types of demonstratives, two of which are said to respectively denote "proximity" and "non-

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proximity" relative to the speaker [Ashton 1944:58].¹ The third demonstrative, said to denote "(prior) reference",² will not be discussed here.

The two "locative" forms are H, the traditional "proximate", and LE, the traditional "non-proximate". Numbers (1) and (2) are the kind of examples found in the traditional grammars:

(1) Traditional example of H "proximate":

Mke wa Sultani akasema, 'A, a, a, h-uyu mbele yetu si mtoto wangu.'

'The Sultan's wife said, "No, no, no, this one before us is not my son."
(after Ashton 1944:181)

(2) Traditional example of LE "non-proximate":

Nenda ukamtazame mtu yu-le ana nini.

'Go and find out what is the matter with that man.'
(after Ashton 1944:182)

Now the traditional analysis is that H and LE respectively mean location proximate or non-proximate to the speaker. If we take these words seriously we will approach this view as a hypothesis subject to validation. The validation of such a hypothesis, it will be seen, depends on redundant information in the context. That is, if the entire body of data available for analysis were exactly like examples (1) and (2), then we would say that the data confirm the hypothesis that H means location proximate to the speaker, and LE means location non-proximate to the speaker. In (1) we see *mbele yetu* 'before us' which independently indicates proximity, and in (2) we see *nenda 'go'*, indicating its goal—the man—is at a distance.

¹Although I only cite Ashton [1944], the best-known grammar of Swahili, there is seemingly complete agreement in the literature as to these meanings.

²Although Ashton [1944:182] states that location is "immaterial", some grammars assign, in addition to a referential meaning, a locative meaning of proximity to speaker [Wilson 1970:356], proximity to hearer [Zawawi 1971:146], or proximity to hearer/non-proximity to speaker [Hinnebusch and Mirza 1979:175]. This third demonstrative is H+class concord+0. Although not discussed in this paper, in the present analysis it is viewed as a discontinuous form H-0 that signals the meaning MID concentration of attention relative to H (HIGH) and LE (LOW). A fuller treatment of the demonstratives which includes H-0 is Leonard [1982].

However, throughout modern Swahili novels and plays we regularly encounter referents of H and LE in locations opposite to those indicated by the traditional hypothesis, that is, H referring to an item we can know from the context to be in a *non-proximate* location, or LE referring to an item in a location known to be proximate. Consider (3), in which the H form, the supposed "proximate", is used to refer to a location that is quite distant from the speaker:³

(3) H "non-proximate" contrary to traditional hypothesis:

(A man climbs up a tall rock and surveys the landscape. He looks south, west, then east.)

Upande mashariki niliweza kuona nyumba ya Baba ikitokeza juu ya miti. Nilikumbuka kwamba h-apa mfoto alikuwa akizaliwa. (KM 88)

'In the East I could see father's house sticking out above the trees. I remembered that there a child was being born.'

The location of the house is clearly *not* close at hand, yet the man refers to that location with H, the traditional "proximate".

In the next example we find LE, the traditional "non-proximate", with a referent that is clearly proximate (a herd of cows). The narrator states that they have drawn *near* to the cows, yet the cows are referred to with LE.

(4) LE "proximate" contrary to traditional hypothesis:

(The narrator and his brother come upon a cowherd who complains to them that she can't make her cows move. They go to help.)

Tulipowakaribia wa-le ng'ombe tulishangaa. Walikuwa wameinama wakinusanusa chini. Jambo lililotushangaza ni kwamba ng'ombe h-awa walikuwa wakilia kwa sauti. (KM 87)

'When we got close to the cows we were amazed. They were bending down smelling the ground. The thing that amazed us was that the cows (H, traditional proximate) were crying loudly.'

Notice that reference to the cows is made with H as well as LE. A strict interpretation of the traditional hypothesis would result in the paradoxical

³While examples (1) and (2) are adapted from Ashton, all other examples in the paper are taken from modern Kenyan and Tanzanian novels and plays, identified by title initials followed by page number. For complete references, see bibliography.

meaning that the cows are at once far from and near to the speaker.

Examples (3) and (4) run directly counter to the traditional analysis, and they are by no means isolated examples. Data like these show clearly how the traditional hypothesis that claims H to mean "proximate to speaker" and LE to mean "non-proximate to speaker" is not a hypothesis that adequately explains the actual distribution of these forms.

I will propose a new hypothesis as to the meanings of H and LE that I suggest enables us to account more satisfactorily for the distribution of these forms. This new hypothesis posits meanings that deal with the speaker's relative concentration of attention (COA) on a referent. Specifically H signals, relative to LE, HIGH concentration of attention (HCOA), And LE signals, relative to H, LOW concentration of attention (LCOA).

The validation of this hypothesis depends on redundant information in the context, as did the attempt to validate the traditional locative hypothesis. To validate the new hypothesis I will show contextual information that independently indicates that motivation exists for the speaker to concentrate a relatively HIGH or relatively LOW degree of attention on a referent. With this in mind let us review examples (3) and (4), which conflicted with the proximate/non-proximate hypothesis.

In (3) the narrator refers to his father's distant house with H, the signal for HCOA. A larger context that the one previously provided shows why. In that house, the narrator's emaciated sister is in labor, having been made pregnant, then abandoned by the narrator's worst enemy. (She dies in bringing forth a stillborn child.) This the the pivotal incident of the whole novel, the culmination of almost the entire first half of the book.

The narrator has previously left the house wanting to forget the entire situation. When he sees his father's distant house, he remembers what is happening in that very important place and refers to it with H, the signal for HCOA.

Returning to (4), what we find are entities that are at first thought just mildly worthy of attention becoming, suddenly, quite noteworthy indeed. In (5), below, a longer version of (4), we find the same entity referred to first by LE and then by H not because of a change in its relative *proximity* to the speaker, but because of a change in its relative *importance* to the speaker.

The narrator is fresh from college and very given to epistemological concerns. At first he finds the cows to be just cows and refers to them with LE, the signal for LCOA. Then he refers to them with H (HCOA) as suddenly he finds these cows to be objects quite worthy of his attention. They illustrate a question that for him throughout the rest of the novel is of central concern: whether we, as humans, in our incomprehension of the works of God, stand in the same relation to Him as dumb animals do to us. That is, are we as dumb animals to God? Or can we indeed fathom some of His works, and can animals indeed fathom some of ours?

(5) longer version of (4) with H, HIGH COA; LE, LOW COA:

Tulipowakaribia wa-le ng'ombe tulishangaa. Walikuwa wameinama wakinusanusa chini. Jambo lililoTushangaza ni kama ng'ombe h-awa walikuwa wakilia kwa sauti. Tulipotazama chini tuliona damu na majani yaliyokuwa ndani ya tumbo la ng'ombe. Mara moja tulielewa kwamba hapa palikuwa mahali alipochinjiwa mwenzao. Sikuweza kuelewa kwa nini ng'ombe h-awa walitenda hivyo waliponusa damu ya wenzao. Sikuweza kujua kama kweli walifahamu jambo lililotendeka kwa mwenzao. Sikuweza kujua kama hayo yalikuwa masikitiko au woga tu wa kifo, au kama walikuwa wakifanya hivyo bila fahamu—kama wasemavyo wataalamu. (KM 87)

'When we got close to the cows (LE, LOW COA) we were amazed. They were bending down, smelling the ground. The thing that amazed us was that the cows (H, HIGH COA) were crying loudly. When we looked down we saw blood and grass that had been in the stomach of a cow. At once we understood that here was a place where one of their companions had been slaughtered. I couldn't understand why the cows (H, HIGH COA) did what they were doing when they smelled the blood of their companion. I couldn't figure whether in truth they understood the thing that had been done to their companion. I couldn't figure whether it was sadness or just fear of death, or whether they were acting the way they were without understanding—like the experts say.'

So at first the narrator views the cows with no special interest and refers to them with LE, the signal for LCOA. But when he sees them as being directly related to a central concern, he refers to them with H, the signal for HCOA.

Now we have seen in (3-5) illustrations of how a referent that would normally be of only casual interest can be upgraded to having HCOA focused on it because of what might be called its *thematic* importance. It is also the case that an item of high thematic importance can be downgraded to suit a speaker's

specific purpose.

In (6), below, we find a man who in the commission of a robbery has killed a policeman. He is beside himself with fear of discovery. He asks himself pesa h-izi zote nitaziweka wapi? Where can I hide all the money?'. Notice H, HCOA. In a very agitated state he enters his house, takes off his coat in which he has placed the money. His sister enters, sees the coat and goes to brush it. She feels its pocket.

(6) Money—importance purposely discounted—LE

Brother: Wewe mpumbavu asiye adabu. Ni nani aliyekuruhusu kuligusa koti langu?

Sister: Kwani hutaki nikupigie brashi?

Brother: Sikukutuma.

Sister: Na pesa naona una nyingi sana, umezipata wapi zote?

Brother: Zi-le ni pesa zangu, wazitakia nini?

Sister: Hebu nizihesabu.

Brother: Zote ni shilingi elfu moja. (NL 21)

Brother: 'You're an idiot with no manners. Who gave you permission to touch my coat?'

Sister: 'Why, don't you want me to brush it for you?'

Brother: 'I didn't tell you to.'

Sister: 'And money, I see you've very much, where did you get it all?'

Brother: 'It (LE, LOW COA) is my money, what do you want from it?'

Sister: 'Hey, let me count it.'

Brother: 'Altogether it's a thousand shillings.'

Pressed for an explanation, he nonchalantly says he won it in a lottery.

The brother's purpose is clear. In his monologue he refers to the money that now threatens his life with the HIGH COA it indeed demands. But when discovered by his sister, this money, which, besides its thematic importance, happens to be a small fortune, is referred to with LE, the signal for LOW COA, downplaying its existence as if it were a commonplace not worthy of special note.

Now let us return to examples (1) and (2), in which we found the referent of H close to the speaker, and the referent of LE at a distance. The present hypothesis is that the choice between H and LE is motivated by the relative noteworthiness of the referent. Viewed in terms of the hypothesis, examples (1) and (2) show the semantic congruence of a speaker's higher COA with an item near him and a lower COA with an item far from him. All other things being

equal, a nearby item is more likely to demand attention than a distant item. A nearby entity has a greater possibility of interaction and greater frequency of interaction with a speaker. Humans are undeniably egocentric and regard their own experience as more interesting than those of others. It is in the nature of things that a human will interact with entities close to him far more often than with entities at a distance from him. Similarly, a human will find the place itself where he is more noteworthy than a place where he is not. So other things being equal, nearby entities, relative to distant ones, should be seen as one class of important, noteworthy entities, one on which a speaker will normally concentrate higher attention.

It must be stressed that nearness and distance are not part of the *meanings* of H and LE but only *inferences* sometimes made from the HIGH and LOW attention meanings. Although we frequently find nearby items referred to by H and distant items referred to by LE, it is not by virtue of the relative closeness of these entities but by virtue of the importance often attached to relative closeness. It is more likely that a speaker will find noteworthy an item close to him than one at a distance, other things being equal.

But other things are often not equal, as we saw in (3-5), in which an entity's *thematic* importance, its importance within a specific discourse, outweighs any importance that might stem from location.

As a further validation of the hypothesis, let us examine another case of items that are noteworthy. These are new or previously unmentioned entities.

A speaker will want to concentrate attention on a new, previously unmentioned referent in an effort to effect a successful discourse. A speaker signaling HCOA is actually instructing the hearer to pay close attention. For a discourse to be successful, it is of course necessary that the hearer be able to identify and keep distinct the entities within the discourse. It is therefore quite reasonable to assume the speaker will insist that the hearer attend more strongly to new items, items that are not yet known, than to old, previously identified ones. So we will expect to find a correlation of H with new items versus LE with old. Table 1 shows such a correlation (see next page). We find that of all referents of H and LE in four randomly selected chapters of different modern novels, non-previously mentioned, that is, new

Table 1: Previous mention⁴ of referent by H and LE
 (Source: MZ Chs. 7, 9; KM Ch. 6; JM Ch. 1)

	referent is <u>new</u> , i.e., not previously mentioned	referent is <u>old</u> , i.e., previously mentioned
H: HIGH COA	64% (32)	32% (47)
LE: LOW COA	36% (18)	68% (102)
	<u>100%</u>	<u>100%</u>

items are referred to by H 64% of the time compared with only 36% for LE. Conversely, previously mentioned, that is, old items are referred to by LE 68% of the time compared to only 32% for H. So H skews towards new items, not before

⁴The terms "new" or "non-previously mentioned" and "old" or "previously mentioned" are here used in the following manner: a referent is considered to be "old" if a noun is mentioned (with or without a demonstrative) and then subsequently referred to by

- (a) a demonstrative plus the same noun
 kijana...kijana yu-le 'youth...that youth' (MZ 39) (= (8) in text)
- (b) a demonstrative plus an equivalent noun
 nyumbani kwa Sembuli...watu h-awa 'the (people of the) household of Sembuli...these people' (HT 17)
- (c) a demonstrative alone, with appropriate concord
 mahali pa-le...pa-le 'that place...there' (MZ 43)
- (d) a demonstrative (with or without a noun) that is a summary of preceding items, e.g., a quotation referred to by maneno ya-le 'those words' (MZ 40).

A referent is considered to be "new" in cases other than the above (and, of course, with no previous mention), e.g.

- (a) example (7) from the text h-ivi 'this' (HT 26);
- (b) najum alisema na h-uku akicheka 'Najum spoke while at the same time laughing' (MZ 37);
- (c) u-le wimbo 'that song' (JM 5).

In (c), the narrator says he remembers 'that song that goes...' and explains how he realizes the words describe his life. The context suggests it is a well-known song. One could thus make a case for the song being in the hearer's consciousness and therefore "old". For the purposes of Table 1 I counted such entities as being, strictly speaking, "new". Had I counted them as "old", the skewing of LE to "old" would have been stronger, i.e. 80% rather than 68%.

mentioned, and LE skews towards old, already mentioned items.⁵

Number (7) is an example of H introducing new items, viz. previously unknown methods of acting and of speaking.

(7) H, HIGH COA = new entity:

(An oath-giver is explaining to an oath-taker the procedure to be followed.)

Sasa basi ni h-ivi. Mimi kwanza nitasema maneno yangu, utayasikia, halafu nikishayasema nataka wewe useme h-ivi: "Mikale mikale..." (HT 26)

'Now, it's this way (H, HIGH COA). First I'll say my words, you'll listen to them, then when I'm finished speaking I want you to speak thusly (H: HIGH COA): "Mikale mikale..."'

In (7) the oath-giver uses H, the signal for HCOA, to introduce the new, previously unmentioned procedures to which he wants the oath-taker to pay careful attention.

Number (8) is an example of LE referring back to an already specified, previously mentioned youth.

(8) LE, LOW COA = old entity:

Kwa pembeni kidogo alikuwapo kijana mmoja wa Kiswahili amesimama kimya... kwa wakati huu, kijana yu-le aliyekuwa amesimama kimya, alipata hisi kuwa nyuma yake kuna wafu. (MZ 39)

'Off to one side was a Swahili youth standing quietly... (another character does something). Meanwhile, that (LE, LOW COA) youth who had been standing quietly realized that there was someone behind him.'

⁵All other things being equal a speaker will use H for new and LE for old. But as we saw in the discussion on proximity, other things are often not equal—other factors can outweigh the noteworthiness that stems from newness or make an old item worthy of attention. Examples of the former include the deliberate downplaying of a new item for thematic reasons as well as the introduction of new but purely background items. Examples of the latter are (3) and (4) in the text. Thus we do not expect a 100% correlation between H and new, LE and old, just as we do not expect (and most certainly do not find) a 100% correlation between H and proximity, LE and non-proximity. By definition, the invariant *meaning* of a form correlates 100% with the form's utterance. "New" and "old", "proximate" and "non-proximate" are but categorizations of factors that tend to influence a speaker in his choice of H (HIGH COA) vs. LE (LOW COA).

Individual examples such as (7) and (8) are useful illustrations of H introducing a new item and LE referring back to an old item, but the presentation of a statistical skewing, as in Table 1, allows us a more forceful line of argument. This type of quantitative presentation can cover relatively large amounts of data at once and can therefore show conclusively that the correlation of the meaning and a validating context is not a feature of, say, just a particular passage or the style of a certain author. It shows us that throughout the data, H tends strongly towards new referents and LE tends strongly towards old referents, additional validation of the present hypothesis that claims H means HCOA and LE means LCOA.

Furthermore, and here we come to an important point, the data in which H tends towards new and LE tends towards old shows the inadequacy of any possible explanation of the data that would expand the traditional meanings to include *metaphorical* proximity and non-proximity. Let us look once more at the father's house in (3). A hypothesis claiming H to mean metaphorical proximity would say that the house becomes metaphorically closer to the narrator when he remembers what is happening there and so utilizes H for the effect, perhaps, of something like a zoom lens, making a distant object seem near.

This zoom lens, however, were it to be considered properly analogous to the effect of H, could also be viewed as support for the present hypothesis, since the very thing that a zoom lens does is focus the attention on a specific part of one's field of vision. This is what the narrator does in (3). Of all the places he surveys from his vantage point on the rock, only one does he find important enough to highlight with H—his father's house, where his sister is giving birth.

In any event, the only reason the house in (3) could be considered metaphorically closer to the narrator is because the narrator is himself a participant in the actions of the story. The narration is in the first person. But let us review example (8), taken from a novel with third person narration. In what possible sense can the Swahili youth be considered even metaphorically close to or far from the author, when the author is not himself involved in the story's plot? The only conceivable thing the youth might be considered closer to, or further from, would be the center of the author's attention, and that would cer-

tainly be support for the present meanings of HIGH and LOW COA.

The point is that the data explainable by a metaphorical proximity hypothesis is only a sub-set of the data explicable by the attention hypothesis. Any example which can be reasonably explainable by the attention hypothesis. Any can be more reasonably explained by attention meanings, and the attention hypothesis further covers data completely unexplainable by metaphorical proximity. Let us review Table 1, which presents the skewing of H to new and LE to old.

It is of course obvious that the newness or oldness of a referent does not make that referent physically, that is, literally close to or far from the speaker. An argument in terms of metaphorical closeness, which perhaps in this case would be closeness to the moment of speaking, is equally untenable. It is not the case that a new referent is closer to the moment of speaking than an old referent; clearly the mention of a new referent and the re-mention of an old referent both occur at the moment of speaking. H forms are used overwhelmingly for new items not because they are in any sense "closer" to the speaker or hearer, but because they require more attention be paid them than be paid old referents if the speaker is to have his communication understood.

It is characteristic of improved hypotheses that they promote discovery of previously unknown distributional facts like this new-old skewing. For the traditional hypothesis such facts about the distribution of H and LE are not even available for analysis since the choice between the proximate and non-proximate meanings cannot predict that such a skewing would even exist.

So in conclusion, we see that the attempt to test the validity of the two competing hypotheses consists of analyzing the correlation of the two different sets of meanings with independent information from the contexts in which we find the forms.⁶ In procedural terms, we examine how well the meanings of the

⁶This approach to linguistic analysis derives from the theoretical framework known as "form-content" grammar, an approach to the semantics of grammatical systems originally developed by Prof. William Diver at Columbia University. For a general introduction to the theory, see Diver [1975:Introduction] and Garcia [1975:Ch.2]. For a detailed application of the theory, see Garcia [1975]. Other studies of Swahili within this framework include Contini [1976, 1983], Hawkinson [1979], and Leonard [1980].

different hypotheses are able to explain a speaker's motivation for the use of H or LE in a particular context. We see that the present hypothesis can explain all data explainable by the traditional hypothesis and it can explain data not explainable by the traditional hypothesis. This most strongly suggests that between the competing hypotheses, the one that better fits the linguistic facts is the attention hypothesis, that posits the meanings of H versus LE to be HIGH versus LOW COA.

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