Cravin’ that straight talk: the latent affective meaning of demonstratives

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Affective demonstratives for everyone

Sarah Palin is the star of this show,

“Americans are cravin’ that straight talk.”
Affective demonstratives for everyone

Sarah Palin is the star of this show,

“Americans are cravin’ that straight talk.”

but we all have a part to play:

- **NPR**: Make that phone call right now.
- **Sinatra**: . . . snatchin’ up all those forget-a-me-nots
- **Experience Project**: Damn, these Glee kids get it on alot!
Reactions to Palin and her speech

Palin’s speech is often regarded as emblematic of her broader social and political attitudes:

**FoxNews.com comments after the 2008 debate**
- “We feel like she talks like we do.”
- “She talked like real people to real people.”
- “This middle class girl knows you were speaking for her.”

**Huffington Post comments after the 2008 debate**
- “pseudo-folksiness and fundamental dishonesty”
- “illusion of straight-talking”
- “‘folksy’ with a wink”
Linguists’ reactions to Palin’s speech

**Usual focus**: coronal pronunciation of \(-ing\) (‘g’ droppin’), euphemisms (\textit{heck, darn}), and dipthongization of \([æ]\).

**Purnell et al. (2009)**

“The register of Palin’s speech has been seen as strikingly informal, even during the vice presidential debate.”

**Pinker (2008)**

“pronounced her ‘ens’ more conspicuously in the debate than in the Couric interviews in part to emphasize that she was one with the ‘everyday American people, Joe Six-Pack, hockey moms across the nation.’ ”

**Labov (2008)**

“It’s a political way of reaching out to people and being casual.”
Our focus: Palin’s demonstratives

- And he also wants to erase those artificial lines between states
- the American workforce is the greatest in this world
- [Paul Revere] warned the British . . . by ringing those bells
- not having that proof for the American people
- that kind of anger and dissatisfaction at the fact that Washington far too many times puts the special interests ahead of their interests
From the 2008 VP debate

“We should be helping them build schools to compete for those hearts and minds of the people in the region.”
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“. . . but John McCain thought the answer is that tried and true Republican response, deregulate, deregulate.”
Everyone else

1. NPR: Make that phone call right now.
2. Flight attendant: get those bags under that seat in front of you.
3. Yoga instructor: get that right arm up over that head.
4. Experience Project: Damn, these Glee kids get it on alot!
5. Experience Project: This Army Wife thing is getting to me . . .
6. Experience Project: . . .to arrange that fateful meeting on that November holiday Friday.
Old Blue Eyes

1956, Capitol Records
You and I are just like a couple o' tots
Runnin' along the meadow
Pickin' up lots o' forget-me-nots
Old Blue Eyes

1956, Capitol Records
You and I are just like a couple o’ tots
Runnin’ along the meadow
Pickin’ up lots o’ forget-me-nots

1972, Live at Royal Festival Hall
You and I, we are just like a couple o’ tots
Runnin’ along the meadow
Snatchin’ up all those forget-a-me-nots
What is the nature and source of affectivity in demonstratives?
The basics of demonstratives in English

Spatio-temporal deixis
[Pointing to an immediately present object]: “That (chair) is a hideous brown.”

Anaphoric
“We bought a chair online, and that chair turned out to be a hideous brown.”

Morphological categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proximal</td>
<td>this</td>
<td>these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal</td>
<td>that</td>
<td>those</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Affective uses

Robin Lakoff’s (1974) emotional deixis

Under this rubric I place a host of problematical uses, generally linked to the speaker's emotional involvement in the subject-matter of his utterance. Since emotional closeness often creates in the hearer a sense of participation, these forms are frequently described as used for 'vividness.' And since expressing emotion is – as I noted last year – a means of achieving camaraderie, very often these forms will be colloquial as well. This is used for several reasons, all linked to the achievement of 'closeness,' like spatio-temporal this, in a rather extended sense.

Liberman (2008, 2010) calls demonstratives with an emotive flavor affective demonstratives. He highlights the presumption of “shared familiarity” associated with their use, and he claims that they “draw us in” since their referents are treated “as ‘assumed to be known’ to the audience”.

Factors amplifying the affectivity

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3. There is clearly no discourse antecedent in the usual sense:
   a. [Revere] warned the British . . . by ringing those bells
   b. We should be helping them build schools to compete for those hearts and minds of the people in the region.
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Optionally makes the demonstrative conspicuous, and a missing antecedent requires, and hence evokes, conceptual or emotional common ground.
Social and emotional contribution

- **Lakoff (1974):** “Establish emotional closeness between the speaker and addressee.”
- **Bowdle and Ward (1995):** “mark the kind being referred to as a relatively subordinate or homogeneous kind located among the speaker’s and hearer’s private shared knowledge”
- **In sum:** not just shared sentiment, but *presumed* shared sentiment, fostering *solidarity.*
Affective demonstratives in other languages

Our account says that affectivity is emergent from the more basic ‘pointing’ meanings of demonstratives. We thus expect the effect to be cross-linguistically robust.

- Ono (1994:133) on Japanese: “the anaphoric a-series can ensure a sense of solidarity and mutual reference between speaker and hearer”.

- Potts and Schwarz (2010) and Davis and Potts (2010) further support the Japanese claims and extend them to German.

The situations in which affectivity arises will influence the places where affectivity is strongest.
Corpus evidence

The above claims are impressionistic. Can we quantify them?
Experience Project confessions

* * Sigh* *

**CATEGORY: FRIENDS CONFESSIONS**

Posted by BrokenAngelWishes on January 20th, 2010 at 12:38 PM

I really hate being shy... I just want to be able to talk to someone about anything and everything and be myself.. That's all I've ever wanted.

[...]

14 Reactions

- you rock (1)
- teehee (2)
- I understand (10)
- sorry, hugs (1)
- wow, just wow (0)

6 Comments (add your own)

Posted by bigbadbear on January 20th, 2010 at 12:41 PM

I was really shy when I was younger. I got better when I entered the work field and gained confidence. I think you will grow out of it. :)

like 1 dislike Flag
Experience Project confessions

Confession: I bought a case of beer, now I’m watching a South Park marathon while getting drunk :P
Reactions: Sorry, hugs: 2; You rock: 3; Teehee: 2, I understand: 3; Wow, just wow: 0

Confession: subconsciously, I constantly narrate my own life in my head. in third person. in a british accent. Insane? Probably
Reactions: Sorry, hugs: 0; You rock: 7; Teehee: 8; I understand: 0; Wow, just wow: 1

Confession: I really hate being shy . . . I just want to be able to talk to someone about anything and everything and be myself . . . That’s all I’ve ever wanted.
Reactions: Sorry, hugs: 1; You rock: 1; Teehee: 2; I understand: 10; Wow, just wow: 0;

Table: Sample Experience Project confessions with associated reactions.
Experience Project confessions

10 Reactions

-you rock (3)  teehee (0)  I understand (6)  sorry, hugs (1)  wow, just wow (0)

Figure: EP reaction icons.
Experience Project confessions

10 Reactions

- You rock (3)
- Teehee (0)
- I understand (6)
- Sorry, hugs (1)
- Wow, just wow (0)

Figure: EP reaction icons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorry, hugs</td>
<td>sympathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You rock</td>
<td>cheering, supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teehee</td>
<td>amused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand</td>
<td>solitary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wow, just wow</td>
<td>shock</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Interpreting the icons.
Experience Project confessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sorry, hugs</td>
<td>91,222 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You rock</td>
<td>80,798 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teehee</td>
<td>59,597 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand</td>
<td>125,026 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wow, just wow</td>
<td>60,952 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>417,595</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) The overall size of the corpus.
(b) All reactions.

Table: In general, reader reactions are sympathetic and supportive.
### Counting and visualizing

| Cat.          | Count | Total          | $\text{Pr}_{\text{EP}}(w|r)$ | $\text{Pr}_{\text{EP}}(r|w)$ |
|---------------|-------|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| *Sorry, hugs* | 1167  | 18038374       | 0.000006                    | 0.26                        |
| *You rock*    | 520   | 14066087       | 0.000004                    | 0.15                        |
| *Teehee*      | 300   | 8167037        | 0.000004                    | 0.15                        |
| *I understand*| 1488  | 20466744       | 0.000007                    | 0.29                        |
| *Wow, just wow* | 473   | 12550603       | 0.000004                    | 0.15                        |

*disappointed* - 1,070 tokens

```
Pr(c|w)
H    R    T    U    W
0.13 0.16 0.17 0.24 0.29
```
Examples

Figure: Words eliciting predominantly ‘you rock’ reactions.

Figure: Words eliciting sympathetic reactions.
Demonstratives

Figure: All determiner demonstratives in the EP data.
Demonstratives

Figure: All demonstratives with complements in the EP data, by type.
Comparisons across the lexicon

Figure: The mean *I understand* value of demonstratives (red) compared with the norm for all other determiners.
Comparisons across the lexicon

Figure: The mean *I understand* value of demonstratives (red) compared with the norm for the entire vocabulary.
How unusual are Palin’s demonstratives?

We’ve shown that affective demonstratives are widely used and widely recognized effects. Is Palin truly unusual in her usage?
Data

- Four talk shows on FoxNews that often have Palin as a guest:
  - Bill O’Reilly’s *The O’Reilly Factor*
  - Sean Hannity’s *Hannity*
  - Greta Van Susteren’s *On the Record*
  - Chris Wallace’s *FoxNews Sunday*

- 16 Palin interviews

- For each Palin interview, the interview immediately before and after it.

- For a total of 48 interviews.
Quantitative analysis

Figure: Non-pronominal dems. as a proportion of all determiners.
Qualitative analysis

- Palin’s demonstratives are *longer* — more richly descriptive.
- We find far more evaluative and potentially controversial language in Palin’s tokens than in the others.

1. that *goofy game* that has been played now for *too many years* with the *leftist lamestream media* trying to *twist* the candidates’ words and intent and content of their statements.

2. these *good, hard-working, average, everyday, patriotic* Americans who want to see the *positive change* in our country that they *deserve*. 
Understanding the reactions to Palin’s speech

Palin is a polarizing figure, and reactions to her often center on her speech. Why?
Folksy or pseudo-folksy?

FoxNews.com comments after the 2008 debate
- “We feel like she talks like we do.”
- “She talked like real people to real people.”
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Huffington Post comments after the 2008 debate
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The presuppositions of informality

In general

- We are informal only with people we know well, and vice-versa. Rich common ground.
- Thus, informal forms presuppose familiarity and shared sentiment, and evoke those social connections.
- Where the connections exist, they are strengthened.
- Where they don’t exist, the effect is jarring.
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**For demonstratives**

- Demonstrative meanings inherently presuppose common ground, in order to establish reference.
- Where the referents are not physically present, but rather attitudinal, the presupposition of shared perspective is itself attitudinal.
**Doonesbury**

**Figure:** A recent Doonesbury cartoon that features Palin’s affective demonstratives.

Panel 1: those good solutions for America
Panel 2: there’s that that wantin’ to progress the nation forward
Panel 3: if God were to, you know, open that door
Panel 4: he’s got that mightiness there
Saturday Night Live

In SNL’s parody of the 2008 debate, Fey-as-Palin uses demonstratives at a much higher rate than Sudekis-as-Biden.

1. You know, John McCain and I, we’re a couple of mavericks. And, gosh darnit, we’re gonna take that maverick energy right to Washington.

2. Gwen, we don’t know if this climate change hoozie-what’s-it is man-made or if it’s just a natural part of the ‘End of Days.’

3. I liked being here tonight answering these tough questions without the filter of the mainstream gotcha media with their ‘follow-up questions,’ ‘fact-checking’ or ‘incessant need to figure out what your words mean and why ya put them in that order’.

4. Oh, and for those Joe Six-Packs out there playing a drinking game at home — Maverick.
Conclusion

- Affective demonstratives are widely used and widely recognized.
- Palin uses them to an unusually high degree, as part of general strategy of being familiar to generate solidarity.
- For supporters, this reenforces perceived ties.
- For detractors, the effect is presumptuous.
- Other subtle aspects of Palin’s linguistic choices show similar patterns — especially her pronouns . . .
References I


Liberman, Mark. 2008. Affective demonstratives. URL

http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=674.

Liberman, Mark. 2010. Sarah Palin’s distal demonstratives. URL

http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2240.


References II