

The acquisition of Hungarian demonstratives

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a small corpus query and a production study exploring demonstrative use in child Hungarian. 13 children between the ages of 3;6 and 4;6 and 11 adults participated in a jigsaw puzzle completion task. We found a significant association between the relative distance of the referent from the speaker and demonstrative choice in both the target group and the adult control group. There is, nevertheless, a strong overall difference between the two groups: children use more distals than proximals, unlike adult controls, who reverse this pattern. We argue that Hungarian children may overuse the distal demonstrative because it serves as the default option in non-contrastive contexts, and is the unmarked form with grammaticalised, non-spatial functions.

Keywords: demonstratives, child language, exophoric, Hungarian.

Introduction

Hungarian has a two-term demonstrative system; *ez*, *ezek* ‘this, these’ are nominal proximal demonstratives, *itt* ‘here’ is an adverbial demonstrative, while *az*, *azok* ‘that, those’, and *ott* ‘there’ are distal. Nominal terms can be used as pronouns or as adnominal demonstratives, as illustrated by (1a) and (1b).

- (1) (a) Ez (a kulcs) nyitja az ajtó-t.
this.NOM the key.NOM open.3SG the door-ACC
‘This (key) opens the door.’
(b) Ez-t (a kulcs-ot) kérem.
this-ACC the key-ACC want.1SG
‘I want this (key).’

Descriptive grammars of Hungarian assume that in adult language use, the choice of spatial demonstratives is primarily determined by the relative distance of the referent from the speaker (along with interactional factors, such as joint attention, contrastivity). Given that acquisition of demonstratives in Hungarian is an underexplored area, our study aims at assessing the basic distributional trends of demonstrative use in child language and at investigating the role of the distance factor in particular. We first report preliminary findings from a corpus study, and then describe the findings of a controlled elicitation task.

Corpus findings

We conducted a corpus analysis in the MONYEK corpus (Morphologically Disambiguated Corpus of Spoken Child Hungarian) (Mátyus and Orosz 2014), which contains spoken language data, specifically transcripts of interviews with children aged 4;5–5;6, where the children were asked to tell or recount stories based on visual prompts. Altogether, we examined 10,000 utterances (approximately 39,000 words), analyzing nominal demonstratives, specifically their nominative and superessive forms, and the two demonstrative adverbs.

As Table 1 shows, the relative frequency of proximal and distal terms is different in the two populations: children use fewer proximal demonstratives and more distal ones. In contrast, adult participants show the reverse pattern, characterized by a higher frequency of proximal terms. The observed difference is quite pronounced.

Table 1. Relative frequency of demonstrative use in the subcorpus.

	Child-directed speech	Children's speech
Proximal terms	357	156
Distal terms	220	318

Our results contradict the observation made by Diessel and Monakhov (2023: 936) based on data from the CHILDES database on a group of languages that does not include Hungarian. Diessel and Monakhov (2023) point out that the proportions of children's spatial terms correspond closely to those in child-directed speech. However, it is important to note that Diessel and Monakhov do not discuss the same age group, their results describe the language use of children aged 1;0-2;1 years. As previously noted, our corpus data include all occurrences and functions of demonstratives. To investigate whether a similar distributional pattern would emerge in a controlled experimental setting, we conducted a production study.

Controlled elicitation task

We adapted the experimental method described by Shin and Morford (2020) and conducted a puzzle completion task with children and adults as a control group. In a scripted conversational setting, the experimenter asked *which piece* questions: *Melyik darabon vannak a mozdony kerekei? Which piece has the wheels of the engine?* to elicit spontaneous use of demonstratives in table-top space. The task was to put the puzzle together. Each session was video-recorded and concluded upon the completion of the puzzle. One session lasted approximately 4 minutes.

Participant and instructor were sitting face to face across a table. The participants were not allowed to touch the puzzle pieces, which were arranged

in three different regions: within easy arm's reach, at forced reach, and beyond reach. There were 13 child participants, 7 female and 6 male, their average age was 3 years and 9 months. We selected this age group based on findings from cross-linguistic research (Küntay and Özyürek 2006; Shin and Morford 2020), which indicate that while four-year-old children are capable of using a variety of demonstratives, their patterns of use differ significantly from those of adults. The children in our study were all monolingual Hungarian speakers.

The adult group included 11 participants, all students from the University of Debrecen (Hungary), with an average age of 23 years. Demonstratives were analysed according to two factors: (i) demonstrative type: proximal vs. distal, and (ii) placement of the puzzle piece (within reach, forced reach, or beyond reach). The children produced 72 tokens, while the adults produced 47 tokens. Detailed results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Relative frequency of demonstrative use in the production task.

	Children		Adults	
	Proximal	Distal	Proximal	Distal
within reach	14	8	16	0
forced reach	11	14	10	6
beyond reach	4	21	2	13
frequency (%)	40	60	60	40

Children generally produced either pronominal (*ez/az*) or adverbial (*itt/ott*) demonstratives, typically accompanied by a pointing gesture, to respond to the *which piece* questions. A significant association was observed between the referent's relative distance from the speaker and the demonstrative patterns in both the target group ($\chi^2(2) = 11.26, p < .01$) and the adult control group ($\chi^2(2) = 24.23, p < .01$).

A comparison of the choice of demonstratives between children and adults revealed a more consistent pattern among adults. Adults predominantly used proximal demonstratives when referring to puzzle pieces within easy arm's reach, while distal forms were favoured for objects located beyond reach. Although children also leaned toward distal terms with beyond-reach objects, their choices were less predictable when referring to items within easy arm's reach. Interestingly, the forced reach zone displayed the opposite trend, showing the greatest variability in demonstrative use across both groups.

In general, the children used proportionally more distals than proximals (as opposed to the adult control group). This confirms the findings of our preliminary corpus queries, since the children's utterances in the MONYEK corpus also exhibited a higher proportion of distal terms.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, Diessel and Monakhov (2023) also remark that English children aged 1;0-2;1 make extensive use of distal

demonstratives, and this is strengthened by the findings of González-Peña et al. (2020: 11), who also observe that in English, children predominantly use *that/there*, i.e., distal terms were present in a higher number of transcripts within the CHILDES database in the case of children aged 18-24 months. Unfortunately, we have not found any data on the same age group.

Regarding the results mentioned on English, Diessel and Monakhov (2023) assume that a possible explanation for the overuse of distals in English is that *that* is the default in non-contrastive situations in adult language use (Levinson 2018). Accordingly, we assume that Hungarian children may overuse the distal demonstrative as it is the default choice in non-contrastive situations, and it is also the unmarked demonstrative that has adopted grammaticalised, non-spatial functions. The distal form *aʒ* ‘that’ serves as the diachronic source of the definite article *a/aʒ* ‘the’ in Hungarian, and it also functions as the matrix pronominal associate of certain finite subordinate clauses and left-dislocated noun phrases. The distal default slowly fades out as children grow, but it is still present in the age group we investigated.

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