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**Documenting deixis in  
Wik-Ngatharr and Wik-Ngathan**

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# Documenting deixis in Wik-Ngatharr and Wik-Ngathan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of deictic expressions, such as English *this*, *that*, *here* and *there*, have traditionally focused on the relative distance of a referent from speaker (Spr), addressee (Adr), or both (Spr/Adr). As more in-depth documentation work takes place on languages that show significant variation in deictic systems, the spatio-centric focus of deixis has been challenged. Drawing on evidence from Yucatec Maya, Hanks (2009, 2005, 1990) argues that a ‘spatialist, egocentric picture’ of deixis is rarely adequate to account for how deictic reference is actually used and pragmatically interpreted in everyday speech (Hanks 1990, 2009: 11). Hanks (1990, 2009) proposes that deixis is less about degrees of physical space and more about the *access* of speech participants to the object or entity of reference (see also Wilkins 1999). Access in this sense can refer to spatial access but also other contextual factors such as perception (visible, tactual), temporality and social knowledge (ownership, shared knowledge).

The aim of this paper is to present a preliminary analysis of the use of locational demonstratives in two closely related Paman dialects spoken in Cape York Peninsula (CYP), Australia, with a focus on *modes of access* rather than physical space (Hanks 1990). The Wik-Ngathan (Nn) and Wik-Ngatharr (Nr) demonstrative system is complex in terms of how speakers combine contrastive forms to produce a range of referring expressions and how these deictic expressions are pragmatically interpreted. Demonstrative locational forms are frequently combined with directional and aspectual particles, morphological case-suffixes and ideophones to communicate a range of deictic reference functions with accompanying contextual elements (e.g. gesture and speaker orientation). Although the Nn and Nr demonstrative paradigm appears to be based primarily on a system of spatial contrast to the speaker (proximal, medial, distal) and addressee (medial), I consider what other modes of access may be relevant in the selection of locational demonstrative forms. The data presented is based on material recorded by Peter Sutton during ongoing fieldwork in the Wik area from 1976 (see Sutton 1978, 1995) and my own field data recorded during a language documentation project at Aurukun, Australia, 2008–9.<sup>1</sup> Some of the particular challenges faced in documenting deixis in fieldwork will be addressed.

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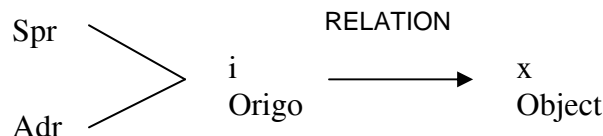
2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY OF DEIXIS

Deictics have proved particularly difficult to pin down in theoretical and methodological terms. The theoretical relevance of deixis is attributed to the central role it plays in the organisation of ‘language in context’ as well as the frequency and pervasiveness of deictic expressions across languages (Levinson 2004). Deictic expressions have also proved important in challenging formal analyses that treat language as an autonomous system isolated from the context of language use. The literature on deixis is extensive and spans the disciplines of philosophy, psychology (see, for example, Bühler [1934] 1982), anthropology and linguistics. More recently, researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics have undertaken comparative research on the deictic systems of a wide range of languages highlighting significant variation across the semantic domains of person, place and time (Levinson & Wilkins 2006, Levinson 2003, Senft 2001, Wilkins 1999). Taking into account the abstract nature of deixis, the intensions of speakers in selecting contrastive forms and the pragmatic interpretation of the context in which they are uttered, describing and understanding deixis becomes a tricky business. In particular, developing universal approaches to the study of deixis is problematic because of the culturally specific ways in which deictics are used and interpreted (Hanks 2001: 120). Despite the long history of the study of deixis, Levinson acknowledges that there remains a paucity of research on how deixis is pragmatically realised (Levinson 2004: 97).

Hanks’ (1990) study of referential practice is one example of longitudinal research that addresses the pragmatic interpretation of deictic use. Hanks challenges the tendency to reduce the deictic field to a single dimension based on space, where typically, deictics ‘individuate objects and places spatially arrayed at different distances from Spr, Adr or both’ (Hanks 2005: 196). Instead, Hanks presents a relational framework (see Figure 1) that conceives of deictic speech as comprising three parts: ‘a referential focus (the object), an origo from which it is picked out (the indexical ground), and the relation between the two’ (Hanks 2009: 11). The relation between the indexical ground and the referent object can reflect and constitute multiple modes of access determined by the context of speech rather than one dimension based on physical distance (Hanks 2005: 193).

**Figure 1**

Relational structure of deictic reference (reproduced from Hanks 2009: 12)



The categorisation of the origo (indexical ground), the object (referential focus) and the relation between the two, can differ markedly between languages. The origo may include Spr only, Adr only or both, or be transposed to an imaginary indexical ground. The object may be formally categorised by marking features of number, gender or animacy. Space may be the salient contextual dimension in the relation between origo and object (e.g. proximity) but others can include time, perception and prior or background knowledge (Hanks 2009: 11).

The formally encoded demonstrative systems of languages have been central to discussions on deixis (Levinson 2003, Dixon 2003, Diessel 1999, Himmelmann 1996). With their accompanying gesture, presentative articulation and ostensive function, demonstrative forms, along with personal pronouns, have been framed as the most basic and universal of deictic expressions (Hanks 2001: 119). Yet, they also prove difficult to study. In part, this is due to the multifunctional role demonstratives often play in language. Demonstrative forms can refer to objects and abstract entities (situated reference) and to referents in discourse (discourse reference) where demonstratives point back (anaphorically) or forward (cataphorically). They can be used recognitionally (see Himmelmann 1998) and can be semantically extended to refer to a range of temporal, spatial and social phenomena (Levinson 2004: 107). Demonstratives frequently co-articulate with gesture and other pragmatic elements that may not always be evident at the time of speech (e.g. requiring background knowledge) (Hanks 2009: 12). For these reasons, Evans notes that ‘more than any other word class, demonstrative semantics require lengthy in-depth study, large corpora, and detailed recording of context and accompanying gesture’ (Evans 2003: 291). The study of demonstratives is therefore well suited to a language documentation approach to fieldwork.

### 3. DOCUMENTING DEIXIS: THE WIK-NGATHARR AND WIK-NGATHAN DEMONSTRATIVE SYSTEM

In addition to person deixis, the demonstrative paradigm is the basis for deictic expressions in the Wik-Ngathan (Nn) and Wik-Ngatharr (Nr) language. When compared cross-linguistically (for example see Diessel 1999), the Nn/Nr paradigm does not appear specifically elaborate in terms of the number of contrastive forms available to speakers. Where Nn and Nr demonstratives are of particular interest is in their multi-functional role across language use and the interpretive range of basic demonstrative forms when combined with directional and aspectual particles, case-markers, motion verbs and ideophones to encode a range of situated and discourse deictic functions. These functions crosscut the semantic domains of space, orientation, motion and time.

Hanks (2009: 13) outlines three types of evidence used to build up an understanding of deictic practice. Firstly, grammatical evidence identifies forms in paradigmatic opposition from which speakers can select to form deictic expressions. Secondly, elicitation tools can provide evidence of deictic forms

within controlled contexts. Speaker metacommentary can also be important in providing contextual information about the normalised use of given forms. Thirdly, observation of deictic use across a range of situations will provide evidence of additional pragmatic factors at the moment of speaking, for example, gesture, speaker orientation, intonation and the ways speakers combine forms to reveal further distinctions in meaning.

A language documentation approach aims to collect a range of linguistic and cultural data from spontaneous, naturally-occurring language to elicited commentary, utilising appropriate recording media and methods to record more of language in context (see Himmelmann 2006). These methods, alongside the study of archival recordings and previous ethnographic and linguistic research on Wik languages, have been integral in the documentation of demonstrative use in Nn and Nr, and are discussed below in terms of grammar, elicitation and observation.

3.1. Grammar: demonstrative paradigms

Starting from a description of deictics presented by Sutton (1978: 280–285) the preliminary analysis presented below is part of ongoing research into the deictic practice of Nn and Nr speakers living at Aurukun, CYP, Australia. The paradigm presented in Table 1 is a partial synopsis of Nn and Nr demonstrative lexical items. Other deictic forms including directional and temporal particles, person reference, ideophones, deictic vocatives and discourse deictics are not included here. Nn and Nr has lexical forms for adnominal, pronominal and locational/adverbial categories, which can be marked for number and grammatical case.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1**  
Partial synopsis of demonstrative forms in Nn/Nr<sup>3</sup>

	UNMARKED	UNKNOWN	ALLATIVE	LOCATIVE	ABLATIVE	GEN/DAT
SG/PLURAL	-TH	-ANG	-ANCH	-ANCHINH	-M	
PROX	<i>anhth</i>	<i>anhang</i>	<i>anhanch</i>	<i>anhanchinh</i>	<i>anhthem</i>	
MED	<i>panhth</i>	<i>panhang</i>	<i>panhanch</i>	<i>panhanchinh</i>	<i>panhthem</i>	
DIST	<i>inhth</i>	<i>inhang</i>	<i>inhanch</i>	<i>inhanchinh</i>	<i>inhem,</i> <i>inhthem</i>	
PLURAL	-Ø	-ANG	-ANCH	-ANGAN	-M	-ENT
PROX	<i>aliy</i>	<i>alang</i>		<i>aliyangan</i>	<i>alem</i>	<i>aliyent</i>
MED	<i>pany</i>	<i>panyang</i>		<i>panyangan</i>	<i>panyem</i>	
DIST	<i>iny</i>	<i>inyang</i>	<i>inyanch</i>	<i>inyangan</i>	<i>inyem</i>	<i>inyent</i>

<sup>2</sup> There is also a two-way contrastive deictic for human referents although the use of these forms requires further investigation and will not be discussed here.

<sup>3</sup> The partial paradigm presented in Table 1 is based on data recorded by Sutton (1978: 282) and additional forms recorded during my own fieldwork (2008–9).

Following Sutton (1978), I refer to one set of terms in the first column of Table 1 as ‘unmarked’ or basic demonstratives. The Nn and Nr basic demonstrative forms are highly frequent in speech, used across intersecting deictic fields (spatial, temporal, motion) and have various pragmatic interpretations. These forms may appear in different syntactic contexts as independent pronouns, noun modifiers (with specifier function) and locational deictics. Example (1) illustrates the most basic ostensive function using the distal demonstrative with pointing gesture (demonstratives in bold type).<sup>4</sup> In (2) the distal plural form modifies the nominal ‘ancestors’. In this sense, the distal demonstrative refers to temporal and perceptual distance. The referents are no longer alive and therefore not accessible to the speaker. In example (3) the proximal form is used to report speech in a story and highlights the ambiguity of the referential focus in the use of basic forms. The demonstrative form selected could refer to the place where the speaker is or to the immediacy of his presence - presenting himself as accessible to children returning to the mission in the context of the story. The ‘here-now’ of example (3) does not refer to where the speaker utters the expression but transports the listener to an imagined origo where the relational access between participants in the narrative is relevant. Transposition of the deictic centre, or what Bühler ([1934], 1982) referred to as *deixis at phantasma* (deixis in imagination), occurs frequently in many of the recorded Nn and Nr texts that recount creation stories, travel, memories and reported speech.

- (1) *inhtha*     *ku’*     *ngatha*  
**DDIST**     dog     1SG.GEN  
 ‘That’s my dog.’  
 (Nn) [SW: 037]
- (2) *wuut*     *eempal*     ***inya,***     *kan-ana*     *wayngke-nh*  
 OLD     ancestors     **DDIST.PL**     PART-3PL     die-DEF  
 ‘Those old people, they all died.’  
 (Nn) [SW: 027\_02]
- (3) “*ngaya*     ***anhtha***     *wey*”     *wine-Ø*  
 1SG.SUB     **DPROX**     dears     call-3SG  
 ‘“I’m here dears!” he called.’  
 (Nn) [SW: 018\_01]

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<sup>4</sup> The following abbreviations are used in the examples: ABL = ablative, ALL = allative, DEF = definite mood, DDIST = distal demonstrative, DMED = medial demonstrative, DPROX = proximal demonstrative, DUB = dubitative, ERG = ergative, GEN = genitive, LOC = locative, NF = non-future, OBL2 = oblique case 2, PART = particle, PL = plural, SG = singular, SUB = subject, UK = unknown, 1 = 1st person, 2 = 2nd person, 3 = 3rd person. Data sources are marked for dialect variety (Nn) = Wik-Ngathan, (Nr) = Wik-Ngatharr, (Al) = Wik-Alkenh and a code identifying the speaker and file.

In Nn and Nr, demonstrative pronouns can be formally distinguished by morphology. The basic unmarked and plural form is combined with the distal demonstrative resulting in the contrastive set presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Demonstrative pronouns in Nn and Nr

BASIC FORM	UNMARKED (SG/PL)		PLURAL (PL)	
PROX	<i>anhth-inhth</i>	‘this one’	<i>aliny-iny</i>	‘these ones’
MED	<i>panhth-inhth</i>	‘that one’	<i>pany-iny</i>	‘those ones’
DIST	<i>inhth-inhth</i>	‘that one’	<i>iny-iny</i>	‘those ones’

Locational demonstratives in Nn and Nr can be placed on a cline of adverbiality - from forms that are used pronominally to forms that behave more like typical adverbs. Demonstratives can be marked for ablative, allative and locative cases as well as genitive, dative and ergative case. In addition there is a case marked with *-ang* that indicates that something is ‘unknown’. The semantic scope of the *-ang* suffix can range from indicating evidentiality, perceptual access or indefiniteness (e.g. regional as opposed to a bound, defined area) depending on the referent. In example (4) the referential object is categorised as a region or undefined area in relation to the speaker through the use of the distal plural demonstrative with *-ang* suffix. This does not necessarily refer to perceptual access (e.g. visibility) as contrastive ‘unknown’ forms occur in the data which refer to undefined areas closeby and visible to the speaker. Rather, it encodes indefiniteness. However, in (5) the *-ang* suffix categorises a relation between the origo (or indexical ground of Spr and ADr) and the referential focus (i.e. the place where the man is coming from) in what appears to be based on perceptual access. Speakers provide the following translations for (5): ‘he’s coming but you can’t see him yet’ or ‘he’s coming but you don’t know when,’ highlighting the ambiguity between different modes of access based on perception (visibility), temporality (immediate/non-immediate) and evidentiality (certainty/uncertainty) inferred by the distal demonstrative root.

- (4) *ngaya wiipa-nga nhiina-ka iny-anga*  
 1SG.SUB shade-LOC sit-FUT **DDIST.PL-UK**  
 ‘I’m gonna sit in the shade over there.’  
 (Nn) [SW: 010]

- (5) *nhula inhth-ang-pal waape-nya*  
 3SG.SUB **DDIST-UK-HITHER** walk-DEF  
 ‘He’s coming’  
 (Nn) [SW: 02\_51\_08]

For now I have termed the contrastive basic roots, *anhth*, *panhth*, *inhth* as proximal, medial and distal to the speaker. The purpose of this paper is to consider to what extent these oppositional forms can be considered spatial and whether further distinctions are contextually salient. Engaging with Hanks' questions about relational access, what do we mean when we speak of proximal, medial and distal, and in relation to what indexical ground? For instance, example (6) challenges expected spatial distinctions. The speaker selects the medial demonstrative in combination with the directional particle *pal* rather than the expected distal demonstrative to refer to a town over two hours drive away from the speaker's location (the town here is referred to as 'north' and glossed *kungkiy*). Despite being physically distant the place is visited regularly and is relatively accessible in the remote region of the west coast of CYP.

- (6) *panhtha-pal kungkiy-m-pala*  
 DMED-HITHER North-ABL-HITHER  
 '(He's) coming from Weipa.'  
 (A1) [MY: 009]

With evidence from Yucatec Maya, Hanks (2005: 198) has illustrated how spatial values can be 'contextually cancelled' by more salient distinctions. In example (6) the referent (Weipa) is construed as medial to the indexical ground. In this instance the indexical ground is not the speaker but the Aurukun community, that is, a sociocentric deictic centre. On the basis of habitual social routes, frequency of travel and familiarity, Weipa is construed as medially accessible to the social space of the Nn and Nr community and this sense is foregrounded rather than physical distance. What examples (5) and (6) highlight is the frequent lack of a simple correspondance between distinct forms and the function of demonstrative terms in the everyday context of speech. Use of demonstratives could not be readily predicted based on knowledge of the grammatical paradigm. In my own early attempts to refer to places and objects I was constantly confused by what contextual factors were most relevant in selecting the demonstrative term. Identifying what contextual information to document when demonstratives were used has become key to understanding demonstrative use in Nn and Nr.

### 3.2. Elicited data and native speaker metalinguistic commentary

Elicitation tools such as the Demonstrative Questionnaire (Wilkins 1999) proved useful to elicit demonstrative forms in controlled contexts and to analyse the extensional range of domains of access in relation to the body and local space (Wilkins 1999: 17). The context in which these forms would be used could then be discussed with native speakers. While native speaker commentary on demonstrative use does not necessarily reflect actual use, it was revealing in how speakers described salient contexts (e.g. time rather than space). One example of confusion in the data was the way that the ablative suffix *-m* was used with demonstratives in everyday conversation. Initially, I expected the ablative to indicate a point of origin or movement 'from X' as in (6) *kungkiy-m* 'from the



North’. Yet in conversation *ngay anhthem* (1SG DPROX-ABL) is interpreted as ‘I’m here’ with the more subtle temporal distinction of inferring ‘I’ve just arrived’. Speakers explained how the use of the ablative contrasted with other possible forms (locative and unmarked). For instance, if a person was present for a while a speaker would use *aliyangan* (DPROX-LOC) or *anhtha* (DPROX) to refer to themselves. The speaker then gave the following example (7).

- (7) *nhula      anhtha-m-inhtha      thoengke-nha      nhiikema*  
 3SG.SUB    DPROX-ABL-DDIST    arrive-DEF      recently  
 ‘He just arrived.’  
 (A1) [LW: 28/05/2009]

The complex demonstrative cluster *anhth-m-inhtha* is used idiomatically to refer to temporal information (or immediacy) indicating ‘now, immediately’. Should *anhthem* then be considered a truncation of temporal information that has now become formulaic in everyday discourse? Or the end-point of path information? Equally, as the ablative can indicate emphatic mood in common nominals could it be an extension of a presentative and emphatic expression along the lines of ‘here it is/here I am’? Speaker commentary, when alternative forms are offered as in (7), can direct research to areas requiring further investigation.

Example (8) highlights some of the problems with eliciting demonstrative use in staged settings. The context of this utterance was the speaker, SW, explaining the use of the ‘unknown’ case. His translation of the utterance, in English, is ‘I lost that biro here somewhere.’ As he spoke he was actually holding the pen in his hand and the utterance reflects this in the selection of the proximal form to modify the generic noun *yuka* where one would expect a medial or distal form if the pen was lost/invisible or its location unspecified and therefore inaccessible. The example provides a number of demonstrative terms with the speaker drawing on a range of linguistic resources to indicate the unspecified/unknown location of the referent. The ‘unknown’ form is a proximal demonstrative, indicating a region (close to speaker) in this context. The speaker then asks where is that (referent) located or where is that (perceptually inaccessible) place. When the speaker locates the referent he presents it thus – *anhtha!* – with presentative force.

- (8) *yuka      anhtha      wayame-nh-ang,      want-ith-e?*  
 THING    DPROX    lose-DEF-1SG.SUB    where-DDIST-INT  
  
*al-ang              want-inh-ma’              inh-anga      anhtha!*  
 DPROXPL.UK    where-DDIST-DUB    DDIST-UK    DPROX  
 ‘I lost that biro here somewhere. Got it!’  
 (Nn) [SW: 037]

Despite evident problems in eliciting demonstrative terms, native speaker metacommentary proved particularly useful in highlighting more subtle distinctions in contrastive demonstrative use. Additional modes of access (e.g.

immediacy) were introduced that previously had been overlooked when focusing on the primacy of physical space.

### 3.3. *Observed use*

Observing how speakers actually use locational demonstratives in everyday speech around Aurukun highlighted the importance of documenting detailed contextual information about participants, gesture and speaker orientation in relation to landmarks and referents. Gesture in Nn and Nr incorporates hand, lip and chin pointing (for example, direction can be indicated by preposing *thaa* 'lip' before cardinal directions (Sutton 1995)). One particularly prominent dimension that affected speakers' selection of demonstrative forms concerns the way in which the social space of Aurukun village is encoded in deictic expressions. In example (9) the speaker is referring to going to the local store.

- (9) *ngay*            ***anh-ancha***  
 1SG.SUB        **DPROX-ALL**  
 'I'm going over there (to the store).'  
 (A1) [LW: 28/05/09]

The store is several streets away from where we were sitting but the proximal form was used, highlighting the accessibility of the referent in social and habitual terms rather than physical space. Aurukun village space is encoded into the demonstrative system in particular ways that highlight familiar places and local orientational knowledge. Demonstratives combine with absolute cardinal terms and an up-down axis that reflects cultural as well as topographical information. The speaker contrasted expressions (9) and (10) and distinguished them as follows:

- (10) *ngay*            ***anh-anch-nka***  
 1SG.SUB        **DPROX-ALL1-ALL2**  
 'I'm going over there (to the store - but coming back quickly).'  
 (A1) [LW: 28/05/09]

The first example, (9), indicates the speaker is going to the store but no temporal information is provided. The attachment of the common nominal allative marker *-nka* to the inflected demonstrative form in (10) indicates that the speaker will return quickly to the place where the expression was uttered. Without a verb, a motion event indicating path and inferred temporal information is encoded in the demonstrative alone. Understanding the pragmatic details of social space in any language context is shown to be of central importance in understanding demonstrative use. These examples suggest that the ways that objects, places (and speech participants) are referenced through relations of social access can override physical space.

#### 4. SUMMARY: THE CENTRALITY OF (SOCIAL) SPACE

Based on the selected examples discussed above, several dimensions of context are relevant to the selection of contrastive locational demonstrative forms by Nn and Nr speakers. These dimensions can be termed (1) SPATIAL, (2) TEMPORAL, (3) PERCEPTUAL, and (4) SHARED BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE. Demonstrative roots can refer to proximal, medial and distal distance in the SPATIAL dimension, though these forms are abstract and include concepts of social space. TEMPORAL dimensions are contrasted by immediacy and non-immediacy as well as concepts of temporal distance. Modes of access in the PERCEPTUAL dimension are more ambiguous referring to definiteness/indefiniteness, visibility and evidentiality. Ongoing research suggests that strategies of indefiniteness in Nn and Nr demonstrative use are associated with speech etiquette, indirectness and manners. The dimension of SHARED BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE in these examples overlaps with concepts of space highlighting modes of access based on familiarity, landmarks, and knowledge of Nn and Nr social life.

The multifunctional role of Nn and Nr demonstratives means that the dimensions are not always formally marked (exceptions include the *-ang* ‘unknown’ suffix). Equally, several dimensions may simultaneously be relevant in any given context. How different contextual dimensions interact and which are foregrounded in the motivation of a speakers’ choice of one deictic over another is not always clear. Analysing the range of dimensions in terms of the relations of access between the indexical ground and referential focus therefore proves useful.

Spatial dimensions remain central to the Nn and Nr demonstrative system. However, reference based on physical space is rarely as straightforward as it seems. Concepts of space are socially encoded and reflect modes of access to referents, particularly in village space, that depend on ease of access to a place/person/object, shared background knowledge, habitual routes around the local area and familiarity of referents. Access to referents based on the domains of background knowledge, perception and temporality can ‘contextually cancel’ the primacy of physical space in the semantic interpretation of demonstrative use.

The study of deixis highlights inherent limitations of corpus work if language is removed from the context of use. What appears to fit into a neat paradigm does not account for the multifunctional roles of demonstratives. In everyday speech, demonstrative forms can be combined with directional and aspectual particles, lexicalised through routine use and semantically extended to refer to time, shared knowledge and perceptual access. The challenge in the study of deixis is to develop appropriate methods that can adequately document and describe the social embeddedness of referential practice that is specific to each language, while also enabling further understanding of deixis through cross-linguistic study.

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