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Original Paper

Pragmatic Variations of Deictic Word "This" in Chinese: A Case Study in Digital Social Contexts

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Abstract

Spatial deictic expressions are an important part of pragmatics. In verbal communication, the meaning of spatial deictic expressions can only be interpreted by the speaker and the listener through the context. But with the continuous renewal of language media, the forms and functions of deixis have also been constantly developing. Based on the spatial deixis framework and the ideal cognitive model of deixis, this paper selected memes containing the deictic word "this" in Chinese from "fabiaoqing.com" as the corpus source to explore the variation of the spatial deictic "this" in digital social contexts. This study employed qualitative analysis to investigate the variation mechanism of the spatial deictic "this" in online contexts, and used quantitative analysis to examine the quantitative indicators of the selected corpus. The results showed that in terms of deictic distance, the near reference was broken and the far reference was attempted; in terms of the boundary dimension, the proportion of the invisible increased; in terms of the emotional dimension, the expression tendency of negative emotions was obvious.

Keywords

digital social context, pragmatic variation, spatial deixis, "this"

1. Introduction

1.1 Digital Social Contacts and Memes

Since 2015, research on memes has been on the rise, which is in line with the trend of the advent of the mobile Internet era and the popularization of smart phones. memes are emerging image symbols in the context of new media and network graphic symbols, serving as a supplementary language for online social interaction. In the process of electronic information transmission, text has abandoned most of the dynamic and emotional expressions of the communication language. Unlike letter delivery or face-to-face communication, the expression method of "combining pictures and deictic words" can no longer meet the audience's need for richer emotional communication on modern social platforms. When text fails to contain or accurately convey the emotions of the communication subject, the emergence of memes precisely makes up for the lack of social presence.

Visual elements like memes are increasingly becoming "deictic concomitants", exerting a profound

influence on the nature of deixis. Pictures, in particular, have extended the expressive capacity of deixis, enabling the conveyance of complex meanings and making deictic expressions more vivid and flexible (Zhao Yong & Zeng Zihan, 2017). In the context of new media, memes play an increasingly prominent role in foregrounding the deictic functions of language. The enhanced efficiency of information transmission has overcome traditional time-space constraints, significantly improving the effectiveness of deixis-based communication in digital social settings. The virtual visualization of deixis, with its clear identity, ensures the universality of deictic communication, allowing individuals to perceive and convey deictic meanings through visual cues more straightforwardly.

1.2 Distance Indicated by Spatial Deixis

Cross-linguistic studies (such as Diessel, 1999, 2006; Imai, 2003) have revealed that the spatial demonstratives in most languages around the world distinguish between near-reference and far-reference forms. In daily communication, spatial indication is typically speaker-centered, with the position of the discourse participants serving as the reference point for determining the proximity or remoteness of objects, people, or other elements involved in the conversation. The four pairs of Chinese words, “this/that”, “come/go”, “here/there”, and “take/bring”, are among the most frequently used spatial deictic expressions. In conventional usage, the selection of these words is largely determined by physical distance; for example, “here” and “this” denote proximity to the speaker, while “there” and “that” indicate distance. Similarly, “come” and “take” imply movement towards the speaker, whereas “go” and “bring” suggest movement away from the speaker.

However, in digital social contexts, numerous instances of deixis deviate from the traditional physical-distance-based principle. The growing prevalence of online discourse represents a new and distinct form of communication. Investigating the variation characteristics of spatial deixis within digital social contexts, which possess a public nature, can significantly enrich the theoretical understanding of deixis research. When studying deixis in the Internet context, it is essential to consider the constraints imposed by the virtual nature of the Internet on the openness of deixis and the challenge of understanding how interpersonal intentions are manifested in digital social interactions. Therefore, this study takes the spatial deictic “this” in Chinese in the virtual network context as a case study to explore its variations across three key dimensions, including deictic distance, deictic boundary, and deictic emotion.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Questions

To comprehensively understand the specific pragmatic variations of the spatial deictic “this” in Chinese in digital social contexts, this study aims to address the research questions: How does the spatial deictic “this” in Chinese changes in the three dimensions of deictic distance, deictic boundary, and deictic emotion within digital social contexts?

2.2 Research Objects

"Fabiaoqing.com" is the largest meme website, covering various scenarios such as daily conversations

and movie and TV related images. The research corpus of this study comprises 374 memes containing the spatial deictic "this" in Chinese sourced from "fabiaoqing.com". The corpus encompasses a diverse range of materials, including images of celebrities, historical figures, animals, animated characters and television screenshots. As online interaction becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, various face-to-face communication cues are replicated in the digital realm, which is particularly evident in the flourishing field of meme-based graphic socializing.

2.3 Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative analysis method is utilized to explore the underlying mechanisms of the pragmatic variations of the spatial deictic "this" in network contexts. Through analysis of specific examples and discourse patterns, the study aims to uncover the cognitive and communicative processes driving these variations. The quantitative analysis method, on the other hand, focuses on the statistical examination of the selected corpus. By analyzing the frequency distribution of different categories within the three dimensions of deictic variation, the study seeks to identify patterns and trends in the pragmatic use of "this" in digital social contexts. This integrated approach allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the pragmatic variations of "this".

3. Results

3.1 Variation of Indicated Distance of "this" in Digital Social Context

According to Imai (2003: 172), the spatial deictic systems of all languages encode space with at least two distinct distance categories in their morphological structures, and digital social images are no exception. In this study, a close indication is defined as an image showing only the participant's head and shoulders, while a distant indication is when the participant's entire body is depicted in the image. The frequency distribution of the spatial deictic "this" in terms of indicative distance in the digital social context is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Remote and Close Indication in Digital Social Context

Indicated distance	Frequency	Proportion
Remote	67	17.9%
Close	307	81.1%

In traditional physical communication, the use of the spatial deictic "this" is closely associated with physical proximity, where "this" is used to refer to objects near the speaker and "that" to those far away. This view of spatial distance has been widely adopted in previous studies (Xu Xueping & Zhou Rong, 2009), and scholars such as Lyons (1977), Lv Shuxiang and Jiang Lansheng (1985), and Wang Li (1985) have also understood the spatial deictic "this" from this objective-meaning perspective.

Table 1 shows that in the digital social context, the frequency of "this" indicating a distant element is 67 (17.9%), while the frequency of indicating a close element is 307 (81.1%). This indicates that "this" still predominantly functions as a near-deictic marker, similar to its role in traditional contexts. However, the presence of "this" indicating distant elements challenges the rigid physical-distance-based understanding of deixis, suggesting that in digital social contexts, "this" has gained more flexibility in distance indication, which may be influenced by factors such as the focus of attention, the speaker's intention, or the virtual spatial structure.

3.1.1 Close Indication of "this"

Figure 1. "What's this?"

In Figure 1, "What's this?", "this" refers to the message sent by the recipient at an earlier stage in the online conversation. The semantic tone of the phrase "What's this?" conveys the sender's confusion and helplessness. The intervention of images in this context enhances the authenticity of communication (Zhu Yuwei, 2017). The meme in the picture is a close-up of the head and hand, and the facial features of the character in the meme simulate the sender's facial expressions, such as frowning and squinting, giving the virtual communication context a sense of process and situation (Liu Hanbo, 2017). The combination of the spatial deictic "this" and the digital social context realizes the function of close deixis. The close-range indication of "this" in the image enhances the interaction between the recipient and the sender. It not only grabs the recipient's attention but also allows the recipient to perceive the sender's helpless mood, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the sender's mental state. In digital social contexts, the spatial deictic "this" is "strengthened" through the combination of images, making the deictic reference more vivid and effective.

3.1.2 Remote Indication of 'this"

Figure 2. "This is Forcing Me to Jump into the Sea."

In Figure 2, "This is forcing me to jump into the sea.", unlike the traditional clear-cut distinction between

"this" for near and "that" for far in spatial deixis, "this" indicating a distant element represents a variation in the digital social context. In this meme, "this" refers to the recipient's previous remarks, such as demands, requests, or threats in the network conversation. The semantic color of the phrase "This is forcing me to jump into the sea" conveys the sender's complaint, which can be interpreted as a reverse threat. When the image of "A bear is jumping into the sea" is incorporated into the discourse, the graphic-text interaction conveys a specific meaning. The full-body portrait of the bear with its back to the observer in the meme implies a certain psychological distance between the image's inner world and the observer, representing a distant indication. Moreover, the gesture of "A bear is jumping into the sea" in the image simulates the speaker's body posture, and through its multi-modal symbolic nature (Sun Xiaowen, 2019), the remote indicative function of "this" in the network context is significantly enhanced. This not only makes the remote indication of "this" more prominent but also visually emphasizes the psychological distance between the observer and the image participant, which aligns with the departure attribute of the speech act of "this".

From the above analysis, it can be observed that in digital social contexts, the objective physical spatial-temporal situation is replaced by image-based representations, and the indication of distance is determined by factors such as the composition of the image rather than physical distance. The choice of spatial deictic "this" depends more on the speaker's subjective construction of the referent (Xu Xueping & Zhou Rong, 2009).

3.2 Variation of Indication Boundary of "this" in Digital Social Context

Based on the research of Anderson and Keenan (1985) and Diessel (2006), some languages distinguish between visible and invisible objects in their deixis encoding. Chinese is no exception. In physical contexts, the visual features of objects significantly influence the choice of near and far deictic expressions (Xu Xueping & Zhou Rong, 2011). In digital social contexts, the visual features of things or situations are conceptualized as "in-bounds" and "out-of-bounds" (Liu Dawei, 2006: 284-285). In this study, an out-of-boundary reference occurs when the referring word is within the boundary of the meme but the referred unit is outside, while an in-boundary reference is when both the referring word and the referred unit are within the meme boundary. The frequency distribution of the spatial deictic "this" in terms of the indication boundary in the digital social context is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Out-of-bounds and In-bounds Refers in Digital Social Context

Indication boundary	Frequency	Proportion
Out-of-bounds	212	56.7%
In-bounds	162	43.3%

Table 2 shows that in digital social contexts, the frequency of "this" indicating an object outside the boundary is 212 (56.7%), while the frequency of indicating an object within the boundary is 162 (43.3%).

This indicates that “this” has a relatively higher frequency of referring to objects beyond the immediate visual boundary, but it does not mean that it has completely shifted to mainly indicating invisible objects. Instead, it shows that “this” in digital social contexts has a broader semantic scope, being able to refer to both visible virtual objects within the digital space and intangible concepts or hidden information outside the immediate visual field.

3.2.1 The Outside Reference of “this”

Figure 3. “This Kind of Tricks, Really?”

In Figure 3, “This kind of tricks, really?”, “this” refers to an object or situation known to the recipient. In this digital social context, the image simulates a person’s reaction to an incredible event during a meal. The object referred to by “this” is not directly depicted in the meme. Through the interaction between the text and the image, “this” points to an invisible object or scene outside the boundary of the image. Images are adept at visualizing space, while text is good at narrating time (Qu Jirong & Li Yiping, 2018). The combination of the meme and the text enables “this” to refer to invisible things, breaking through the spatio-temporal constraints of the context. The human-body-like simulation in the image helps to recreate the scene to some extent (Zhu Yuwei, 2017), allowing the recipient to relate to the events experienced by the sender and understand their subjective feelings.

3.2.2 The Inside Reference of “this”

Figure 4. “Use This Charm to keep Me in Check.”

In Figure 4, “Use this charm to keep me in check.”, combined with the image of a person holding a 100-yuan note, “this” clearly refers to the “100-yuan money” within the image. The object “100-yuan banknote” is located within the boundary of the image and is presented in a realistic-like scene (Liu Dawei, 2006). The recipient perceives this object through visual cues in the digital social context and associates it with the “this” in the text. The realization of the deictic function of “this” requires the recipient to distinguish the specific object from other elements in the visual field based on the visible

"100-yuan banknote" (Zhu Yuwei, 2017: 66). The indication of visible things by "this" in this context is constrained by the specific digital social context, emphasizing the recipient's careful observation of the image content and the need for the referred object to be clearly identifiable within the visual frame.

Under the influence of objectivism view of meaning, people have always connected physical space distance directly with the meaning of distance in spatial deictic coding, and the academic community has failed to give a proper explanation of its essence. In fact, some researchers have also noticed the mapping of psychological factors on spatial deixis selection. For example, Xu Xueping and Zhou Rong (2011) verified the ideal-cognitive model of deixis based on relevant experiments and pointing out that the psychological basis for guiding the choice of deixis in speech acts is that speakers can "construct ideal-cognitive models of deixis with the structure of image schema of far and far". We can find that the indication of the spatial deixis "this" is visible in the physical context, but more invisible in the digital social context, which suggests that the psychological constructiveness of the deixis in the virtual context is gradually enlarged, and its subjectivity gradually becomes the core of manipulation. Virtual context first turns the originally invisible into partially visible, and then completes the indicative process by connecting the intervening discourse with "this".

3.3 Variation of Indicated Emotion of "this" in Digital Social Context

According to James (1884), emotion is the psychological response of the body to external stimuli, endowing subjective experiences with distinct colors. Peng Dan Ling (2001) further explained that when objective events or situations align with an individual's needs and desires, positive emotions are elicited; conversely, negative emotions arise. In language use, deixis not only reflects humans' understanding of the physical world but is also subtly influenced by speakers' emotional inclinations.

In this study, specific criteria were established to categorize the emotional color of "this" in digital social contexts. Positive emotion indication occurs when the semantic content of the deictic discourse conveys positive emotion, and the accompanying image belongs to a high-sensory modality that evokes pleasant feelings. Negative emotion indication is identified when the deictic discourse has negative semantic tones, and the image corresponds to a low-sensory modality that induces discomfort. When the semantic content of the deictic discourse is neutral, lacking clear positive or negative connotations, the "this" in such cases is considered to primarily serve a conceptual function rather than an emotional indication, and thus is not elaborated upon in this study. The frequency distribution of the spatial deictic "this" in Chinese across different emotional indications in the digital social context is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Indicative Emotions in Digital Social Context

Indicative emotion	Frequency	Proportion
Negative	186	49.7%
Positive	124	33.2%
Neutral	64	17.1%

Table 3 illustrates that in digital social contexts, the frequency of “this” indicating negative emotions is 186, accounting for 49.7% of the total. The frequency of positive emotion indication is 124 (33.2%), while neutral cases account for 17.1% (64 occurrences). These figures suggest that although “this” can convey a range of emotions, negative emotion indication is relatively more prevalent. However, this does not imply a definitive shift from positive to negative emotion indication. Instead, it reflects the diverse and context-sensitive nature of emotional expression through “this” in digital social interactions, challenging previous assumptions and highlighting the complexity of deictic emotional functions in virtual communication environments.

3.3.1 Negative indication of “this”

Figure 5. “This Weather is Killing Me.”

In Figure 5, the statement “This weather is killing me” exemplifies the negative affective indication of “this”. Here, “this” refers to the current weather condition, and the words “killing” and the overall context strongly convey the speaker's dissatisfaction and distress. The accompanying image, featuring a character with cat ears, pink cheeks, a frowning expression, and an open mouth as if crying, further reinforces the negative sentiment. The combination of text and image creates a multi-modal communication effect. The visual elements not only personify the speaker’s emotional state but also enhance the vividness of the negative emotion associated with the object indicated by “this”.

This kind of interaction in digital social contexts is highly interactive. The speaker uses facial expressions and body postures depicted in the image to simulate real-life emotional expressions, aiming to draw the recipient's attention and evoke empathy. It demonstrates how digital media, through the integration of visual and textual cues, can effectively amplify the emotional connotation of deictic expressions, making the negative emotion indicated by “this” more palpable.

3.3.2 Positive Indication of “this”

Figure 6. “Is this Love?”

In Figure 6, the question “Is this love?” showcases the positive affective indication of “this”. The word “love” and the interrogative tone inherently carry positive emotional undertones, reflecting the speaker’s curiosity and hopefulness regarding the event in question. The image, with a character having pink cheeks and an expression of surprise and shyness, complements the positive sentiment in the text. The visual elements of the cartoon character’s facial features serve as a non-verbal means to express the speaker’s inner emotional fluctuations, adding depth and nuance to the positive emotion.

The synergy between the text and the image in this example is crucial for emotional communication. The “pleasant surprise” expression of the character in the image, combined with the textual content, forms a coherent communicative scenario. This allows the recipient to infer the nature of the event experienced by the speaker and understand the underlying positive emotions. It shows that in digital social contexts, the indication of “this” towards positive-emotion objects can be significantly enhanced through the multi-modal combination of text and image, facilitating more effective emotional expression and interpersonal connection.

The exploration of the relationship between emotions and the use of spatial deixis “this” in digital social contexts provides empirical support for the mental spatial construction theory of deixis. As noted by Lakoff (1974), Lyons (1977), Yule (1996), and Imai (2003), among others, the choice of deixis is influenced by psychological factors such as emotional distance. For instance, in English, the use of “that” to refer to a physically close object, as in “That one really stinks” (Imai, 2003: 146), demonstrates that psychological factors can override physical proximity in deictic selection.

In digital social contexts, this psychological constructiveness is further magnified. The use of images to simulate the characteristics of deictic objects can either narrow or widen the psychological distance. When indicating negative-emotion objects, the combination of text and image can make the recipient more vividly experience the speaker’s negative emotions, effectively bridging the emotional gap. Conversely, for positive-emotion indications, the multi-modal presentation enriches the positive sentiment, enhancing the communicative effect.

This study’s findings indicate that while in physical contexts, “this” may have a tendency to be associated with positive emotions, in digital social contexts, its emotional connotation becomes more diverse. The relatively higher frequency of negative emotion indication by “this” suggests that digital deictic language is evolving into a more flexible tool for emotional expression, monitoring, and adjustment in virtual communication. It is not a simple binary shift but rather a complex adaptation to the unique communicative needs and characteristics of the digital social environment.

4. Conclusion

This study has delved into the pragmatic mechanisms underlying the variations of the spatial deictic “this” in Chinese in digital social contexts, grounded in an analysis of specific graphic materials. The findings reveal that the variations of “this” manifest across three key dimensions. In terms of deictic distance, “this” retains its primary role as a close-deictic marker but exhibits increased flexibility, occasionally being used

to indicate relatively distant elements within the virtual space, thus challenging traditional understandings based on physical distance. Regarding the indication boundary, “this” demonstrates a broader semantic scope, referring not only to visible virtual entities but also to intangible concepts and hidden information, reflecting the complexity of digital communication. In the dimension of emotional indication, “this” does not show a straightforward transition from positive to negative emotion indication.

These results highlight that spatial deixis in virtual contexts is no longer solely a matter of spatial reference. It has evolved into a more complex form of psychological construction, aligning with the theoretical understanding of previous academic research. However, it is essential to recognize that these changes are not binary oppositions but rather part of an integrated and nuanced transformation. In traditional studies of spatial deixis, “this” and “that” were mainly used to represent physical distances from the speaker. Although Xu Xueping (2011) empirically studied the influence of mental space construction on spatial deixis selection and identified the impact of factors such as emotion and visibility, their research was limited to contexts. The results are similar to those of Mao Xiaosheng (2020), but this paper emphasized that in the three dimensions, "this" merely breaks the traditional contextual indication tendency. The exploration of the variation mechanism of spatial indicators in the digital social context helps to reveal that the indication range of spatial indicators has the characteristic of elastic contraction. By exploring the interaction between it and vector relationships in the context environment, it provides a more novel and broader platform for future research on spatial indicators.

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