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Discourse deixis and information tracking

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I. Introduction

Discourse deixics include those "elements which indicate or otherwise refer to some portion or aspect of the ongoing discourse" (Fillmore 1975:70). Directional discourse deixics reference parts of the linguistic text, which is alternatively envisioned either as a spatial entity with inherent directional properties, or as a temporal line which progresses through time. In Russian an additional set of discourse deixics, comprised of both presentative-demonstrative deixics and a number of the so-called modal or discourse particles, functions on the propositional level.

In order to describe the use and distribution of these discourse deixics, it will be useful to have some sort of model of the discourse. Here I will follow Fillmore's (1984:139-140) suggestions, with the addition of background knowledge as an integral component. The term discourse will be used to refer to the combination of at least the following parts:

1. the linguistic text, and the surrounding co-text;
2. the text setting, the world the text is in;
3. the text content, the world the text is about;
4. background knowledge, real-world knowledge that is shared, or presupposed to be shared, by the discourse participants. This kind of knowledge is to be distinguished from the text content, which is created by the text. That is, it is not linguistically evoked or inferrable (as defined by Prince 1981) from the text.

It is important to keep in mind that as the discourse progress, the relative saliency of referents changes. The deictic frame of reference (Hanks 1993, 1990) of the discourse is constantly in flux. What discourse deixics do is track the ever-changing information status of the discourse elements and simultaneously function to provide links between the text, the text setting, the text content and the background knowledge.

2. Directional discourse deixics

The most straightforward and best understood of the discourse deixics are spatio-temporal deixics. By and large, these reference parts or chunks of the linguistic text and, by virtue of such referencing, index the text content. Fleischman 1991 shows that in English and French there is a high correlation between spatial textual mappings and written language, and temporal textual mappings and spoken language. This holds for Russian as well: spatial textual deixics belong almost exclusively to the area of written language. They are found only in highly stylized speech, usually where a prepared, written text is read (e.g. a formal talk or presentation). When spatial deixics are used, the text is envisioned as a physical entity with spatial dimension, which is probably a direct reflection of the spatial dimensions of a written page. This usage, which is fairly straightforward and well-known, is illustrated example (1), where vyšė 'higher' in line 1 serves to reference prior text:
(1) Rabinović 1991: 290

1. Privedennoe vyše sravnenie “ščegol’skogo narečija” so cited above comparison “fancy speech” with

2. “sladkojazyčiem” dostatočno nagljadno illjustrirjet različie meždu “sweet dialect” sufficiently clearly illustrates distinction between

3. žargonom i ljubim drugim dialektom (daže i social’nym) imenno vvidu jargon and any other dialect even social specifically in view

4. IX znacitel’nogo zvukogo soxodstva. their significant sound similarity

‘The comparison, cited above, of the “fancy speech” with “sweet” sufficiently clearly illustrates the distinction between jargon and any other dialect (including even social dialects) specifically with respect to their similar phonological systems’

Example (2) shows analogous use of a temporal deictic, do six por ‘up until now’, again used to reference prior text:

(2) Levinton 1991: 219

1. Do six por my kasalis’ tokl’ko paradigmatičeskoy osi svad’by, Up until now we touched on only paradigmatic axis wedding

2. no ta že binarnost’ projavljaets i v sintagmatike. but same binariness appears also in syntagmatics

‘Up until now we have touched on only the paradigmatic axis of the wedding, but that same binariness appears in the syntagmatics as well’

The mechanism underlying the use of directional deictics is relatively clear: the linguistic text, creates content (and context) and when that text is referenced, the underlying content is referenced as well. Thus in example (2), by indexing the text which occurred prior to line 1, the author indexes his argumentation. What is interesting, in Russian at least, is that these spatial and temporal deictics are often accompanied by a paraphrase or synopsis of the referenced text. This suggests that they function to serve global coherence. In both examples (1) and (2), the directional deictics occur at topic transition points. That is, in each case they appear in statements briefly summarizing a previous topic, and move from this topic to a new topic which is still thematically related to the first topic. Here the deictics link these two topics so that the one topic seems to naturally flow into the next.

Directional deictics locate the current talk with respect to prior or upcoming speech and so in this respect are “signposts” to the addressee as Kurzon 1985, calls them. This point is particularly clearly illustrated in example (3), where the temporal deictic used to signal temporal progression of the discourse is the adverb potom 'then' in line (3). It is used metalinguistically to mark a point in the narration:2
(3) Irina, explaining why it is worthwhile to travel to the Far East:

1. Poëtmu tam očen' raznoobraznaja priroda i očen'/ therefore there very varied nature and very

2. očen' interesno/ VOT/ very interesting VOT

3. NU potom, tam ran'se bylo vse vremja zakryto NU then there before was all time closed

'Therefore the nature there is very diverse and it's very good, very interesting. And then it used to always be closed [to foreigners] there'

This example provides a clear illustration of the differences between discourse deixis and deictic reference in the broader sense. For example, tam 'there' in lines (1) and (3) references a real-world geographic location outside of the text – the Far East. This reference is in contrast to that of potom 'then' in line (3), which unambiguously indicates the temporal representation of the ongoing discourse as talk that moves through time. It locates the current talk as following the talk which had occurred. Thus potom references a point in the temporal line of the narrative itself, and can be juxtaposed to the temporal adverbial ran'se ‘formerly’ which indexes a point in time relative to the moment of utterance.

Notice that the adverb potom in line 3 comes after a topic change in the narration; the speaker has concluded the discussion of nature in the Far East and continues listing her reasons for encouraging people to travel there. (These topic changes are further marked by the particles VOT in line 2 and NU in line 3; I will return to this in a moment.) The deictic potom here signals a sequencing in the speaker's argumentation, not a sequence of real-world events.

This use of potom serves to make the text locally cohesive, making for a smooth transition from topic to topic. Furthermore, it is a signal to the addressees to help them locate the current subtopic (the fact that the Far East used to be closed but is now open to foreigners) within the overall framework of this listing of reasons to go to the Far East.

3. Opening and closing topical units

A number of discourse deictics serve to signal changes in the topical structure of the discourse. There are a variety of ways of tracking topical structure in Russian: for example, Nichols 1984 shows the use of zero-anaphora to track the discourse topic (which she calls literary theme). Repetition of previous utterances can serve to reestablish a local topic, or to close a topic.

Discourse deixis is involved in tracking changes in topical structure at three levels: (1) at the level of the superordinate (discourse) topic, deictics are used to signal the openings and closings of topical units; (2) they signal the openings of subtopical units which are thematically related to the larger discourse topic; and (3) discourse deictics further track sentential-level topics, where they may signal a continuing topic or specify a particular topic. Just as spatio-temporal discourse deictics track the ongoing flow of linguistic text, other discourse deictics track the ongoing flow of the text content.
Just how transitions in topic are negotiated is extremely important in terms of global coherence and local cohesion. Topic changes essentially segment the text. In spoken Russian, the openings and closings of topical units (as defined in Schegloff and Sacks 1973) are marked with striking consistency, although there are a number of different devices used to mark them. Among the most frequent are the particles DA, NU, TAK and VOT. These particles are distinguished by the fact that they usually have no lexical meaning, are non-elicitable and do not affect truth conditions (see Arndt 1960:326; Nikolaeva 1985; Rathmayr 1985). The closest analogue is the German Modalpartikeln; they are similar to what in English Schiffrin (1987) calls discourse markers but differ both syntactically and pragmatically (see Abraham 1991:4-5; König 1991:201, fn. 6). The meaning of the Russian particles would normally be conveyed in English by such prosodic means as intonation and heavy stress, tag questions, periphrastic verbal constructions such as ‘go and VERB’ (Bublitz 1978). The distribution of these Russian particles can best be explained in terms of their discourse functions; for this reason, they are not glossed in the examples.

Just as with directional deictics, the actual devices used to mark changes in topical structure differ in spoken and written language. The use of particles as discourse deictics to mark openings and closings is largely limited to spoken Russian; in this section I will focus on the use of such particles. These essentially bracket topical units. The particle NU, which appeared in line 3 of example (3), is one of the most frequent openings in colloquial Russian. In this same example the preceding topical unit was closed by the particle VOT in line (2) which was followed by a pause.

VOT is of particular interest. Outside of its discourse functions, VOT is a presentative deictic and in this is similar to French voici and voilà. In its discourse functions, two types of VOT as text deictics can be distinguished. VOT-1 is uttered with high, level intonation and is not followed by a pause. It is used to introduce the beginning of a new discourse topic or subtopic. In contrast, VOT-2 is pronounced with falling intonation and is followed by a pause. It marks topic closings. Thus it was VOT-2 which was found in example (3), line 2, where it closes the topical unit on “nature in the Far East.”

Example (4) illustrates the use of VOT-1 as an opening.³

(4) My husband the architect (from Zemskaja and Kapanadze 1978: 113)

1. M. Dal// Volosy u menja byli očen’ xorošie// yes hair by me were very good

2. K. Kakoj...cvet volos? Pепel'nye u vas (byli)? Ili temnee/ rusye? what color of hair ash by you (were) or darker brown

3. M. Net// VOT kak u moej dočki// no VOT as by my daughter

4. K. A-a// Da-da- da- dal// zolotistyey a-a yes yes yes golden

5. M. Zolotistyey golden
6. M. **VOT moj muž. Moj muž byl arxitektoṣ // I on skazal [...]**

VOT my husband; my husband was architect and he said.

In the first five lines, the speakers discuss M's hair color while looking at a picture of her when she was young; they are included to illustrate just how different this first topic is. This topic is closed in line 5 with repetition of the last word of line 4, zolotistye 'golden' and followed by a pause. (Repetition is another frequent closing in Russian discourse.) The pause following the repetition is a clear boundary between topics. A brand new discourse topic is introduced in line 6, as signaled by VOT-1. This new topic is introduced by VOT-1 and a nominative NP moj muž 'my husband'. It is then repeated in the nominative again as the subject of the sentence moj muž byl arxitektoṣ 'my husband was an architect', which is again followed by a pause.

An examination of larger chunks of spoken Russian reveals a consistent segmentation of the discourse into topical units. The openings and closings of nearly every superordinate topic are marked. Example (5), an excerpt from an hour-long conversation, illustrates some of the complexities involved in opening and closing topical units in actual discourse, where the topic is jointly negotiated by the two speakers, Lena and Irina:

(5) discussion of the current visa situation, in response to the question if I, as a foreigner, need a visa to go to the Baltic States:

1 L: **V Pribaltiku/[navernoje]** to Baltic probably

2 I: **[V Pribaltiku] navernjaka /** to Baltic probably

3 **A VOT meždu respublikami SNG/ tam nekotorye tol'ko gosudarstva**

A VOT between republics CIS there several only states

4 **trebujut vizu/počemu oni tam i den'gi vot berut//**
demand visa because they there emph. money vot take

5 **VOT už vzjat' Uzbekistan/ naprimer/ trebujut vizu/**

VOT emph. to take Uzbekistan for example demand visa

6 **xotja mnogie tuda v''ezzjat bez vsjakix viz//**

although many there enter without any visa

7 **Nekotorye=**

Some

8 L: **=NU=**

NU
I: =Naverno [kto-to ???? ???????]  
probably someone

L: [NU / tuda poka ešče] možno  
NU there now still possible

I: bez viz v obščem-to [????????  
without visa in general

L: [NU / v byvše republikj / da/ poka ešče//  
NU to former republics yes now still

I: VOT [mne skazali]  
VOT me said(3rd pl.)

L: [mesjaca čerez dva]/ my ne znaem=  
months in two we neg know

I: =VOT Ukraina/ naprimer /  
VOT Ukraine for example

I: i Uzbekistan/točno trebuju viz  
and Uzbekistan definitely demand visa

‘L: To go to the Baltic, probably  
I: To the Baltic, probably, but VOT between the republics of the CIS,  
only some states demand a visa, because they get money for it.  
VOT take Uzbekistan, for example, they demand a visa, although  
many people go there without one. Some=

L: =NU  
I: =Probably [someone

L:[NU for now you can still go there without a visa  
in general[????  
I: [NU, to go to the former republics yes, for now//  
VOT [I was told

L: [in two months we don’t know=  
I: =VOT Ukraine for example, and Uzbekistan as well, they definitely  
demand a visa’

Line 2 repeats line 1, overlapping it and closing the topic of the Baltic. In line 3 a  
new topic (the republics of the CIS) is opened with A VOT-1; its closure is seen at  
the end of line 4 with a longer pause. A subset of this topic, Uzbekistan, is opened  
in line 5, again marked by VOT-1. In lines 8 and 10 Lena tries to get the floor,  
beginning her turn and potentially a new topic with the particle NU, which was also  
seen in example (2) to signal the beginning of a new topic. In line 12, Irina  
similarly begins a turn with the particle NU, overlapping with Lena and closing her  
turn by repeating part of line 10 (poka ešče ‘now still’), and opening in line 13 with
VOT-1. The closing strategy can be judged unsuccessful by the overlap in lines 13 and 14, which ends in 15 when Irina opens another topical unit, the situation in Ukraine.

In sum, four lines begin with VOT and three with the particle NU. VOT-1 (with high level intonation) introduces a topic unit and VOT-2 with falling intonation closes a topic. Thus both the particle and the intonation serve as brackets around a topic unit.

4. Sentential level topic: tracked by -TO

The particle -TO can be used to track changes in the sentential-level topic when it is still related to the more global discourse topic. It is a clitic, etymologically related to the Modern Russian demonstrative pronouns ěto ‘this’ and to ‘that’. The linguistic marking of topic/comment structure in Russian is extremely complicated, with word order and intonation probably the two single most clear indicators of sentential-level topic (Yokoyama 1986). The particle -TO establishes a topic frame, signaling the selection of one of a number of potential topics as the local-level topic. It occurs with this function in both spoken and written discourse, as illustrated in examples (6) and (7).

In example (6), prior to line 2 the discussion had been about crime in the US and in Russia, contrasting the situation in the two countries. (This conversation was recorded in Moscow):

(6) Tanja asks about crime in Moscow as compared to the US:

1 L: VN'ju-Jorke ne to čto ja bojus' xodit' po ulice, no/
in New York neg that I fear to walk along street but

2 T: Net, NU u nas-TO
no NU by us-to

3 v centre esče osveščaetsja
in center still is lit

4 A VOT na okrainax
A VOT in outskirts

5 VOT krajnie rajony Moskvy novostrojki,
VOT edge regions of Moscow new buildings

6 ix nazyvajut spal'nymi rajonami
them call (3rd pl) sleeping regions

L: ‘It’s not that I’m afraid to walk along the street in New York, but
T: No, NU but here-TO, the center [of town] is still lit, but on the outskirts,
on the outer regions of Moscow, the newly built areas, they’re called
sleeping regions’
The particle -TO in line 2 specifies Moscow as the current topic; it establishes the
topical frame to which the remaining utterances are predicated. The preceding
context established a number of potential local topics, such as the US, Russia, New
York or Moscow. -TO denotes the local-level topic as selected from a previously
established set of potential topics. Example (7), from a written text, demonstrates a
similar use of -TO:

(7) Strugackij and Strugackij 1992:30

1 U menja bylo neskol’ko voprosov k kotu Vasiliyu, da i rusalka, živuščaja
   by me were several questions to cat Vasily and mermaid living

2 na dube, predstavljala opredelennyj interes, xotja vremenami mne
   on oak presented particular interest although at times to me

3 kazaloš’, čto ona-to mne vse-taki prisnilas’. Ja ničego ne imeju protiv
   seemed that she-TO to me still dreamed I nothing neg have against

4 rusalok, no ne predstavljaju sebe, kak oni mogut lazit’ po derev’jam
   mermaids but neg imagine to self how they can climb around trees

‘I had several questions for the cat Vasily and the mermaid, who was
living in the oak tree, was of particular interest, although at times it
seemed to me, that I was nonetheless dreaming her up. I have nothing
against mermaids, but I can’t imagine how they can climb around in trees’

In the immediately preceding text two potential topics are introduced: the cat Vasily
and the mermaid. This example provides an especially clear illustration of the use
of -TO because it is arguably syntactically unmotivated. Pronominal reference here
is unambiguous. Here it is a clitic on the pronoun ona ‘she’, whose referent,
rusalka ‘mermaid’, is morphologically feminine, while kot ‘cat’ is masculine. In
line 1 of this excerpt, both the cat and the mermaid are introduced as possible future
topics. In line 3 the mermaid is selected as topic for lines 3 and 4. What -TO does
is mark the saliency of a given referent in terms of local-level topic; its use signals
selection of that topic from a set of possible topics.

5. VED’: Indexing background knowledge

The particle VED’ is used to reference background knowledge which the
speaker assumes is shared but is not currently in the discourse. Prior to its
introduction with VED’, this “content” or knowledge has not been linguistically
introduced or invoked in the discourse, and it is not inferrable. Similarly, it is new
in that sense where new contrasts with given, as defined by Chafe 1971, where
given is that knowledge or information which the speaker assumes is in the hearer’s
consciousness. That is to say that this background knowledge is assumed by the
speaker to be shared by the hearer but not in his or her consciousness. In contrast
to the other modal particles which I have discussed here, ved’ retains some lexical
value, etymologically it is the imperative of the verb OR védê, related to the IE
perfect 'I saw', as in Latin *vidi*, with the interpretation of the perfect 'I saw' as having resultative or evidential meaning, 'I saw therefore I know'.

In the first ten lines of the following example, somewhat abridged here, the speaker discusses a small town outside of Moscow which seems to be unaffected by the recent economic and political upheavals. In line 11 Maksim begins to argue with her. VED’ serves to signal that his utterance is topically relevant and that the existence of these commercial stands is known, although not previously introduced into the discourse, and indisputable. Here it provides for a thematically smooth transition between turns, where there are no obvious lexical or other cohesive ties:

(8) Tanja discussing her parents’ town:

1 T: *Unix ne došlo ni putč, ni pere- VOT èto VOT/
by them neg come neg putsch neg pere- VOT this VOT

2 antialkogol’nye zakony, ni/ vybory tam//
anti-alcohol laws neg elections there

[omitted approximately 6 lines describing the town]

10 tak čto vse otnositel’no=
so that everything relatively

11 M: =no VED’ i tam že pojavitel’ kommerskie palatki [??]
but VED’ emph. there emph. appeared commercial stands

12 T: [da, da
yes yes

T: ‘[Nothing has changed there.] There’s been no putsch, no pere- VOT, no anti-alcohol laws, no election.[...] So that everything is relatively=

M: =but VED’ commercial stands have appeared there, right? [??
T: [yes yes’

In examples like (8) VED’ serves several discourse functions. It references knowledge that the speaker presupposes to be known or shared by the interlocutor but has not been linguistically invoked in the discourse. Furthermore, it serves coherence relations in that its use asserts that this knowledge is relevant to the discourse topic, and in this is in compliance with the Gricean maxim of relevance (Grice 1975).

6. VOT for exophoric reference

Lastly, certain deictics are used exophorically, to index entities in the physical environment, the text setting. In this, they provide links between that setting and the linguistic text and text content. This is illustrated in (9), where VOT functions as a presentative demonstrative deictic. In both lines 1 and 2 the indexical
function of VOT is clear as its utterance is accompanied by a physical gesture, pointing to the parts of the text setting which are being referenced:

(9) looking at a picture of a boy, describing his boots

1 takie sapogi možno do samogo VOT (points to own leg) verixa odet′ such boots possible to very VOT top put on

2 Oni tak VOT imenno VOT (points to picture) tak odevajutsja i snimajutsja they so VOT exactly VOT so put on and take off

'This kind of boots can be put on to the very top of your calves. They are put on and taken off exactly this way'

Here the verbal and physical gestures combine to incorporate the picture and the speaker himself into the discourse. Although exophoric reference is not textually cohesive (Halliday and Hasan 1976:18), it is important in terms of discourse coherence because it anchors the linguistic text to the text setting.

7. Conclusion

A variety of linguistic devices function as discourse deictics in Russian. Spatial and temporal prepositions and adverbs provide the basis for directional discourse deictics, which reference the linguistic text as if it had either spatial dimensions or temporal properties. The discourse These deictics serve to link the linguistic text with the text content and the text setting, and to reference background (or unused but accessible) knowledge. By signaling the saliency of a referent, discourse deictics function to foreground that referent, making it the figure against the background of the text. At a local, sentential level they mark topic-comment structure, thereby serving local cohesive ties. At the discourse level, they signal saliency of referent and foreground and background relations. Furthermore, they create coherence on a global level by signaling boundaries (openings and closings) of topical units and by tracking the sentential-level topic. These deictics are also used to index background knowledge, bringing it into the discourse. In this, they serve local cohesive relations and help maintain global coherence.

NOTES

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2Here and throughout the following transcription system is used:
   = no pause between utterances     ???- unintelligible
   underlining - increased volume   [ overlap
All examples are taken from my fieldnotes, unless otherwise marked.

3 This example comes from a collection of published texts; the pause between lines 5 and 6 is unmeasured but longer than a pause marked //, as at the end of line 3.

4 This is an instance of what Chafe 1976:51 calls a topic as a premature subject. Such topics are frequently found in colloquial Russian speech.

REFERENCES


