Affirmative Demonstratives

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1 A new kind of demonstrative use

It has been well studied that demonstratives have other uses besides the standard uses as demonstratives. In this contribution, I want to study a different use of the demonstrative in English and German, one that recently got some traction in social media especially on Twitter or Facebook (and arguably can be attested in many other languages). The following screenshots illustrate the phenomenon:

(1)

(2)

This use of *this*, while clearly being demonstrative (as indicated by the frequently used pointingfinger emoji), is special in its own rights. There are four important aspects that I will highlight in this short contribution: First, it is a stand-alone use of the demonstrative which, I argue, is not elliptical as other seemingly stand-alone uses of the demonstrative are. Secondly, while the demonstrative always has an utterance or, more precisely, some kind of "post" as its target, it does not refer to the post itself but to its content. Hence, this use of the demonstrative has some kind of propositional reference. Thirdly, the use of the demonstrative is what I like to call *affirmative* or "endorsing" as it invariably seems to convey some kind of agreement with the content of the demonstratum. Finally, the affirmation itself is expressive. As a last point, I will distinguish two different types of affirmative *this* depending on whether it is used as a simple comment or together with a "repost".

2 Affirmative *this* is not elliptical

Of course, ordinary uses of demonstratives can also seem to occur as stand-alone utterances. However, these uses are always elliptical: They can only be used in contexts in which the demonstrative can be integrated into a contextually recoverable host utterance; for instance, when it is used as an elliptical answer to an (explicit or implicit) question or if it is used to pose a (recoverable) clarification question.

(3)   A: Which movie should we watch?
         B: [Pointing to A New Hope]
               This. ("We should watch this movie.")

(4)   A: Would you pass me the bottle?
         B: [Pointing to bottle of water]
               This? ("Should I pass you this bottle?")

In contrast, affirmative *this* can be used without any contextual factors that would determine a corresponding host clause for the demonstratives. While one can, of course, try to reconstruct utterances like (1) or (2); but given that it is not possible to decide between various suitable expansions, like "I agree with this", "This is correct" or something more elaborate like "This is the best way to express a thought that I share", assuming affirmative *this*-utterances to be derived by ellipsis seems to be very unlikely. At least, the burden would be on an elliptical account to provide evidence for such a claim. Furthermore, an affirmative *this*-utterance has a certain expressive character to it and shares some properties with genuine expressive language (as discussed below). For instance, one cannot really directly reject an affirmative *this*, even though it is of course possible to discuss the content that is endorsed by it. But the fact that the speaker (or poster) agrees with the demonstrated content does not become at-issue. This would be unexpected, if the affirmative demonstratives would just be elliptical versions of ordinary descriptive utterances.

3 Affirmative *this* refers to propositions

While affirmative *this* is usually presented with some demonstrative target (e.g. a (re)tweet or (re)post), it does not refer to the post itself but to the content itself and hence affirmative *this* involves propositional reference and not reference to individuals. This can be shown by the fact that it is possible to react to affirmative demonstratives with another affirmative utterance.

(5) A: This.
    B: Yeah, totally!!!

4 Affirmative *this* is ... affirmative

The most characteristic and maybe most surprising property of the affirmative use of demonstratives is its name-giving property: Instead of just referring to the content of the demonstratum – which in of its own may be an expected behavior – the use of affirmative *this* expresses the speaker's agreement, affirmation or endorsement of some sort of the content. In this sense, affirmative *this* is not just referential but also propositional as it expresses a speaker attitude on its own. This leads to the question of whether this attitude is expressed in addition to the (propositional) reference (the content of the demonstratum) or whether the entire utterance just expresses an affirmation without any additional reference (while the reference of course provides the object of the speaker's endorsement). I will come back to this momentarily.

5 Affirmative *this* is expressive

I am assuming here that the affirmative content is rather expressive and not really descriptive content that is at-issue. This is inline with other non-sentential constructions that can be used to express attitudes, for instance the meme-like "that moment when" construction (Gutzmann & Turgay 2019). However, this is again hard to test, since affirmative *this* does not interact with other content and therefore, it cannot be checked if it would escape semantic embedding or not (e.g. under negation, propositional attitude or conditionals). Hence, tests by direct manipulations are indecisive. However, we can nevertheless try to test the at-issueness of *this*-affirmations by checking how it can be reacted to and how it can be used in discourse. First, let us observe that affirmative *this* cannot be used to answer a question. If one answers a question with *this* plus a demonstratum, when we do not really get the affirmative interpretation but rather an interpretation as an elliptical answer and the affirmative meaning gets lost.

(6)   A: What excited you today?
        B: This.
           ↝ "This excited me today."

Going into the other discourse direction, we can observe that one cannot really react to the affirmation itself. Of course, other speakers may agree or disagree with the content of the demonstration that is endorsed by affirmative this, but they cannot directly target the affirmation of the speaker.

(7)   A: This.
      B1: No, this is not correct.
      B2: # No, you do not endorse this.

This leads me to conclude, that the affirmative meaning of *this* is expressive and that the referential meaning is just part of the attitude, because if it would be expressed independently, it should be to answer a question with it, while retaining the affirmative attitude as just shown above.

6 Two kinds of uses of affirmative *this*

There are two kinds of uses of affirmative *this*. One is discourse initial. The speaker (re)produces a post or tweet with a certain content and then refers to this content and affirms it by the use of *this*. That is, the speaker (re)produces the demonstratum together with demonstrative (and demonstration). The second use is reactive. Here the speaker affirms another post or tweet by replying to it with the use of affirmative *this*. In this case, the speaker only produces the demonstrative (and demonstration), while the demonstratum is not (re)produced but exists independently of the speaker's utterance. The examples in (1) and (2) are instances of the former kind, while the following examples illustrate the latter kind.

(8)   (9)

References

Gutzmann, Daniel & Katharina Turgay. 2019. Der Moment, wenn dir klar wird, dass es expressive Nebensätze gibt. In Franz d'Avis & Rita Finkbeiner (eds.), *Expressivität im Deutschen*, 261–291. Berlin: De Gruyter.