

Notes on mixed-modality expressions

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Introduction: Mixed-Modality Expressions

- ▶ Colloquial / dialectal American English has a small set of expressions that **obligatorily co-occur** with a gesture:

- (1) a. I once caught a fish yay big^{WIDTH}.
b. *I once caught a fish yay big.

- ▶ I will refer to these as Mixed-Modality Expressions (MiMEs)
- ▶ MiMEs raise several interesting questions; here's two:
 - What are the formal properties of these expressions?
 - How are we to understand the obligatoriness of the gesture?
- ▶ This talk offers some **preliminary** notes on these issues.
 - Main goal today is just to put MiMEs on the research agenda;
 - All analytical remarks will remain quite tentative for now.

Introduction: Overview of MiMEs

- ▶ The set of MiMEs in English includes at least three members:
 - *yay*, *thisaway*, and *thataway*
- ▶ Whereas *yay* combines with a gradable adjective to indicate **size**, *thisaway*/*thataway* indicate a **path**
- ▶ At a glance, these are obviously conventionalized expressions
 - But the gestural component itself clearly isn't conventionalized, being gradient and/or iconic
- ▶ There is very little prior work on these; the only work I'm aware of that discusses all three is Talmy (2018) ("T18")
 - Other discussion in the literature is extremely limited, making only passing reference to *yay* (e.g. Partee 1973, de Ruiter 1998, Cooperrider 2017)
- ▶ I'll spend much of the talk just establishing the empirical profile.

Outline of the talk

1. Basic properties, starting with *yay*:
 - Properties of the gesture
 - Referential and other semantic properties
 - Comparison with *thisaway* / *thataway*
2. Their place in the typology of iconic enrichments
3. The obligatoriness of the gestured component:
 - Prospects for a demonstration-based acct. (Davidson 2015)
4. A syntactic environment distinguishing demonstrations vs. non-demonstrations?
5. Conclusion

Descriptive properties of *yay* I

- ▶ *yay* takes a size-referring gesture (aligned co-speech) depicting:
 - “...the distance between two objects, where one or both of these objects are body parts **of the speaker**” (T18: 106)
 - Between both hands, or one hand and the ground
- ▶ Crucially, unlike e.g. *this/that*, *yay* **cannot** refer:
 - anaphorically to a spoken size-denoting antecedent (2)

(2) My rug is 8ft long, so I need a table {that / **yay*} long too.

- nor exophorically to a size made salient by a non-linguistic context (3) or by another's gesture (4)

(3) [Context: Aoife is introducing us to her partner]

You never told us he was {this / **yay*} tall.

(4) [Context: Kate is holding her hands 3ft apart. Jo says:]

I once caught a fish {that / **yay*} big.

Descriptive properties of *yay* II

- ▶ *yay* combines with a gradable Adj that picks out one of the “major linear dimensions internal to an object” (T18: §7.4.3)
 - So *yay* can't combine with e.g. *rich*, or with *short*
 - (The impossibility of **yay short*^{HEIGHT} is clearly reminiscent of e.g. **5ft short*: Hale 1970)
- ▶ Relatedly, there is no ‘speakable counterpart’ to the gesture
 - e.g., it can't combine with a spoken measure / degree phrase:

- (5) a. *I've known Jim since he was <4ft> *yay* <4ft> tall.
b. *The table was <very> *yay* <very> long.

- ▶ The contribution of the gesture is clearly **at-issue** (typical of a degree modifier): it can be negated, embedded under various operators, etc. (cf. Ebert and Ebert 2014)

- (6) If your son is *yay tall*^{HEIGHT}, he can go on the ride, but if he's *yay tall*^{HEIGHT}, he can't.

Thisaway and *thataway*: Comparison with *yay* I

- ▶ *Thisaway* / *thataway* both require a **path** gesture (T18: 92, 106)
- ▶ Like *yay*, and unlike *this/that way*, it can't rely anaphorically on a spoken path-referring antecedent:

(7) Jie was going west, so Ben went {that way / *thataway} too.

- Nor can it rely exophorically on a path made salient by a non-linguistic context (8) or by another's gesture (9):

(8) [*Context: I release a spider outside my house, and it immediately runs past me back inside.*]

I didn't think it would run {that way / *thataway}.

(9) [*Context: we're watching a horror film. A character is talking to his friends while pointing into a dark forest.*]

Are they really going to go {that way / *thataway}?

Thisaway and *thataway*: Comparison with *yay* II

- ▶ Other shared properties with *yay*:
 - gesture aligns as co-speech (on *thisaway* / *thataway*);
 - no spoken counterpart to the gesture;
 - gestured content is always at-issue
- ▶ But also some **differences** (other than the gesture's meaning):
 - Whereas the gesture with *yay* is clearly **iconic**, it's less clear for *thisaway* / *thataway* ('self-targeting' vs. 'outward-targeting': T18: 379)
 - Pointing usually isn't iconic, instead picking out an object / point in space (but cf. Ebert, this morning);
 - However, the *thisaway* / *thataway* gesture refers to a **path**, arguably depicting it (contra T18)

Typology of iconic enrichments

- ▶ Viewed against the typology of iconic enrichments from Schlenker (2018: 886), MiMEs are a little puzzling
 - The obligatoriness of the gesture makes them look ‘+internal’, but the gesture doesn’t get its own time slot
 - So they correspond to ‘iconic modulations’ (e.g. *The talk was loooooong*): “modifications of a lexical sign to represent aspects of the denoted” object.
- ▶ Not entirely clear how the ‘modification’ relationship plays out in MiMEs (see below).

The obligatoriness of the gesture

- ▶ The central puzzle posed by MiMEs:
 - Why is the gesture obligatory? How can this be understood?
- ▶ One option to be rejected right away: **selection for a particular modality**
 - e.g. “yay selects a [+gestured] degree modifier” (or worse, a GestureP)
 - This would do extreme violence to the modular architecture of grammar (cf. the Principle of Phonology-Free Syntax: Zwicky 1969, Zwicky and Pullum 1986)
 - If this is ok, why not verbs that only select pro-speech complements, or only those with [+velar] onsets, etc.
- ▶ So what are our options, given obligatoriness is usually understood in terms of selection?

Analytical prospects: Demonstrations I

- ▶ Some **preliminary** remarks on a possible way forward, building on the approach to iconic depictions from Davidson (2015)¹
 - Davidson's account of imitation-embedding predicates e.g. *be like* adds a new semantic type **demonstration**, directly referencing form:

(10) A demonstration *d* is a *demonstration of e* (i.e. *demonstration(d, e)* holds) if *d* reproduces properties of *e* and those properties are relevant in the context of speech.

- ▶ Stated over properties of events (see also Barnes 2024), but:
 - Recall that e.g. *yay* involves a degree modifier of a gradable Adj; so, to make this work, we'd need a *d* that can range over properties of individuals too (but cf. Ebert, this morning)
- ▶ How does this help with the obligatoriness of the gesture?

¹I thank Masha Esipova for helpful discussion of these ideas.

Analytical prospects: Demonstrations II

- ▶ With this, we can take *yay* to be a function from **demonstrations** to **degrees** (i.e., a degree which resembles the demonstration)
- ▶ So say that MiMEs must select a demonstration, like some other preds. How do we ensure that it's a **gestural** demonstration?
 - Perhaps there's no choice: what other sort of demonstration could resemble a degree besides an iconic (size) gesture?
 - Finding a salient exophoric antecedent of degrees isn't so easy without the help of an iconic gesture
 - If it's actually impossible, we're left with iconic (size) gestures as the only demonstrations that can satisfy *yay*.
- ▶ Should we worry about having a subtype of demonstration that depicts degrees?
 - No: just accounting for speech reports requires an array of *d* subtypes (whispered, shouted, etc.): Clark and Gerrig (1990)

Syntactic properties: *yay* as a demonstrative?

- ▶ As a syntactician, I'm contractually obliged to mention at least a few syntactic properties of MiMEs; I'll continue to focus on *yay*
- ▶ Interestingly, *yay* can only be **predicative**, not **attributive**:

- (11) a. I saw a woman who was *yay* tall^{HEIGHT}.
b. *I saw a *yay* tall^{HEIGHT} woman.

- ▶ This is also true for **degree demonstratives** (see Ruys 2025: §8) when they combine with a gesture:

- (12) a. I saw a woman who was *this* tall^{HEIGHT}.
b. *I saw a *this* tall^{HEIGHT} woman.

- ▶ So syntactically, *yay* is just a demonstrative?
 - ...not so fast

A syntactic difference with selection of *d*

- ▶ Consider the following asymmetry (see Troseth 2009 on the syntax of *degree inversion* within DP):

(13) [Context: *we're looking at a photo of a very tall woman*]

- *I met *yay* tall (of) a woman just last night.
- I met *that/this* tall (of) a woman just last night.

- ▶ In non-gestural (non-demonstrational) exophoric cases, *yay* is out while *this/that* are fine—this is expected, given (3).
 - But with a **gestural** demonstration, suddenly the two pattern alike: they're **both** bad with predicate inversion:

(14) a. *I met *yay* tall^{HEIGHT} of a woman last night.
b. *I met {*this/that*} tall^{HEIGHT} of a woman last night.

- ▶ Possible conclusion: expressions that combine with demonstrations are **syntactically distinct** from those that don't
 - This would be satisfying if so—consistent with the semantics.

Conclusion and open questions

- ▶ I hope to have placed MiMEs on the iconicity research agenda.
- ▶ The main puzzle: within a modular architecture, how can we explain a particular spoken expression requiring a gesture?
 - Sketched a possible way forward, at least for *yay*: selection for a particular subtype of *d* ranging over properties of individuals (and size = the only depictable option)
- ▶ All preliminary, so many open questions remain:
 1. What accounts for the syntactic distribution of *yay*?
 - Why/how does selecting for a *d* argument bear on this?
 2. Is the path gesture of *thisaway* / *thataway* a demonstration?
If so, improved prospects for a unified analysis of MiMEs
 - (Also makes syntactic predictions, based on the above)
 3. How widely attested are MiMEs across languages?

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