



HAL
open science

When distance fails to explain how to differentiate between this-these and that-those: a meta-operational approach to English demonstratives.

Jean-Pierre Gabilan

► To cite this version:

Jean-Pierre Gabilan. When distance fails to explain how to differentiate between this-these and that-those: a meta-operational approach to English demonstratives.. 2020. hal-04887747

HAL Id: hal-04887747

<https://univ-smb.hal.science/hal-04887747v1>

Preprint submitted on 15 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

When distance fails to explain how to differentiate between *this-these* and *that-those*: a meta-operational approach to English demonstratives.

Jean-Pierre GABILAN

Abstract

Grammarians and teachers of English invariably explain the difference between *this-these* and *that-those* by referring to « inches », whether literally when spatial references are concerned – *this book* near at hand or *that book* over there on the shelf – or metaphorically when non spatial references are concerned – *this nice girl* or *that awful girl*. Unfortunately the « inch rule » fails to account for everyday occurrences. Objects that are near at hand and viewed positively can be referred to with *that-those* while things that are not even present and viewed negatively can be referred to with *this-these*. Such occurrences should be treated as exceptions or speakers' whims.

Using the theoretical framework known as *meta-operational grammar* we propose to tackle the question in a far more satisfactory fashion. As we shall demonstrate, by choosing either *this/these* or *that/those*, the speaker attributes a *status* to the noun that is preceded by a demonstrative and this *status* depends on how the addressee is associated in his or her choice of noun. When most linguists agree that languages are based « on finite means for infinite usage » *status* proves to be a very productive means indeed.

Key words : meta-operational grammar ; assertive and non-assertive status

1. Introduction

Traditional grammar books and more linguistically oriented publications seem to all agree on the role played by demonstratives *this-these* and *that-those* and which is invariably linked to distance: *this-these* are said to denote close reference and *that-those* distant reference. This is best explained by Randolph Quirk *et alii*¹:

The demonstratives can function both as determiners and pronouns. The general meaning of the two sets can be stated as « near » and « distant » reference:

	singular	plural
« near » reference	<i>this</i> (student)	<i>these</i> (students)
« distant » reference	<i>that</i> (student)	<i>those</i> (students)

I like these (pictures that are near me) better than those (pictures over there on the far side)

By further metaphorical extension we have *this/these* used to connote interest and familiarity in informal style (Then I saw, away in the distance, *this* lovely girl, and...)

There can be a corresponding emotive rejection implied in *that/those* (Here is *that* awful Jones and *those* children of his).

The point of view expressed here is widely shared and this is how, the world over, teachers of English teach how to use demonstratives. But this distance based approach is far from satisfactory and I beg to disagree with it for *near* and *distant* are extremely vague notions when applied to grammar. If this close or distant reference were relevant, one would be entitled to ask how close or distant an object has to be for the speaker to choose between *this* and *that*. How close is close? How distant is distant?

¹ 1985: 372.

To put it simply, how many inches or centimeters are at stake in each case? No answer is ever given. Not only are such vague notions simply unteachable, but they are also unlearnable. Further more the idea of metaphorical extension mentioned by R. Quirk *et alii* is simply *ad hoc* and not scientifically established. What metaphor are we talking about exactly? What is informal style when demonstratives are concerned? How could *this*, which is supposedly meant to denote close reference, be used to denote, as by magic, distance and familiarity? It is no wonder that native speakers of English should never fail to notice that foreigners never seem to use *this* and *that* properly, but yet without ever providing any suitable explanation as to how to use them. Demonstratives in English are nothing short of a conundrum both for teachers and learners alike, and this mainly because without appropriate tools tackling demonstratives is nothing short of a wild goose chase. Analysing in terms of closeness or distance is simply beside the point as we shall see.

The analysis we propose to present in this paper are based on the theoretical framework known as meta-operational grammar². Before going any further a word must be said about *th-* grammatical items in English.

1.1. *Th-* grammatical items

Before tackling *this-these* and *that-those*, a word must be said about other grammatical items all sharing *th-*.

	- e	Where is <i>the</i> car?
	- en	I saw her <i>then</i> .
TH	- ere	So she went <i>there</i> .
	- is	Look at <i>this</i> photo.
	- at	<i>That</i> is the news.
	- us	... <i>thus</i> failing his exams.

Those six words share *th-*, which is nothing else but an anaphora linked morpheme. When using any of those six items the speaker refers to something either already mentioned in the immediate context or that the addressee is supposed to know about. With *the* and *that*, the speaker, as we shall see, will take for granted that the addressee shares some knowledge with him or her. With *this*, the speaker will present something to the addressee or consider that the addressee has presented something he or she does not necessarily takes for granted. For pedagogical reasons we shall start our analysis with *that-those*.

2. *That – those: shared knowledge and non-assertive status*

Every ice cream van in Britain bears the following sign: *Mind that child*. It is aimed at motorists, encouraging them to be careful. Why is *that* used exactly? Any analysis in terms of near or close reference is evidently doomed to fail. The answer lies elsewhere. Ice cream vans travel where the presence of children is expected and so motorists must be warned that a child, any child, could cross the street. It is then taken for granted that an ice cream van is bound to attract children as children are its usual patrons. The presence of at least one child is thus taken for granted: motorists are supposed to know and the sign *Mind that child* means exactly that. What is at stake grammatically speaking is the *status* of *child* in the sentence. We shall say that *child* is given a *non-assertive status* for the speaker (= whoever wrote the sign, icecream companies etc.) takes for granted that the addressee is in the know: there could be a child, any child, ready to cross the street in front of any passing car. In such contexts the phrase *shared knowledge* seems quite appropriate. But grammatically speaking, we shall favour *status*, and thus, *non-assertive status*.

Bazuka that verruca!

² Meta-operational grammar was founded by Henri Adamczewski (1925-2004) : https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Adamczewski

Bazuka is the name of a treatment for verrukas and warts. It has been around for years and is advertised in papers and magazines showing the picture of a foot accompanied by the following sentence: *Bazuka that verruca*. Why is *that* used? Manufacturers and retailers invariably follow the same advertising pattern: they try to show that they know all about our daily routines. By using *that* verruca, they take for granted that there is bound to be someone who has to cope with verrucas. *Bazuka that verruca* is to be understood as follows: we know that you know what a verruca is and we know that you know that you are desperate to have it removed. Verruca is given a non-assertive status.

*How to get rid of those pit stains once and for all.
Saving your white shirts isn't as hard as you think.*

This was taken from a page in a magazine for men – *Esquire* – in which advice is given as to how to cope with stained shirts. Once again, it is taken for granted that all men know about pit stains, hence the presence of *those*, giving pit stains a non-assertive status.

*Never Forget that Special Occasion with Birthday-Reminders
Never forget those important special occasions again – sign up for FREE special occasion reminders today. <https://thatspecialoccasion.net/wpress/>*

Everyone has special occasions in their life: birthdays, anniversaries, dates, weddings etc. By using *that* or *those*, whoever has anything to sell simply uses *that* or *those* to be understood. Anyone saying *that* special occasion without talking to anyone in particular knows that all humans have had, have, will have a special occasion at some point.

Here is another series of adverts:

*How to remove those brown stains from your washer.
How to remove those ugly black stains on a roof with Roof Sparkle.
Poop, Poop, Go Away: How to Remove those Poop Stains.*

Using *that-those* is the only possibility in such contexts, thus conveying the idea that someone is bound to feel concerned and identify with the problems. Supposedly, everyone at one moment or another has to cope with a stained washing machine, stains on their roof, poop stains etc. Non-assertiveness is what is at stake, which only *that - those* can indicate. Non-assertive status conveyed by *that-those* is very similar to what article *the* conveys, which is the non-assertive status of the noun that follows. By using any of those three *th*-grammatical items, the speaker knows the addressee knows what he or she is talking about.

*It's one of those days...
It's one of those days when even my coffee needs coffee.
(<https://apagraph.com/quote/6663>)*

When saying the above, any speaker knows that the addressee understands what it is all about, taking for granted that all humans go through difficult times on certain days, meaning one of *those* days when everything seems to be going wrong. One should bear in mind that anyone saying « It is one of those days » invariably says so when asked by someone what is wrong with them. *Those* has nothing to do with negative feelings.

We shall now examine several examples taken from various novels:

“What was Einstein’s reaction?”
“He stood there and looked at me from under *those* bushy eyebrows and said...”
(Roald Dahl, *My uncle Oswald*)

The speaker takes for granted that the addressee knows what Einstein looks like and knows about one of his striking features: his bushy eyebrows. It could also have been his mussed hair, or his tongue – an allusion to the legendary photograph of Einstein sticking his tongue out. *These* is simply impossible here.

With silence in the carriage he looked out at the soldiers standing along the train.

[...]

Those soldiers nearest the train pressed forward and unlooped their automatic rifles.

(Alan Sillitoe, *The General*).

There are soldiers along the train. Some are necessarily closer and others farther away from the carriages. So, the presence of soldiers nearest the train is taken for granted. What is interesting here is that going by the traditional rule *these* should be used. But not only would *these* be ungrammatical here, but this one occurrence annihilates the inch rule in a spectacular fashion. What would learners do if they were given the passage with *those* having been removed and were asked to fill in the blank with either *these* or *those*? What other choice would they have but write *these*, after being blinded by the inch rule?

He caught hold of Jo and swung her round to face him. He looked at her closely and saw that she now had two bruises on her face - one going yellow that he'd given her when he had sent her flying two or three days before – and a new one, dark purple.

“Where did you get *that* bruise?” he said, touching it lightly.

(Enid Blyton, *Five fall into adventure*)

By saying *that* bruise, the speaker knows that the addressee knows that she has a bruise on her face. This very common use of *that* in the case of shared knowledge – hence the non-assertive status of *bruise* in this particular context – is quite interesting here for the boy is actually touching the bruise lightly. Once again, anyone believing in the distant reference traditionally attached to *that-those* will feel at a loss trying to explain why *that* is used here.

“I can see from your face that you know I’m right. You would be full of doubts and fear. And you would have reasons sometimes. *I will for example always see Peter. Maybe I would want to see Martyn. I will not change the way I live my life. I have promises to keep, debts to pay to people. I will not be forced to change that.*”

“But I would give you *that* freedom. I would. I’d teach myself.”

(Josephine Hart, *Damage*).

The word *freedom* has not been mentioned previously *per se* but the passage we have used italics for denotes freedom. By saying not only *freedom* but *that freedom* the speaker makes it is clear that he has understood what has been stated just before by the addressee.

Let us now have a look at a few everyday sentences containing *that*:

He is one of *those* men who will never take no for an answer. (**these*)

Millions of similar sentences are being produced on a daily basis. Whoever says: « He/she is one of *those* who... » takes for granted that the addressee knows such people exist.

That is the news.

There is no possible alternative here. Once the news is over on BBC radio 4 for instance, the speaker knows that millions of addresses have been listening to the news, and nothing else. *That* used as a pronoun here refers to the only thing he can be referring to – the news.

Can you pass me *that* book? (*only one book on the table*)

No matter how close or far the book is from either speaker or addressee, if the speaker thinks that the addressee knows what book is concerned, *that* is the obvious and only possible choice.

That pen is the best word processor in the world ! (pronounced by writer Alan Sillitoe at a book presentation in Paris in 1994)

When asked if he used a computer to write his books, Alan Sillitoe had taken a fountain pen from his pocket, and after showing it to the assembly had said: « *That* pen... ».

Once again, the complete complicity (connivance) between speaker and addressees is such that using *this* in such situations is impossible.

Please feel free to drop it any time. You know where *that* key is!

This is what some very old friends of mine in Kent keep telling me. They know that I know that at some point I had had problems finding a key they had left for me, hidden under some flower pot. From then on, the key has always been *that* key, for obvious reasons.

Quick ! Follow *that* car !

This is the type of sentence one can hear in detective films for instance. A man will jump into a taxi and ask the driver to follow one particular car, a car that the driver is supposed to have seen as it has just left in a hurry under his very nose. As there are no other cars to choose from, *this* is never used in such circumstances.

Is it *that* expensive? // I did not know it was *that* cheap.

In both cases, a high or low price has been mentioned and the speaker will comment what he or she is sure the addressee agrees on. We will see further what using *this* would mean.

What's *that* noise? (<https://www.iheartradio.ca/chum/contests>)

What's that noise? happens to be the title of a radio show in the USA. It is explained as follows:

Play CHUM 104.5's « What's That Noise? » contest.

Starting January 2nd with Marilyn Denis & Jamar, we will play a mystery noise. Listen for *the* "noise" at 7am, 11am, 1pm, 4pm & 7pm.

Be the 25th caller at 416-870-1045 when you hear *the* noise then tell us what you think it is. If you are correct you could win a lot of CASH!

We will start every new contest with a jackpot of \$2020.00. If our 25th caller doesn't correctly identify *the* noise we'll add \$104 dollars to the jackpot and so on and so on.

Be sure to listen closely to CHUM 104.5 at 7am, 11am, 1pm, 4pm, and 7pm!

What is interesting here is the correlation between *the* and *that*. The title of the radio programme could not be **What's the noise?* for *the* does not allow as total complicity with the addressee as *that* does. But when talking about afore mentioned noise in the description of the programme, *the* is fine. As the purpose of the game is to identify a noise once it has been played on live radio, *that* noise is the only possible way of talking about it, and for two reasons: first because the concept *noise* is taken for granted - listeners are going to hear something which is called noise – and secondly, as the programme makers have established total complicity with the listeners, *that* must be used.

His first major role was *that* of gay French teacher John Paul Keating in the Channel 4 comedy-drama *Teachers* during its second series in 2002. (*this)
<http://www.shaunevansonline.co.uk/sample-page>

Non-assertiveness is very clear in such contexts - *this* is simply impossible. The one and only possibility is to use *that* as a pronoun because *that* is the only possible tool when the choice of noun has already been made.

Each group will then compare their conclusions with *those* of the other groups. (*these)

For similar reasons, try as one might, *these* just cannot be used in such context for the word conclusions is the only possible choice of word here.

We shall conclude this series of commented examples with a short dialogue taken from *Calvin and Hobbes*, the well known comic.

(Both Calvin and his pet tiger Hobbes are reading a book)

Calvin: « What does *this* word mean? » (he points to a word from a short distance)

Hobbes: « Which one? »

Calvin: « *That* long one. » (he places his finger on the word)

According to what R. Quirk *et alii* and many other grammarians say, *this* should here replace *that* and vice-versa. When grammar books fail to account for the way English is used by natives, it seems that the explanations ought to be reconsidered straight away. What is at stake here is, as we have already shown with a few examples, the status given to the noun. In the case of the dialogue between Calvin and Hobbes, the situation is crystal clear: out of all the words on a page, the boy selects one, thus giving that word an assertive status for there are other words on the page to choose from. As he has not made himself clear the first time, Calvin has to show the word with more accuracy. By putting his finger on it, all ambiguity has then gone. The one word is given a non-assertive status for there is no doubt left for the addressee. As we had said in our introduction, any reference to distance is beside the point.

3. *This-these*: assertion and assertive status

Occurrences of *this-these* are uncouneted for once the inch rule is put forward, unless one is ready to accept the type of metaphor mentioned by R. Quirk *et alii*. How can anyone explain the use of *this-these* when the noun introduced in the sentence refers to someone or something not being even present when and where both speaker and addressee are talking? Such examples, far from being exceptional, may very well be best suited to explain how *this-these* can be differentiated from *that-those*. As we shall see, status will keep on being the key to explaining why *this-these* are chosen.

Alice had shown him Alice in wonderland, a favorite from her childhood which he'd heard of but hadn't read. She must have talked about him to her mother, another sign that she cared for him.

"There's *this* airman who reads and writes all the time." (**that*)

"Well", her mother said, "maybe you can let him borrow *these*. Let him get his teeth into *this* one if he can." (Alan Sillitoe, *The Open door*)

Had Alice used *that* instead of *this*, it would have meant that her mother knew the airman, thus giving *airman* a non-assertive status. But the mother does not know the man. She first hears about him when Alice mentions him using *this*. Alice cannot say either *the* or *that*. She could say *an* airman, giving it an assertive status too. By saying *this* airman, Alice uses a *th*-word which, and because of the anaphora implied by all *th*-words, seems to mean that Alice wants her mother to feel as she were

missing something. *This* airman is different from *an* airman, and the difference has to be accounted for. But to the mother, *airman* is given an assertive status. *This* is used here in a very characteristic fashion. How far or close the reference is does not matter at all. *These* books and *this* one express the mother's choice among other books: first a handful taken from a much bigger pack and then one item taken from a bunch. In both cases the speaker presents her choice to the addressee.

"Where shall we have dinner tonight?" I said.

"I don't care." she said. "I think we ought to try solve *this* Proust thing first. I'd hate to see *this* little bugger get away." (Roald Dahl, *My uncle Oswald*)

This little bugger: what is interesting here is the negative judgment made by the speaker. Most grammar books would rather *that* were used in such examples. Out of all the possibilities one could choose from to talk about the character called Proust, the speaker opts for a very personal choice, that of not only *bugger* but also *little*. Had *that* been used, it would have meant that the speaker was taking for granted that the addressee shared the same point of view, thus giving *little bugger* a non-assertive status. Once again, when most grammar books advocate the use of *that-those* for negative judgment, or things that are kept at a distance for they are being viewed negatively, everyday English proves to function otherwise. What matters is the degree of complicity the speaker establishes with the addressee. No previous shared knowledge leads to *this-these*, complicity leads to *that-those*. What is at stake can be a noun on its own, but also the adjective being used.

This Proust thing: the speaker could have said *that Proust thing* instead, giving *Proust thing* a non-assertive status. But by saying *this Proust thing*, the speaker conveys a very personal point of view on the situation. Calling it a *thing*, and then *Proust thing* tells a lot about her attitude towards the character called *Proust*, which is very negative as is clear immediately afterwards. In other words, saying *this Proust thing* enables the speaker to convey her point of view in a very personal way, hence, the use of *this*. Using *that* would have meant that the addressee was supposed to share her point of view and have diminished the strength of her words.

The noun can sometimes have a non-assertive status if it were used on its own but the speaker will add an adjective not yet taken for granted by the addressee which will alter the status of the noun, as is the case in the following example:

"We've been playing Night Clubs" Sybil said. "Lisa's simply frantic. I'm afraid I won't keep her much longer." she sighed. "Oh, *these* bloody foreign girls! Where've all the good servants got to?" (John Braine, *Life at the top*).

Lisa is an au pair girl. On the level of pure grammatical acceptance, either *these* or *those* would fit. With *these*, speaker Sybil conveys her own judgement. She chooses an adjective – *bloody* – and applies it to *foreign girls*. If it seems pretty obvious that pair girls are usually foreign. But calling them *bloody* is the speaker's choice. Only with *these* can the speaker display any assertiveness.

"*These* bloody thoughts" is for example the title of episode 4 of a television series *The Alienist*. (2018) More often than not everyday conversations contain all sorts of taboo adjectives and nouns and among those, the *f.* word certainly is a winner. It is thus not uncommon to hear what follows:

this fucking X, *these* fucking Xs
etc.

The *f.* word is not restricted to *that-those*. Not only are such occurrences perfectly acceptable, but so many are pronounced every day that it is nothing short of miracle that grammar books should still go by the inch rule rather than just listen to English the way it is used by natives.

Until now, most of the credits for ignoring the order has gone to Von Choltitz, because Von Bressendorf, a modest man, did not want to publicize his role. But he was persuaded

to put on record *this* tantalizing slice of history by his son Michael, especially when it became clear earlier this year that Von Bressendorf was dying of cancer.
(*The European*, Aug. 26 – Sept. 1, 1994)

This-these can be used for past reference; referring to something that took place in the past has no effect on the choice of demonstratives. What is at stake is not only the status of the noun but also the status given to the noun by the adjective. If we examine *this tantalizing slice of history* it appears that the choice of words is very clearly the speaker's own choice, the speaker's own judgement. By using *this* the speaker is being very assertive, giving more strength to his opinion on the period of time being referred to. What is said in grammar books about *that* being used to express distance, which goes as far as expressing reject proves once again to be beside the point. More often than not, when a speaker does not approve of something that is being presented or said to him or her, reject will be expressed, among others means, by using *this-these*, which is to be understood as follows: the speaker has been presented with something – a situation, a point of view, an object etc. – he or she does not want to share with the addressee who has just presented it to him or her. The following example is quite interesting in that respect. Taken from an episode of television series *Endeavour*, (ITV 1):

Detective Inspector Thursday has lent money to his brother without telling his wife. His brother has made risky investments and the money is lost for good. When Win Thursday, the detective's wife, learns about it all she is devastated and mad at her husband:
Win Thursday: "27 seven years of marriage.... And *this*... !"

The speaker expresses anger at her husband, at the loss of money, and at the breach of trust. Her unfinished sentence is accompanied by an angry gesture. Using *this* means that she does not agree with what her husband has been doing behind her back, that she has no word for it. Rejection is complete. *That* could never convey her attitude towards what she is made to undergo.

4. *This* and *that*: status based choices

More often than not a noun referring to exactly the same item – objects, people, situations, events – can be introduced by both *this-these* and *that-those* within a few lines in a book³, a paper or a magazine, or within a few seconds in the course of a conversation. We shall now examine a few examples so as to account for what sometimes appear like mystery choices when one does not use appropriate linguistic tools.

"For someone to marry into the British Royal family and emerge as an equal is extremely dangerous. The orders have to come from the top."
"This," he added, "is the beginning of the end for the British monarchy". And no one wants to see *that*. (Newsweek, Nov. 30th, 1992)

The someone referred to here is Diana Spencer, still married to Prince Charles at the time. The switch from *this* to *that* is of course very interesting. *This* is pronounced by someone who does not agree with the situation he describes in his own words and refers to something he rejects wholly after giving his own perception of things. *That* is produced by the journalist reporting on the event, and, talking to the readers, just takes for granted that they have read what has just been written. There is a similar use of *that* at the end of Looney tunes cartoons:

That's all folks!

³ In that respect *The letter*, a short story written by Somerset Maugham is a masterpiece for the noun *letter* is used many times in the story and *a, the*, but mainly *this* and *that* are constantly used. The inch rule proves to be quite useless in a very spectacular fashion when it comes to explaining why *this* and *that* are used.

or at the end of news bulletins on the radio:

That is the news.

In all similar occurrences the speaker knows the addressee is on the same wavelength, as it were, hence the choice of *that*. When *this* is used, the speaker conveys a personal opinion, presents things in his or her own way, or implies that he or she does not approve of the addressee's choice of words. For instance people will say:

That's true.

when reacting to something they totally agree with, but:

This is true, but ...

when they do not give their full agreement; keeping at bay an opinion expressed by the addressee and adding after *but* what is on their mind.

«I'd like to start, if I may, Mr Menzies » he began, « with what your counsel seems to set great store by proof of your innocence. »

Menzies's thin lips remained in a firm straight line.

« *The* pertinent entry in your diary which suggests that you made a second appointment to see Miss Moorland, the murdered woman » - three words Sir Humphrey was to repeat again and again during his cross examination – « for the Wednesday after she had been killed »

« Yes, sir, » said Menzies.

« *This* entry was made - correct me if I'm wrong – following your Thursday meetings at Miss Moorlands's flat. »

« Yes, sir, » said Menzies, obviously tutored not to add anything that might help prosecuting counsel.

« So, when did you make *that* entry? » Sir Humphrey asked.

Jeffrey Archer, *Perfect murder in A twist in the tale*, p. 42 (Harper Collins, 1993)

After first introducing the noun *entry* with article *the*, Sir Humphrey will then use *this* and then *that* – for the very same entry in a diary. Some form of grammatical logic prevails here. Once the entry has been mentioned for the first time, it is only natural that *that* should be used as both know what entry is at stake. Things can be different when different nouns referring to a same reality are used, as is shown in the following example:

In the last days of August, as the Allies approached the city, the unarmed population of Paris rose against the occupying German forces. [...] To commemorate *these* dramatic days, we will reproduce the six front pages from the NYHT chronicling the week of August 22th through August 27th vents covered in *that* extraordinary week include the liberation of Marseille, Grenoble, Le Havre, and Rouen. (*IHT* Aug. 19th 1994)

In both cases, the period being referred to is the same. What differs is the power of assertion, the personal commitment of the speaker who decided to endorse *dramatic* but who decided to consider *extraordinary* to be shared knowledge. These are occurrences when the speaker's choice is not under any constraint but only depends on his or her own perception.

One should be very careful when mistaking proximity in real life and grammatical status in a sentence.

What matters is the choice of nouns - or of adjectives and nouns – to denote a situation, an event etc.

Our last example we owe to then Attorney General Geoffrey Cox⁴ who spoke to opposition members in Parliament in London quite irately on Sept. 25th 2019 to opposition members of parliament, reproaching them with preventing Brexit to happen:

⁴ G.C. was appointed Attorney General on July 9th 2018.

This parliament should have the courage to face the electorate. But it won't. It won't.
Because so many of them are really all about preventing us leaving the European Union
But the time is coming, the time is coming Mr Speaker when even *these* turkeys won't be
able to prevent Christmas.

(Attorney General Geoffrey Cox, Sept. 25th 2019, live parliament session in London⁵)

Calling members of parliament *turkeys*, whether they are close at hand or distant is quite a judgement. But it is even stronger – more assertive – if it is done with *these*. If Geoffrey Cox had said *those* turkeys he would have implied that it was everyone else's opinion that opposition Mps were known as turkeys. Choosing to call them *turkeys* there and then was his own very assertive choice. The fact that they were standing right across the room from him has nothing to do with *these*. As we have shown, things or people being close can be referred to using *that-those*.

5. Conclusion : the concept of status in grammar

Apart from *this-these /that-those* one cannot fail to see that English – but all languages are concerned in one way or another – has other sets of minimal pairs that teachers and linguists alike find very challenging, so challenging that suitable explanations are more often than not a long time coming. Let us name but a few:

prepositions: *till/until* (both also used to introduce subordinate clauses) ; *over/above* ; *under/below*...

adverbs: *here/there* ; *nearly/almost* ; *too/also*...

quantifiers: *some/any* ; *a little/little* : *a few/few* ; *a lot/much* ; *a lot/many*

modals: *may/can* ; *shall/will*

tenses and aspects: *simple present/be+ing present*

etc.

How do reference grammar books explain the difference between the items in the following minimal pairs:

the wife of the German ambassador / the German ambassador's wife

I will see you at nine / I will be seeing you at nine

As shown in several publications⁶ the concept of status – assertive and non-assertive – goes beyond English demonstratives and each of the minimal pairs mentioned above can receive adequate explanations based on status related analyses which, as we hope has been shown convincingly, never take extra-linguistic realities⁷ into consideration to account for grammar.

References

Adamczewski, H., 1982, *Grammaire linguistique de l'anglais*, Paris: Armand Colin.

Adamczewski, H., & Gabilan, J.-P., 1993, *Les clés de la grammaire anglaise*, Paris: Armand Colin.

Adamczewski, H., & Gabilan, J.-P., 1996, *Déchiffrer la grammaire anglaise*, Paris: Editions Didier.

Gabilan, J.-P., 2020, *Grammaire expliquée de l'anglais*, Paris: Editions Ellipses.

Quirk, R., et alii, 1985, *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*, London and New York; Pearson.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8SEZ10LVgg>: we can only recommend to our readers that they go online and watch Geoffrey Cox during his speech.

⁶ Adamczewski 1982, Adamczewski & Gabilan 1993, Adamczewski & Gabilan 1996, Gabilan 2006 and 2020.

⁷ In other words, as we have explained for *this/that*, what goes on in the real world has no influence whatsoever on syntax. The word *car* refers to an object in the real world, but *a car*, *the car*, *this car*, *that car* etc. do not refer directly to extralinguistic realities but to the type of status given to *car* and conveyed by the speaker to the addressee.