

When demonstratives act like definites: Evidence from focus in Mandarin

Overview. Previous work has shown that, in anaphoric contexts, the Mandarin distal demonstrative *na* ‘that’ behaves more like a definite determiner (e.g., the) than like a canonical demonstrative (e.g., that). On the basis of these patterns, Saha et al. (2024) propose that *na* exhibits a dual status: it can function as an ordinary demonstrative or as a strong definite determiner (Schwarz, 2009; 2013). Yet little is known about the anaphoric behavior of the Mandarin proximal demonstrative *zhe* ‘this’; in particular, it remains an open question whether it functions exclusively as a true demonstrative, or whether it exhibits dual behavior similar to the distal form. In two experiments, we show that (i) unlike *na*, *zhe* is sensitive to discourse context, specifically, to the number of antecedent NPs, a hallmark of true demonstratives (Exp. 1); and (ii) the contrast between *na* and *zhe* can be captured under Saha et al.’s (2024) focus-based proposal, which posits that a demonstrative functions as a true demonstrative when focused and as a strong definite determiner when unfocused (Exp. 2).

Background. It has been observed that in English, Turkish, and Bangla, distal demonstratives are sensitive to (i) the number of antecedent NPs (one vs. two), and (ii) the situation type of the follow-up sentence (same vs. new) (Saha, 2023; Saha et al., 2023). In these languages, demonstrative NPs (e.g., *that boy*) are more acceptable in *One NP* and *New Situation* conditions (see English translations in (1)), whereas definites (e.g., *the boy*) are highly acceptable across all conditions.

(1) { [*OneNP* A boy] } / { [*TwoNPs* A boy and a girl] } entered the classroom.

a. {*Zhe ge/Na ge*} *nanghai* *zuozai* *qianpai*.
this CLF/that CLF boy sit.at front.seat
‘This/That boy sat at the front row.’ [Same Situation]

b. *Wo* *zuotian* *zai* *shudian* *jian* *guo* {*zhe ge/na ge*} *nanghai*.
I yesterday at bookstore see PERF this CLF/that CLF boy
‘I saw this/that boy at the bookstore yesterday.’ [New Situation]

However, Mandarin diverges from this cross-linguistic pattern: its distal demonstrative *na* shows no sensitivity to discourse context; it patterns, instead, with definite determiners in English, Turkish, and Bangla (Saha et al. 2024). To account for this contrast, Saha et al. (2023, 2024) propose a focus-based analysis, in which typical demonstrative NPs obligatorily place focus on the demonstrative (2a), while definites may either lack focus, or allow focus on the entire phrase (2b).

(2) a. **that**_[FOC] boy (as opposed to another boy) \rightsquigarrow More acceptable in *One NP* condition.

b. [**the boy**]_[FOC] (as opposed to the girl) \rightsquigarrow More acceptable in *Two NPs* condition.

This explains why demonstrative NPs are more acceptable in *One NP* conditions: placing focus on the demonstrative (2a) invokes a contrast with alternative boys, which is more natural when only a single antecedent NP is introduced. However, *na* differs from typical demonstratives in allowing flexible focus placement: on the demonstrative (e.g., *na-ge*_[FOC] *nanghai*), with no focus (e.g., *na-ge* *nanghai*), or on the entire phrase (e.g., [*na-ge nanghai*]_[FOC]). This flexibility aligns *na* closely with a definite determiner. Moving forward, we set aside the situation type manipulation, as it is orthogonal to the focus-based analysis in (2), i.e., only the number of antecedent NPs is relevant.

Exp. 1. To investigate the behavior of the proximal demonstrative *zhe*, we conducted an acceptability judgment task with two factors crossed: demonstrative type (proximal vs. distal), and number of NPs (one vs. two), following the experimental design of Saha et al. (2023, 2024). See (1) for a full Mandarin item example. Following Saha et al.’s methodology, we employed a dual-presentation design in which participants read a context sentence followed by two possible continuations: one containing a demonstrative NP (target), and one with a definite bare noun (control). The position of the demonstrative NP (subject vs. object) was counterbalanced. Participants rated the naturalness of each follow-up sentence on a 0-100 scale. **Results & Discussion.** We fitted a linear mixed effects model where acceptability ratings were predicted from demonstrative type, number

of NPs, and their interaction. Results (Fig. 1) show that *na* was rated significantly more acceptable than bare nouns ($p < 0.001$), and no effect of number of NPs was detected for *na*, replicating Saha et al. (2024). Crucially, *zhe* was significantly more acceptable in the *One NP* than *Two NPs* conditions ($p < 0.001$), showing sensitivity to discourse context and thus patterning with typical demonstratives. We propose that *zhe* necessarily carries focus (3). This explains why only proximal demonstrative NPs show sensitivity to the number of antecedent NPs. To further test Saha et al.'s (2024) claim that the Mandarin distal demonstrative behaves as a true demonstrative when focused and as a strong definite determiner otherwise, we ran Exp. 2 using auditory stimuli.

(3) **zhe-ge**_[FOC] nanhai (as opposed to another boy) \rightsquigarrow More acceptable in *One NP* condition.

Exp. 2. We conducted an auditory acceptability judgment task with two factors crossed: position of focus (\approx stress; Sybesma & Sio, 2008) (dem vs. noun), and number of antecedent NPs (one vs. two) (see (4)). Exp. 2 used the same sentences as Exp. 1, but presented them auditorily, and tested only the subset containing distal demonstratives. Participants listened to each sentence in isolation and rated its naturalness on a 0-100 slider. There is no limitation of playing times.

(4) { [*OneNP* A boy] } / { [*TwoNPs* A boy and a girl] } entered the classroom. (auditory \bullet)

a. Wo zuotian zai shudian jian guo **na ge**_[FOC] nanhai. [Focus on Dem]

b. Wo zuotian zai shudian jian guo [na ge **nanhai**]_[FOC]. [Focus on Noun]

Results & Discussion. We fitted a linear mixed effects model where acceptability ratings were predicted from focus position, number of NPs, and their interaction. The results (Fig. 2) revealed a significant interaction between *Number of NPs* and *Position of Focus* ($p < 0.001$). Specifically, in the *Two NPs* condition, *Focus on Noun* was rated as more acceptable than *Focus on Dem* ($p < 0.001$), whereas no such difference was observed in the *One NP* condition ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that the interaction was driven by the difference between *Focus on Dem* and *Focus on Noun* in the *Two NP* condition. Crucially, the simple comparison between the two *Focus on Dem* conditions was significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that *Focus on Dem* was more acceptable in *One NP* than in *Two NP* conditions. We further suggest that the lack of a difference in the *One NP* condition could be due to speakers' general preference for placing stress on content words (e.g., nouns) rather than function words (e.g., demonstratives) (Grosjean & Gee, 1987). Overall, these findings support Saha et al.'s (2024) focus-based account: focused demonstratives behave like true demonstratives, resulting in higher acceptability in the *One NP* condition, while unfocused ones pattern like strong definite determiners, yielding higher acceptability in the *Two NPs* condition.

General Discussion. In Mandarin, the proximal demonstrative *zhe* shows sensitivity to the number of antecedent NPs, whereas the distal demonstrative *na* does not (Exp. 1). We propose that *zhe* necessarily bears focus while *na* allows flexible focus placement. We are currently conducting a follow-up study to test the predictions made by this proposal and to elucidate the precise role that focus plays in the interpretation of *zhe*. Overall, our results further support Saha et al.'s (2024) focus-based account (Exp. 2), highlighting how focus shapes the interpretive flexibility of demonstratives and providing a unified explanation for when they behave like definites.

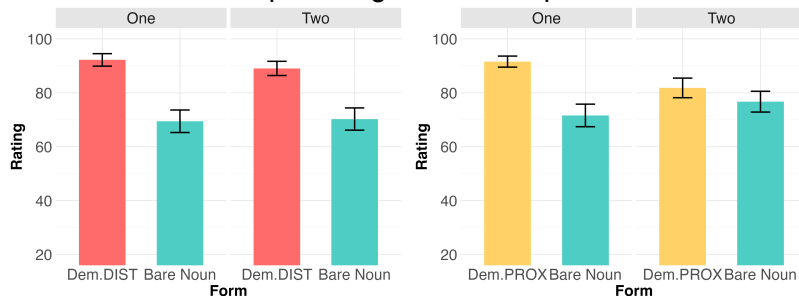


Fig. 1: Acceptability judgments with written stimuli (Exp. 1).

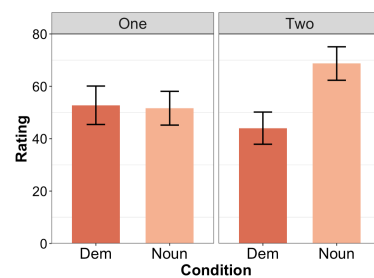


Fig. 2: Acceptability judgments with auditory stimuli (Exp. 2).