

This, That, and That Near You: New Research on Bilingualism and Demonstratives

by Vianne Basulto, Quil del Villar, Naomi Shin,
Rosa Vallejos-Yopán, and Amalia Skilton

What's This and That?

"Where did you get that shirt?" "Can you hold this for me?" "This" and "that" are classified as demonstratives, which are useful for all teachers to understand because they are an instrumental part of language. They are also among the most frequent words used across all languages and learned early during child development (Clark, 1978; Diessel, 2006; Diessel & Coventry, 2020). Demonstratives are also an especially exciting topic for dual language educators because they are commonly used for teaching vocabulary (e.g., "This is a pen" or "That is a book"), and they differ across languages. This article explains how they differ, discusses their functions, and then presents new findings from cutting-edge research on three bilingual communities: Spanish-English bilinguals in Albuquerque, as well as Secoya-Spanish and Ticuna-Spanish bilinguals in the Amazon. Also, based on this information, we present ideas for teaching demonstratives in dual-language classrooms in the article that follows on page 4.

Demonstratives are complex

At first glance, demonstratives seem quite simple: we use "this" for something close to us and "that" for something far from us. But if we look deeper, we use these words in complex ways that go beyond just indicating the distance between us and the thing we are talking about. For instance, we also consider where our interlocutor (the person we are talking to) is when choosing a demonstrative. Demonstratives also have different functions, including pointing out objects in space and managing the attention of the interlocutor (Diessel, 2006; e.g., "Hey! Look at that!"). Demonstratives can also appear in various positions in a sentence. They can be adnominal or pronominal. Adnominal demonstratives combine with a noun and are used to specify what we are talking about, as in "this cup." Pronominal demonstratives are used without an accompanying noun, as in "My dad gave me this."

Pronominal demonstratives are typically used when everyone knows what "this" refers to. This article will focus specifically on adnominal demonstratives.

Demonstratives differ across languages

Whereas English has two demonstratives ("this" and "that"), some dialects of Spanish have three (este 'this,' ese, 'that,' and aquel 'that over there'). Other languages have even more! For example, Ticuna, a language spoken in the Amazon, has four (ña'a 'this near me,' ngema 'that near you,' ngea 'this near both of us,' and yea 'that over there,' Skilton, 2024). Furthermore, English demonstratives have traditionally been characterized as egocentric because speakers focus on the distance between the speaker (self) and the thing the speaker is talking about (the referent), as in "this cup" for a cup near me and "that cup" for a cup farther from me. By contrast, in languages like Spanish and Ticuna, demonstratives are considered sociocentric because speakers focus on the location of the interlocutor in addition to the distance between the speaker and the referent.

Bilinguals' demonstratives

What happens if you speak two languages with different types of demonstratives? Consider the case of Spanish-English bilinguals. If English demonstratives are egocentric and Spanish demonstratives are sociocentric, how will bilinguals use demonstratives in each of their languages? One possibility is that if you are dominant in English, you might use demonstratives egocentrically in both your languages, including in Spanish. Shin and Lease (2025) found evidence for this among Spanish-English bilinguals in New Mexico. However, their experiment included only limited configurations. More recent work emerging from the University of New Mexico employs two experimental tasks to study demonstrative use in three bilingual communities: Secoya-Spanish and Ticuna-Spanish bilingual communities in the Amazon, and Spanish-

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English bilinguals in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Skilton, Shin, and Vallejos-Yopán, under review).

Secoya is a Tukanoan language with three demonstratives: *i* ('this'), *jão* ('that, at a medium distance'), and *je* ('that over there') (Vallejos-Yopán, 2025). There are only around 700 speakers of Secoya. They live in nine small villages in the Peruvian Amazon and three in Ecuador. A Secoya village is portrayed in Figure 1. Most Secoya elders are monolingual, but more Spanish has reached the community in the past two decades. As a result, many children, adolescents, and male adults are bilingual in Secoya and Spanish.

Ticuna is a language isolate (a unique language not traced to any family) with four demonstratives. There are approximately 50,000-70,000 speakers of Ticuna who live in the Brazil-Colombia-Peru border region of the northwestern Amazon. A Ticuna town is portrayed in Figure 2. Ticuna speakers have been in contact with Spanish and Portuguese for more than two centuries. Today, speakers are usually bilingual in Ticuna and Spanish, or in Ticuna and Portuguese. The Spanish spoken by these Amazonian communities generally has two demonstratives: *este* ('this') and *ese* ('that'), whereas the Spanish spoken by the participants in New Mexico generally has three demonstratives: *este* ('this'), *ese* ('that'), and *aquel* ('that over there').



Figure 1. Secoya village of Bellavista, Peru, June 2025, © Rosa Vallejos-Yopán.



Figure 2. Calle Anderson neighborhood in the Ticuna town of Cushillococha, Peru, 2023, © Amalia Skilton.

The main research question in Skilton et al.'s study is whether the interlocutor's location, with respect to the speaker and the referent, influences the speaker's demonstrative use across all the languages in the study. To answer this question, Amalia Skilton designed an experiment called the "Ask Me" task, taking the sociocultural context of the three bilingual communities into account. In this task, participants stand still in one spot (location 1). Three more locations are marked in front of them, 1 meter apart. An object (e.g., a book) is placed in one of the four locations, and then the interlocutor also stands at one of the four locations (See Graphic #2, page 11). For each trial, the participant is prompted to ask the interlocutor, "Is this/that your book?" (or, if in Spanish, "¿Este/ese/aquel libro es tuyo?"). Each participant completes this task in both their languages, with four similarly sized objects.

If speakers use demonstratives egocentrically, then only the distance between the speaker and the object will shape demonstrative use. By contrast, if speakers use demonstratives sociocentrically, then the location of the interlocutor will matter, too. Skilton et al. expected that the interlocutor's location would influence demonstrative use in Ticuna and Secoya because previous research suggests that these are both sociocentric languages (Skilton, 2024; Vallejos-Yopán, 2025).

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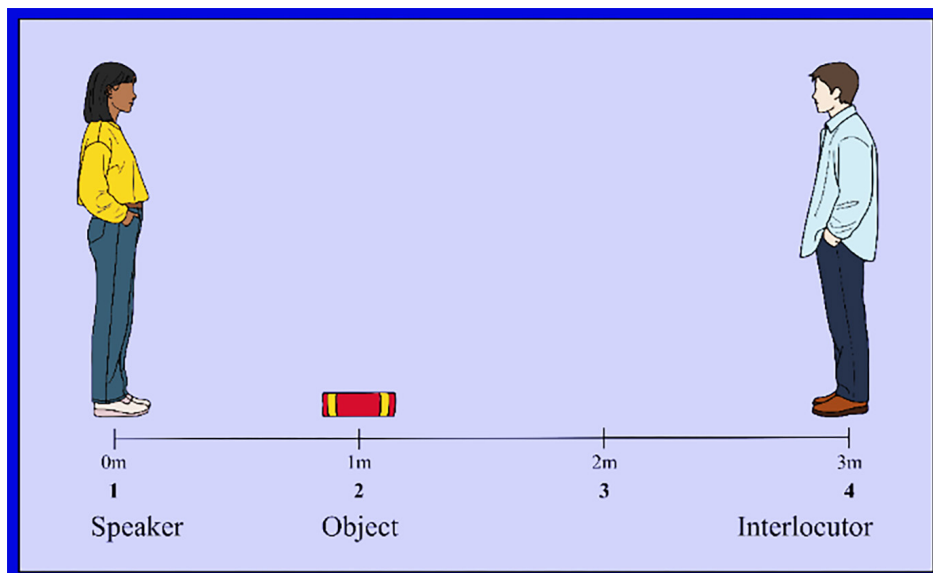


Figure 2. “Ask Me” task setup.

Take This (and That) with You

Overall, we have seen that demonstratives are much more complex than we might expect. In fact, this paper barely scratches the surface. Beyond understanding distance and the location of who we are talking to, demonstratives are also used to manage our interlocutor’s attention. This means that “this” and “that” reflect both how we conceptualize space and

how we understand others. This takes time for children to develop, so it may

be helpful to guide children in dual-language classrooms to produce demonstratives. Our classroom application article on page 4 provides exciting and fun ideas for incorporating activities in the classroom to teach children about how demonstratives are used across languages.

Additionally, they anticipated that Spanish-dominant bilinguals in Albuquerque would use demonstratives sociocentrically because previous research suggests that Spanish varieties with three demonstratives are sociocentric (Shin & Lease, 2025).

To Skilton et al.’s surprise, the interlocutor’s location influenced demonstrative use across all the languages in the study. For example, even when the object was at the exact same distance away from the participant, the interlocutor’s location mattered. Specifically, when the object was near the interlocutor, participants used more “that” in English, *ese* (‘that’) in Spanish, *jão* (‘that, at a medium distance’) in Secoya, and *ngema* (‘that near you’) in Ticuna.

Another surprising finding was that there were no clear effects of bilingualism in Skilton et al.’s study. However, given that previous research finds that bilinguals do sometimes transfer conceptualizations of space across languages (e.g., Bohnemeyer et al., 2014; Bohnemeyer et al., 2015; Shin & Lease, 2025), more research is needed to investigate crosslinguistic influence, that is, the way in which bilinguals’ languages influence each other. For example, it would be helpful to include a wider variety of Spanish-English bilinguals in terms of language dominance to continue to investigate whether the way we use English demonstratives affects how we use Spanish demonstratives and vice versa.

Demonstratives are useful for understanding how children acquire and develop languages. Bilinguals’ languages might influence each other when producing demonstratives. This influence, as we have seen, can reflect something beyond grammar: perception. Although Skilton et al. did not find this in their study, previous research has shown that bilingualism can indeed impact conceptualizations of space and demonstrative use (Rubio-Fernández, 2022; Shin & Lease, 2025). Moreover, not much is known about how children use sociocentric demonstratives, which are semantically more complex than egocentric demonstratives. Sociocentric demonstratives therefore might present unique challenges to child learners (Skilton, 2023). This is an active area of research development, and Skilton et al.’s work provides groundbreaking insights.

The references cited in this article can be found at <https://bilingualism.unm.edu/resources/for-educators.html>.

