

that the acquisition of demonstratives plays a key role in the development of joint attention and perspective taking across languages. Building on these early abilities, the acquisition and use of anaphoric demonstratives and definite articles require more sophisticated ToM abilities: monitoring ongoing discourse and earlier common ground requires, at a minimum, to be able to keep a record of what has been said and previously shared and, once fully developed, an understanding of what is known to the interlocutors in a conversation. Therefore, the use of anaphoric demonstratives and definite articles ultimately feeds into the development of (e.g., deciding whether the listener knows the person you want to talk about, or whether you first need to introduce that person in the conversation).

Table 1: Conceptual parallels across language, pragmatics and ToM during language change.

Diessel (2006:477) characterized the evolution of demonstratives into definite articles as an evolution of their corresponding functions: Deictic > Anaphoric > Definite. Comparing exophoric and anaphoric demonstratives, Diessel (2013:246) refers to the latter as ‘disembodied uses’ since discourse referents no longer have a physical substrate. Here I propose a whereby this pathway of language change marks a three-step expansion of the speakers’ notion of common ground, starting with the shared physical space, and abstracting away to their ongoing discourse representation, and further still, to earlier experiences and world knowledge shared by the interlocutors (see Fig. 1). This diachronic view, however, describes the conceptual expansion observed in diachrony, and does not apply to the distribution of these forms in synchronic language use (e.g., definite articles can be used to mark a familiar discourse referent).

Fig 1: Diachronic expansion of common ground.

In this view, the development of the child’s notion of common ground is parallel to the development observed in the historical record across a vast number of languages that evolved definite articles from their demonstratives.

References