The use of spatial demonstrative pronouns in modern Võro: contact-induced changes in the system

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Demonstratives are deictic expressions that help to identify the referent for the addressee (Lyons 1977). The choice between spatial demonstratives is influenced by the referent’s distance from the speaker (and the hearer) (Lyons 1977; Diessel 1999; Dixon 2003). Spatial demonstrative pronoun systems are classified as distance- and person-oriented (Anderson & Keenan 1985). In the case of distance-oriented systems, the demonstratives indicate the distance of the referent from the speaker, in person-oriented systems, at least one of the demonstratives also conveys the viewpoint of the hearer, indicating the proximity of the referent to the hearer.

In Võro, there are three demonstrative pronouns: seo ‘this’, taa ‘this; that’, tuu ‘that’. Traditionally, this system has been classified as person-oriented in which seo is used to refer to the referents near to the speaker, taa to referents near to the hearer and tuu to referents far from both, the speaker and the hearer (Pajusalu 2009).

Võro is under a strong influence of Common Estonian, where one-way (see ‘this, that’) and two-way (see ‘this’, too ‘that’) demonstrative pronoun systems are used. We propose that the use of demonstrative pronouns in modern Võro is influenced by Estonian and we propose the following: 1) as the Estonian two-way demonstrative pronoun system is used in traditional Võro language area, there is a good reason to assume that the use of two-way system is spreading also in modern Võro; 2) as there is no direct counterpart to Võro pronoun taa in Estonian, the use of that pronoun has become inconsistent; 3) the demonstrative pronoun system in modern Võro is distance-oriented.

As a research method, we conducted an experiment, testing the influence of distance, addressee’s position, and role of the participant (being actively involved with the referent or not) on demonstrative choice. The participant and the experimenter sat behind a conference table and placed different shapes on coloured discs in different locations. After the object was placed, the participant was asked to memorize the object and its location by naming the shape, while using a noun phrase with demonstrative pronoun accompanied by a pointing gesture. After half of the trials, the experimenter changed her position, taking a seat either opposite to or next to the participant. Altogether 37 participants took part in the experiment.

Results indicate that although the three-way demonstrative pronoun system prevails, the two-way system is also spreading. Some participants even used only one demonstrative pronoun throughout the experiment. The use of tuu is most consistent while the use of seo and especially taa has more variation. The pronoun system in Võro seems to be distance-oriented.
References


