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Elevation Affects Demonstrative Choice in English: Implications for Theories of Linguistic Diversity

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Spatial communication systems across languages are thought to exhibit extensive variation (Majid et al., 2004; Evans & Levinson, 2009). Notably, some languages structure spatial communication in relation to absolute features of the environment, even in table-top space (e.g. the cup is uphill/downhill of the teapot) rather than taking an ‘egocentric’ perspective (e.g. the cup is to the left of the teapot). Here we test if ‘elevation’ may be important for choice of spatial demonstratives in English – a language usually considered to be ‘egocentric-dominant’. Ninety-five native English-speaking participants rated the acceptability of demonstratives (*this/that*) to describe images featuring a combination of speaker/hearer/object, while manipulating object distance, position of hearer - and critically the elevation slope of the environment on which all three were situated. Analyses using multinomial multilevel modelling revealed effects of all three variables (i.e. including elevation) on demonstrative rating. Implications for theories of spatial communication diversity are discussed.