Demonstratives, joint attention, and language emergence

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Demonstratives (e.g., *this, that, here, there*) constitute a small class of deictic expressions central to communication, cognition, and grammar. Their core function is to coordinate interlocutors' joint attention—a foundational aspect of human interaction. Their communicative importance is reflected in several distinctive properties: unlike most other closed-class items, demonstratives are universal, inherently multimodal, phonetically iconic, and etymologically non-derived. Across languages, they are also among the earliest and most frequent words in children's speech and play a key role in discourse and the evolution of grammar. This talk brings together my research on demonstratives in linguistic typology, first language acquisition, and diachronic change to explore their pivotal role in communication, cognition, and language emergence (cf. Diessel 1999, 2006; Diessel and Coventry 2020; Diessel and Monakhov 2023; Coventry et al. 2023).