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ARTICLE

Discourse genre predicts demonstrative use in text: experimental evidence from German

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Abstract
In German written language, demonstrative expressions like *diese* or *die* play an important part in connecting discourse referents and making larger stretches of discourse coherent. But what makes a writer decide to use a proximal (*diese-dieser-dieses, hier*) or a distal (*die-der-das*, *da*) demonstrative variant? Using a free writing production experiment, we investigated the role of two types of factors suggested to drive demonstrative variance in German written text: the higher-order variable of discourse genre and a number of local structural variables reflecting the prominence of discourse referents, such as the distance between demonstrative and antecedent and the syntactic function or clause position of the demonstrative clause. We asked 100 participants to write emails to a friend (a narrative type of text) and a local authority (an expository text) about an event on the basis of a given scenario. The results indicate that discourse genre by far exceeds the effect of local variables as driver of demonstrative variance. As such, this study complements earlier work on German demonstrative use and corroborates existing findings in other languages through offering an explanatory framework for the understanding of the discourse conditions responsible for the majority of demonstrative choices in German written text.

Keywords: deixis; demonstratives; discourse genre; experimental pragmatics; German; reference

1. Introduction

1.1. Demonstrative variation in German

Demonstratives such as *this* and *that* are among the most frequently used words in language (Brysbaert & New, 2009). Research on their use in spoken communication has confirmed that demonstratives often play a pivotal role in establishing joint attention between interlocutors on a given referent (Diessel & Coventry, 2020; Jara-Ettinger & Rubio-Fernandez, 2024; Levinson et al., 2018; Peeters et al., 2021; Skilton, 2024). Whether speakers select a proximal demonstrative (such as *this*) or a distal

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demonstrative (such as *that*), across languages, indeed often depends on whether a referent is already in the psychologically shared space between speaker and addressee (Peeters et al., 2015; Rocca et al., 2019; Rubio-Fernandez et al., 2026). Similarly, when it comes to written language, it has been proposed that the degree of (presumed) accessibility of a referent in the mind of the reader would drive a writer to use either *this* or *that* in a given sentence (Ariel, 1990). Recent research, however, interestingly suggests that the discourse genre of a text is the main predictor of writers' demonstrative choice, at least in Dutch, English and Mandarin Chinese (Maes et al., 2022a; Peeters et al., 2025).

Here we further investigate this recent claim in German. There are two main reasons for why a focus on German in this domain can be considered theoretically relevant and important. First, there is a long tradition of studying writers' demonstrative use in German, with mixed outcomes that have previously been theoretically difficult to integrate, as we will show below. Second, there exists an interesting asymmetry in the demonstrative system used in German written discourse. Like many languages, written German has two frequently used demonstrative variants, as proximal[1] demonstrative pronouns and determiners [*diese (Frau), dieser (Mann), dieses (Kind);* 'this woman, this man, this child'] and adverbs (*hier;* 'here') can be distinguished from distal demonstrative pronouns (*die, der, das;* 'that') and adverbs (*da, dort;* 'there'). However, written German is deprived of unambiguous distal determiners (e.g., *die Frau, der Mann, das Kind*) as written language lacks word stress to clearly indicate whether a definite article or demonstrative is intended. This asymmetry raises the question to what extent the proximal variant has taken over the function of a distal demonstrative, as has been claimed to happen for recognitional demonstratives, traditionally associated with distal demonstratives (e.g., in English, 'Do you remember *that* guy we met in Paris'), but in German suggested to be taken over by the proximal term (e.g., Himmelmann 1996; Schumacher & von Heusinger, 2026).

The variation between German proximal (*diese*, *dieser*, *dieses*) and distal (*die*, *der*, *das*) demonstrative pronouns has received detailed attention in a number of recent empirical studies (Bader et al., 2022; Bader & Portele, 2019; Fuchs & Schumacher, 2020; Patil et al., 2020, 2023; Patterson et al., 2022, 2025; Patterson & Schumacher, 2021; Schumacher et al., 2022). In these studies, differences in use between the two types of demonstrative pronouns have been investigated both on the level of *local* discourse variables affecting the presumed accessibility and prominence of referents (order of mention: e.g., last mentioned *vs* mentioned earlier; syntactic function: e.g., subject *vs* object; thematic role: e.g., stimulus *vs* experiencer) and on the more global discourse level (e.g., the discourse modality or register at hand).

[1]In most publications on German demonstrative pronouns, the terms 'demPro' and 'Dpro' have been used. Here, we will rather use the well-known terms 'proximal' *vs* 'distal' for all types of demonstratives in German. The observed behavior of the two variants in German is largely similar to what has been found in other two-term systems in related languages like Dutch and English. The traditional German distal pronoun and determiner '*jene-r, −s*' is hardly ever used anymore in contemporary written German ($n = 1$ in our data), very much similar to obsolete distal forms in related languages (Dutch: '*ginds*'; English: '*yonder*'). Coventry et al. (2023), in contrast, studying exophoric demonstrative use in German and 28 other languages, considered three demonstrative terms for German, with two different distal variants '*der-die-das + da*' and '*der-die-das + dort*', which are two (combinations of) forms not occurring in our data.

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Compelling evidence for an effect of local variables is scarce. For example, proximal demonstrative pronouns, more so than distal ones, have been suggested to prefer the last-mentioned noun phrase (NP) in the previous sentence as their antecedent (Zifonun et al., 1997 in Patterson & Schumacher, 2021). However, participants' use of the two German demonstrative variants showed largely the same pattern in this regard in rating experiments using ditransitive contexts with three antecedents differing in prominence, as in example (1) (Patterson & Schumacher, 2021), and also in sentence completion experiments using sentences such as in example (2) (Bader et al., 2022). The latter experiments also showed the same behavior in situations in which this last-mention preference was overruled by thematic role preferences in implicit causality sentences. There is indeed growing agreement that *der* and *dieser* are quite similar in terms of local structural and semantic variables (Bader et al., 2022; Patil et al., 2023).

(1) Die Eigentümerin vermietete die Parkfläche dem Anwohner. Der/Dieser war froh über den langfristigen Vertrag. (Patterson & Schumacher, 2021, p. 1447)

The (female) owner rented the parking space to the (male) resident. 'That'/'This' was delighted about the long-term contract.

(2) Der Fischer beeindruckt Peter, weil der/dieser …. (Bader et al., 2022, p. 408)

The fisherman impresses Peter, because 'that'/'this' ….

Fuchs and Schumacher (2020) suggested an interesting alternative account for explaining the difference between German proximal and distal demonstrative use, i.e., their differential capacity to bring about a durable topic shift in discourse. In their sentence continuation experiment, they asked participants to write six sentences following introductory sentences such as in example (3), starting with either an ambiguous personal (*er/sie*), distal (*der/die*) or proximal (*dies-er/−e*) pronoun. The results first show that both proximal and distal variants were predominantly used to establish a topic shift from the subject ('*der Pfleger*') to the object referent ('*den Heimbewohner*'). As such, they both obey to the same degree the rule of avoiding to refer to the most prominent referent ('*der Pfleger*'). However, the results also indicate that distal demonstratives resulted in more robust topic shifts than proximal demonstratives, as the number of re-mentions of the referent was higher after having started with a distal (*vs* a proximal) demonstrative. Nevertheless, subsequent research could not confirm this finding in a forced-choice judgment task, as respondents did not more often associate distal (as compared to proximal) demonstratives with more durable topic shift contexts (Schumacher et al., 2022).

(3) Jeden Morgen hat der Pfleger den Heimbewohner gekämmt. Dabei hat er/der/dieser … (Fuchs & Schumacher, 2020, p. 195)

Every morning, the (male) nurse combed the (male) resident. At the same time 'he'/'that'/'this' …

On a more global discourse level, it has been suggested that German proximal demonstratives are more commonly associated with the written modality, while distal demonstratives would be more strongly preferred in spoken discourse. For

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example, in their experiments on the difference between personal and demonstrative pronouns, Patterson et al. (2022, p. 5) decided to use the proximal rather than the distal demonstrative variant because they considered *dieser* 'better suited to a written experiment than *der*, which is perceived by some speakers to be slightly pejorative and is more appropriate in spoken, possibly less formal, contexts'. However, the empirical evidence for this idea is mixed, as witnessed, for example, in Patterson et al.'s (2025) spoken version replications of two earlier, written experiments (Hinterwimmer & Patil, 2022; Patterson & Schumacher, 2021). In their first replication experiment, no difference was found in participants' acceptability ratings between the written and spoken use of proximal and distal demonstratives. In their second experiment, using rather unusual experimental sentences with two demonstrative NPs as in example (4), the use of two distal demonstratives ('*Die … dem*') turned out to be more acceptable in the spoken as compared to the written version. As a tentative suggestion, Patterson et al. (2025) propose that both modality (spoken *vs* written) and register (neutral *vs* informal) played a role here. Specifically, they conjecture that the use of two distal demonstratives may have pushed the spoken sentence from a neutral into a more informal register, while the written equivalent with two distal demonstratives would feel less acceptable because of the unnatural combination of the written modality and informal language use.

(4) Im Konzert gestern Abend hat sich eine Musikerin mit einem Stimmnachbarn gestritten. Die/Diese hat nach dem Konzert kein Wort mehr mit dem/diesem gesprochen. (Patterson et al., 2025, pp. 25–26)

In the concert last night, a (female) musician argued with a (male) colleague. 'That'/'This' did not speak a word anymore with 'that'/'this' after the concert.

This explanation seems in line with experimental evidence for the role of register in German demonstrative use. Concretely, Patil et al. (2020) showed a clear preference in forced-choice tasks for distal demonstrative pronouns in informal contexts and proximal pronouns in formal contexts. However, as these results were obtained on the basis of a small set of similar, constructed examples only, the scope of these 'global' register preferences remains unclear, for example, in view of corpus studies finding relatively large numbers of distal pronouns in formal conversations (Weinert, 2007) and newspaper texts (Bosch et al., 2003). As such, it remains to be seen whether the experimental effects of register hold under more natural circumstances.

In sum, on the basis of existing studies, it seems fair to conclude that the influence of local variables on the German writer's use of proximal *vs* distal demonstratives is limited, while global variables such as modality and register may tentatively be considered to play a more important role in explaining which demonstrative a writer uses in a given sentence or text. Yet, the picture sketched by the existing literature remains incomplete. First, the studies discussed above almost exclusively focused on demonstrative *pronouns* referring to *animate* referents. It remains to be seen whether existing findings generalize to demonstrative NPs and adverbs, and to demonstratives referring to non-animate referents and non-nominal (i.e., abstract, propositional) antecedents (cf. Maes et al., 2022b). Second, the role of global discourse variables such as modality and register deserves to be investigated in a more systematic way, and not simply as a by-product of the study of local variables. In other words, local and global variables should be contrasted within the same study

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and taken into account in the same research design. Third, almost all previous experimental work on demonstratives in German circumvents natural written language production. Most of the theoretical proposals put forward are tested through constructed sentences that are implemented in forced-choice, continuation or rating tasks, where participants are invited to play the part of language expert or evaluator, fully aware of the research focus on these little demonstrative words, while at the same time largely kept in the dark about the type of discourse the sentences would fit in. The writers' behavior in such environments is likely quite different from their behavior in writing full texts in a specific genre given a particular discourse goal. In particular, the role of higher-order discourse variables can hardly be investigated reliably in such restricted experimental contexts. And we know that participants' intuitions on demonstratives not necessarily match the reality of their everyday use (e.g., Piwek et al., 2008).

Finally, even when suggestions on the difference between proximal and distal demonstratives in German are plausible and some results replicate, it remains unclear how to explain them in an overarching theoretical framework. *Why* would proximal demonstratives be strongly associated with writing and formal language, and distal demonstratives with speaking and informal language (Patterson et al., 2025)? To advance our understanding, an experiment is required that is based in an established theoretical framework and allows for systematically analyzing the influence of global *vs* local variables in German writers' naturalistic written demonstrative use.

1.2. The present study

In the present study, we aim at providing a comprehensive account of the difference between proximal and distal demonstrative use in German. Our theoretical starting point is the conceptual framework set out in Peeters et al. (2021). This theoretical account considers demonstrative variance to be dependent on a combination of physical, psychological and referent-intrinsic factors. The relative importance of these factors is influenced by sociocultural parameters, such as personal characteristics of the individual language user and affordances offered by the physical or discourse context. For demonstratives in written discourse, the framework considers the affordances provided by genre experiences as most crucial in explaining demonstrative variation.

Discourse genres are commonly defined in terms of pre-existing assumptions on how writers interact with addressees and referents (Biber, 1993; Weaver & Kintsch, 1991). These assumptions are firstly related to different discourse goals, for example, the goal of the writer to narrate, expose or evaluate (Mar et al., 2021). Lifelong experiences of writing and reading texts given specific goals and intentions likely lead to differences in how language users conceptualize how they use and perceive language across genres. Specifically, demonstratives are considered as ways of expressing default interactional assumptions connected to particular discourse genres. Concretely, proximal demonstratives are seen as expressing the primary focus of a writer on the topic of a text, thus stressing in the first place the tight connection between a writer and the topic they write about. Distal demonstratives, on the other hand, primarily express the interaction of writers with their readers, as they provide discourse referents with a flavor of familiarity (Peeters et al., 2021). As such, it is proposed that an increasing preference for distal demonstrative anaphors should be observed when the role of the addressee becomes more prominent in the discourse

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setting at hand (as in narrative discourse, for instance), while an increasing preference for proximal demonstratives should be observed when writers are focused more on the topic of their text, as in an expository context (Peeters et al., 2021).

Thus far, both corpus research in English (Maes et al., 2022a) and text production experiments in Dutch and Mandarin (Peeters et al., 2025) have confirmed these preferences in writers' demonstrative use by looking at the presence of demonstratives across different genres. Obviously, the genre differences hypothesized here are related to notions like modality and register prominent in the existing German demonstrative literature. It is likely to assume that the narrative genre can be strongly associated with informal spoken and written discourse settings and the expository genre with more formal writing. The conceptual framework outlined above suggests that, underlying these notions, however, one should situate the assumptions related to the differential relations between writer, the referents discussed in their text and their addressee(s) across discourse genres.

Methodologically, in the current study, we replicated the established setup that was used in Peeters et al. (2025) in the study of written demonstrative variation in Dutch and Mandarin. As such, we here asked German respondents to write two short texts in different genres (narrative and expository) based on two different scenarios. This setup allows for contrasting a potential influence of discourse genre with the effect of 'local' variables such as the relative distance between demonstrative and antecedent, and whether the demonstrative is in subject or initial position in the sentence or not. In line with the conceptual framework discussed above, we expected to find an overall preference for proximal demonstratives in expository texts, and for distal demonstratives in narrative texts (Peeters et al., 2021). Under such an account, any meaningful remaining variation in demonstrative use might be attributed to local discourse variables (Maes et al., 2022a). In contrast, if written discourse is strongly associated with proximal demonstrative use across the board in German (Patterson et al., 2025), we should observe substantial proximal demonstrative usage regardless of genre.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 100 native speakers of German (40 female, 59 male, 1 not disclosed; *M* age = 34,8; age range = 21–72 years old) participated in the experiment via the online platform Prolific (www.prolific.com). Sample size was determined a priori in line with power considerations outlined by Peeters et al. (2025). Participants received financial compensation of their time.

2.2. Design and stimuli

Design and stimuli were identical to the (Dutch and Mandarin) experiments reported by Peeters et al. (2025). As such, the study had a 2 (discourse genre: narrative *vs* expository) × 2 (scenario: tree *vs* traffic sign) design. Stimuli consisted of a short written description of a recent event, an image providing the visual environment in which that event was said to have taken place and a table with information in which the main event details were summarized. Two scenarios were used. In the *tree scenario*, it was described that a pine tree fell on a shed in the participant's backyard

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during a storm last weekend, damaging both the shed and the lawn mower inside of it. The shed was described as having been previously constructed by the participant together with their friend Noa. The result of the storm was depicted in the accompanying image. In the *traffic sign scenario*, it was described that the participant woke up in the middle of the night from noise in the street, after which they saw a stop sign being stolen by a group of people that wore coats with the local football team's logo on it. The traffic sign had been placed in the street following a request by the participant and their friend and next-door neighbor Beau. The morning following the theft, the participant was said to have witnessed a cyclist almost being hit by a car in the absence of the traffic sign. An image depicting a stop sign in an urban street environment accompanied this written scenario. Figure 1 shows the exact information provided to the participants, here translated into English. We opted for these two scenarios as they consistently led to the use of demonstratives in other languages (Peeters et al., 2025), while they do not include demonstratives themselves. The full experiment can be found via the OSF link below.

2.3. Procedure

Participants first provided informed consent and basic demographic information (age, gender, educational background, native language). They were informed that the experiment consisted of writing two separate texts on the basis of two different scenarios. The order of presentation of the two scenarios (tree *vs* traffic sign) was fully counterbalanced across participants and each participant saw each scenario only once. For each scenario, participants were instructed to write an email of about 150–200 words explaining what happened, either to their friend (in the narrative condition, for both scenarios) or to the head of calamities of their insurance company in the tree scenario or the local head of police in the traffic sign scenario (in the expository condition). Whether a scenario was part of the narrative or the expository condition for a given participant was counterbalanced across participants. As such, each

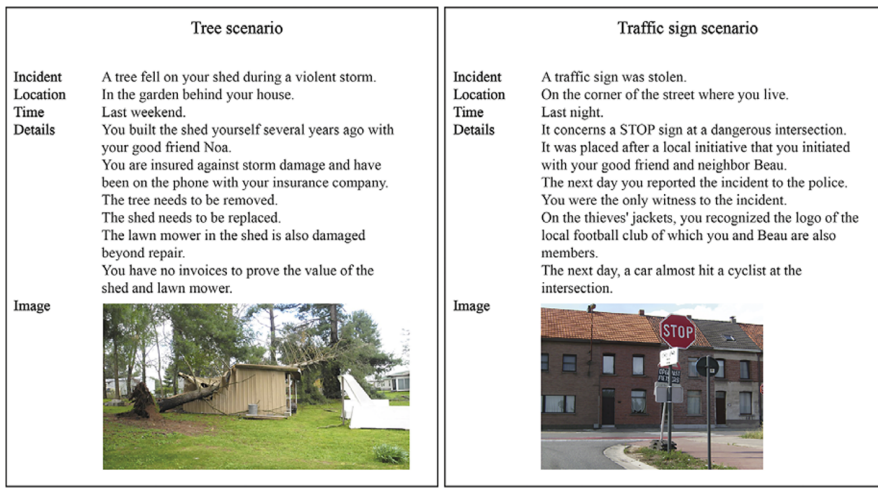


Figure 1. Overview of the main information provided to the participants for each of the two scenarios, here translated into English.

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participant saw two different scenarios and wrote one narrative and one expository email. Besides the addressee of the text, instructions in the narrative and the expository condition were identical except that, in the expository condition, the aim of the text was 'to describe in detail what happened, starting from the relevant facts and events', while in the narrative condition, the aim of the text was described as 'to tell your friend what happened, from your personal perspective'. The experiment was carried out online in a Qualtrics environment (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

2.4. Data coding

We first identified all demonstratives present in the 200 elicited texts. For each demonstrative, we first coded their variant (proximal *vs* distal), number (singular *vs* plural), word class (pronoun/determiner *vs* adverb) and type of use (text-based *vs* situation-based; see below). These data were used for calculating descriptive statistics. As a basis for the statistical analysis, we then coded each demonstrative's position in the clause (clause-initial *vs* clause-non-initial), the grammatical role of the phrase that contained the demonstrative (subject *vs* other) and the position of the antecedent in relation to the demonstrative (same or directly preceding clause *vs* an earlier clause). In line with earlier work (Maes et al., 2022a; Peeters et al., 2025), demonstratives were also considered to be 'in subject position' when they were the subject of a coordinated or subordinated sentence, and demonstratives were also considered 'in sentence-initial position' when they were part of the first syntactic element of a coordinated or subordinated sentence. Also when calculating the distance between demonstrative and antecedent, what we considered a clause or sentence was not based on capital letters and periods, but on grammatical roles (i.e., the presence of a subject and a conjugated verb). The raw and coded datasets, including all elicited texts, and the code book are available on OSF (https://osf.io/xbsdt/).

Two coders coded all data separately. After having coded 200 cases, they discussed the inconsistencies, adapted some of the coding variables and also sharpened some coding instructions. After subsequently finishing the coding of all demonstratives, one coder compared the results for each variable separately and split all inconsistencies into two groups: clear errors and interpretation differences. Clear errors were corrected, and interpretation differences were discussed and resolved. For most variables used in the analysis, all differences were caused by errors: *word class* (12 of 12), *demonstrative variant* (8 of 8), *number* (27 of 29), *grammatical role* (37 of 37) and *demonstrative form* (adverb, pronoun, NP; 52 of 52). For two other variables (*type of use*, $n = 16$ and *type of text-based demonstrative*, $n = 24$), inconsistencies mostly reflected ambiguous demonstratives [*type of use*: *text-based* or *situation-based*; *type of text-based*: *(indirectly) anaphoric* or *first mention*]. For the variable *type of use*, we decided to choose for *text-based* whenever a plausible text-based interpretation could be found, when any antecedent trigger was present in the context or when the demonstrative variant (the proximal one) could reasonably be changed into a distal one without clear semantic change. For inconsistencies on the variable *text-based*, we decided to consider some cases as vague or ambiguous. For the other two variables, *antecedent position* ($n = 67$) and *position in the clause* ($n = 71$), we solved most of the differences by strictly considering clauses only when a conjugated verb was present.

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3. Results

A total of 818 demonstratives were found in the overall dataset. We observed both situation-based and text-based demonstratives (Maes et al., 2022b). Situation-based demonstratives (e.g., *Du glaubst es ja nicht was gestern Nacht hier passiert ist.* ID26[2]. *'You do not believe what happened here yesterday'; Ich bin über diese Mailadresse erreichbar.* ID57. *'I can be reached via this email address'*), which find their interpretation in the writing situation (e.g., the container of the text, the time or place of writing) but outside the written text itself, do not pragmatically allow for variation in selecting either a proximal or distal term. Therefore, these instances (n = 103) were excluded from further analysis. Cataphoric (n = 63; e.g., *Ich hoffe, du genießt deinen Urlaub trotz dieser Nachricht: …* ID750. *'I hope you enjoy your holiday despite this update: …'*) and first-mention (n = 14; e.g., *Am letzten Wochenende hatten wir diesen unglaublich starken Sturm*. ID305. *'Last weekend we had this incredibly strong storm')* demonstratives were excluded as well, as they (by definition) have no antecedent and therefore did not allow for full coding. Obviously, we also excluded all *die-der-das* NPs, as they do not reliably allow one to determine their demonstrative or definite nature, including NPs with a likely demonstrative interpretation (e.g., *Aber in dem Fall ist das Stopp Schild super wichtig. 'But in that case, the stop sign is very important'*).

Application of the exclusion criteria resulted in a remaining dataset of 612 German text-based anaphoric demonstratives that entered the analysis, which included 202 proximal and 410 distal demonstratives (excluding one case of *jener*). Out of these 612 demonstratives, 245 (208 singular; 37 plural) were used as a pronoun, 131 (115 singular; 16 plural) as a determiner (all proximal) ('*dies-*', cf. English *this*, *these*) and 236 (29 proximal, 207 distal) as an adverb ('*hier*', '*da-*', cf. English *here*, *there*). Table 1 shows the distribution of demonstratives as a function of the position of the antecedent in relation to the demonstrative (same/directly preceding *vs* an earlier clause), the grammatical role of the phrase that contained the demonstrative (subject or not), the position of the demonstrative in the clause (clause-initial or not) and the two text genres.

Table 1. Number of proximal *vs* distal demonstratives observed across the two levels of each of the four categorical predictors in the data that were statistically analyzed (n = 612)

	Proximal	Distal	Total
Position antecedent ('distance')			
Close (same or directly preceding clause)	98	261	359
Remote (an earlier clause)	104	149	253
Grammatical role			
Subject	70	142	212
Other	132	268	400
Clause position			
Clause-initial	80	191	271
Clause-non-initial	122	219	341
Genre			
Expository	146	113	259
Narrative	56	297	353

[2]Examples provided here are followed by their identification number in the dataset.

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The descriptive statistics in Table 1 numerically confirm that writers preferred to use proximal demonstratives in expository texts and distal demonstratives in narrative texts. In addition, a stronger preference for distal (*vs* proximal) demonstrative use can be numerically observed for close relative to more remote antecedents. Besides an overall preference for distal demonstratives, no strong influence of the grammatical role of the demonstrative phrase that contained the demonstrative or the position of the demonstrative in the sentence is expected based on the descriptive statistics.

To test for the predictive power of genre in relation to local discourse-structural variables sensitive to the accessibility of referents (i.e., distance, grammatical role and clause position), we carried out an overall binary logistic regression analysis. The binary dependent variable in this analysis was the use of a proximal (German equivalents of *this*, *these*, *here*) or distal (German equivalents of *that*, *those*, *there*) demonstrative. To test our theoretical predictions, we opted for a hierarchical regression approach to data analysis (forced entry), comparing a model (Model 1) that included the three categorical 'local' accessibility-based factors (distance, grammatical role, clause position) to a model (Model 2) that additionally included genre (expository *vs* narrative) as a categorical predictor.

It was observed that Model 1 explained significantly more variance in the data compared to a baseline, intercept-only model, χ^2 (3) = 14.44, p = .002, R^2 = .023 (Cox-Snell), .032 (Nagelkerke). As such, the model explained about 2% (Cox-Snell) to 3% (Nagelkerke) of variance in the writers' choice of demonstrative type (proximal *vs* distal). Out of the three individual 'local' predictors, only the distance between demonstrative and antecedent significantly explained variance in the data (p = .002). This finding confirms that participants used more distal (*vs* proximal) demonstratives when the antecedent was close (i.e., in the same or directly preceding clause) to the demonstrative (*vs* when the antecedent was more remote). Model 2, in which genre was added as an additional predictor, explained significantly more variance in the data compared to Model 1, χ^2 (4) = 157.30, p < .001, R^2 = .23 (Cox-Snell), .32 (Nagelkerke). As such, adding genre to the model led to about 21% (Cox-Snell) to 29% (Nagelkerke) of additional variance in the writers' choice of demonstrative type (proximal *vs* distal) being explained by this model compared to the model that did not take into account the genre of the texts. Table 2 shows that the genre of the text indeed

Table 2. Logistic models of predictors of anaphoric demonstrative variation in German (95% BCa bootstrap confidence intervals based on 1000 samples in brackets)

	b	Sig. (2-tailed)	Lower 95% CI	Odds ratio	Upper 95% CI
Model 1					
Constant	.97 [.65, 1.29]	<.001			
Distance	−.59 [−.93, −.22]	.002	.39	.56	.79
Gramm. role	.22 [−.22, .66]	.293	.82	1.24	1.90
Clause pos.	−.26 [−.67, .13]	.196	.51	.77	1.17
Model 2					
Constant	2.13 [1.75, 2.56]	<.001			
Distance	−1.20 [−1.63, −.75]	<.001	.20	.30	.46
Gramm. role	.86 [.35, 1.38]	<.001	1.44	2.35	3.84
Clause pos.	−.45 [−.93, −.00]	.06	.40	.64	1.01
Genre	−2.40 [−2.94, −1.99]	<.001	.06	.09	.14

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significantly explained variance in the data, statistically confirming that writers used more proximal demonstratives in expository texts and more distal demonstratives in narrative texts. Also in this final model, the distance between demonstrative and antecedent significantly explained some variance, as in the earlier model. In light of the large difference in explanatory power of the two models, this predictor arguably had a significant but small influence. The same holds for the grammatical role of the phrase that contained the demonstrative (subject or not). With much variance explained by genre, there was a slight preference for writers to use a distal (rather than a proximal) demonstrative when the demonstrative was in non-subject (*vs* in subject) position in a phrase.

As the lion share of previous experimental work on written German demonstratives has exclusively focused on demonstrative pronouns (e.g., Bader & Portele, 2019; Bader et al., 2022; Bosch et al., 2003; Bosch et al., 2007; Bosch & Umbach, 2007 Hinterwimmer et al., 2020; Kaiser, 2011; Portele & Bader, 2016; Weinert, 2011), we replicated the above analysis but restricted the dataset to include demonstrative pronouns only. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the demonstrative pronouns (n = 245) in this restricted dataset. Besides the overall preference for distal demonstrative use, the clear role of genre stands out again numerically.

In the analysis on the demonstrative pronouns, Model 1 explained significantly more variance in the data compared to a baseline, intercept-only model, χ^2 (3) = 10.75, p = .013, R^2 = .043 (Cox-Snell), .063 (Nagelkerke). As such, the model explained about 4% (Cox-Snell) to 6% (Nagelkerke) of variance in the writers' choice of demonstrative type (proximal *vs* distal). Out of the three individual 'local' predictors, again only the distance between demonstrative and antecedent significantly explained variance in the data (p = .013), meaning that participants used relatively more proximal (*vs* distal) demonstrative pronouns when the antecedent was close (i.e., in the same or directly preceding clause) to the demonstrative (*vs* when the antecedent was more remote). Note that the directionality of this effect was indeed opposite to the finding in the overall dataset as reported above, as reflected in the opposite polarity of the corresponding b values. Model 2, in which genre was added as an additional predictor, explained significantly more variance in the data compared to Model 1, χ^2 (4) = 118.71, p < .001, R^2 = .38 (Cox-Snell), .56 (Nagelkerke). As such, adding genre to the model led to no less than about 34% (Cox-Snell) to 50%

Table 3. Number of proximal and distal *pronominal* demonstratives observed across the two levels of each of the four categorical predictors

	Proximal	Distal	Total
Position antecedent ('distance')			
Close (same or directly preceding clause)	51	117	168
Remote (an earlier clause)	14	63	77
Grammatical role			
Subject	37	129	166
Other	28	51	79
Clause position			
Clause-initial	38	123	161
Clause-non-initial	27	57	84
Genre			
Expository	53	18	71
Narrative	12	162	174

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(Nagelkerke) of additional variance in the writers' choice of demonstrative pronoun type (proximal *vs* distal) being explained by this model compared to the model that did not take into account the genre of the texts. Table 4 shows that the genre of the text indeed significantly explained variance in the data, statistically confirming that writers used more proximal demonstratives in expository texts and more distal demonstratives in narrative texts. With genre added to the model, none of the 'local' variables significantly explained any variance in the data anymore. Figure 2 visually illustrates the influence of genre on German writers' demonstrative use.

4. Discussion

In this study, we asked German participants to write emails to a friend and a local authority using scenarios stimulating natural conditions for writers to produce narrative and expository texts, respectively. Participants relatively more often used proximal demonstrative pronouns (*dies-*), determiners (*dies-*) and adverbs (*hier*) in their expository texts, and distal demonstrative pronouns (*der*, *die*, *das*) and adverbs (*da-*) in their narrative texts, thereby confirming genre as the main factor explaining demonstrative choice in German. As such, the present study shows that German writers' demonstrative use aligns with earlier corpus-based and experimental observations in English, Mandarin and Dutch (Maes et al., 2022a; Peeters et al., 2025). It can also be seen as a confirmation of suggestions made in previous studies about the

Table 4. Logistic models of predictors of anaphoric demonstrative variation in German, including only demonstrative pronouns (95% BCa bootstrap confidence intervals based on 1000 samples in brackets)

	B	Sig. (2-tailed)	Lower 95% CI	Odds ratio	Upper 95% CI
Model 1					
Constant	1.10 [.70, 1.58]	<.001			
Distance	.84 [.19, 1.64]	.015	1.16	2.33	4.68
Gramm. role	−.63 [−1.42, .10]	.083	.26	.53	1.11
Clause pos.	−.25 [−.94, .57]	.497	.37	.78	1.65
Model 2					
Constant	3.04 [2.40, 4.38]	<.001			
Distance	−.52 [−1.86, .51]	.291	.21	.60	1.66
Gramm. role	−.32 [−1.64, .79]	.561	.27	.73	1.95
Clause pos.	−.24 [−1.47, 1.02]	.650	.29	.78	2.13
Genre	−3.86 [−5.32, −3.12]	<.001	.01	.02	.05

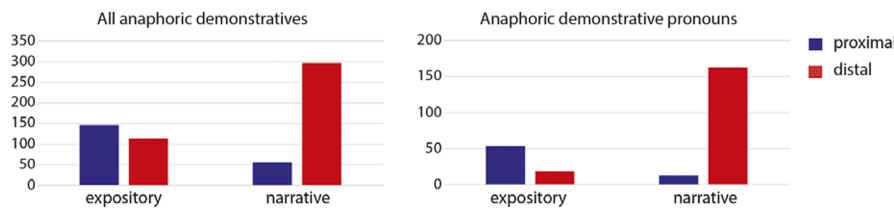


Figure 2. For all anaphoric demonstratives (left panel, n = 612) and only the demonstrative pronouns (right panel, n = 245), the number of proximal (in blue) and distal (in red) demonstratives observed across the expository vs narrative conditions.

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role of global discourse variables in driving demonstrative choice in written German discourse (Patil et al., 2020; Patterson et al., 2025).

We observed only a minor influence of local, structural variables that could be related to the assumed prominence or accessibility of discourse referents (cf. Ariel, 1990; Botley & McEnery, 2001; Kirsner, 1979). In our analysis on demonstrative pronouns, the relative distance between demonstrative and antecedent explained a small proportion of the variance in writers' demonstrative use, but only when genre was not taken into account in the analysis. Interestingly, proximal demonstrative pronouns preferred close (*vs* remote) antecedents, while the opposite was true when all demonstratives (pronouns, determiners, adverbs) were included in the analysis.

The free writing situation used in our experiment did not allow us to directly test demonstrative variation in more refined configurations of local variables as discussed in the Introduction, such as structural (e.g., order of mention, clause position), syntactic (subject *vs* object) and semantic (implicit causality, semantic roles, referent animacy) influences. The carefully constructed sentences as used in earlier rating and sentence completion experiments simply did not (systematically) show up in our data, nor do our texts allow for a systematic analysis of demonstratives used to refer to more *vs* less persistent topics. This raises the question to what extent constructed examples in previous work represent everyday language use.

Nevertheless, the genre-based theoretical framework we adopted in the present study may well be used to shed more light on earlier acceptability differences in examples like (5) and (6), taken from Patil et al. (2023, p.14). Crucially, the second sentence in these examples contains an evaluation of the content of the first sentence. Unlike the proximal demonstrative, the distal demonstrative in these cases is able to refer to the discourse topic in the first sentence, thereby breaking the often confirmed rule of demonstratives avoiding to refer to the most prominent referent (e.g., Bosch et al., 2003; Portele & Bader, 2016).

(5) Maria hat Peter geohrfeigt. Die /? Diese hat sich einfach nicht im Griff!

Maria slapped Peter. She_distal /? She_proximal just cannot control herself!

(6) Volker hat Anja einen Donut vom Bäcker mitgebracht. Der /? Dieser ist wirklich ein fürsorglicher Mensch!

Volker brought Anja a donut from the baker. He_distal /? He_proximal really is a caring person!

Patil et al. (2023) offer experimental evidence for these acceptability differences and propose a local prominence-based theoretical solution following Hinterwimmer and Bosch (2016, 2018). In their view, the most prominent referent in these examples is not the one based on local structure or semantics (i.e., the discourse topics 'Maria' and 'Volker'), but the external 'perspectival center' of the speaker/narrator evaluating the content of the first sentence. Distal demonstratives turn out to be sensitive to such perspectival centers, which means they can refer to the (less prominent) discourse topic (i.e., *Maria, Volker*), while still obeying the rule of avoiding reference to the most prominent referent (i.e., the perspectival center). Proximal demonstratives are arguably not sensitive to such perspectival centers, and thus, when they pick out the discourse topic as their referent, they break this rule, resulting in low acceptability.

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This elegant theoretical solution leaves open the question of why the prominence scales for the two demonstrative pronouns would be different (Patil et al., 2023, p.12). The genre framework we presented may be helpful here. Although the evaluative stance of the narrator can be described in terms of local discourse dynamics (i.e., the establishment of an external perspectival center), it is clear that the phenomenon is typically (though not exclusively) part of the toolbox of the narrative genre. The use of a distal demonstrative in situations like these can be seen as a pre-eminent device for writers to connect to their addressee, to enrich stories, add sidelines and express the position of the narrator. Creating and acknowledging a bond between writer and addressee is one of the major pragmatic functions of distal demonstratives, again, particularly in narrative contexts (Maes et al., 2022a, pp. 6–8). It has long been established that these solidarity-type demonstratives 'are perhaps the most curious semantically, since the distance marker that seems to establish emotional closeness between speaker and addressee' (Lakoff, 1974, p. 351). The German evaluative examples commonly represent this pragmatic function. In the present study, the traffic sign scenario offered a typical occasion for writers to not only convey the facts, but also provide their own evaluation of who stole the stop sign and why. It resulted in a handful of cases like example (7), all in the narrative condition. Changing the distal forms into proximal ones is not impossible, but less acceptable, and it would strip the fragment of its typical narrative flavor.

(7) Ich glaube, das war vielleicht der Max oder der Holger. *Die bauen immer so eine Scheiße.* Vielleicht, haben die sich gedacht, lass uns das Ding mal mitgehen lassen, … (ID350-351)

I think it might have been Max or Holger. Those are always pulling of this kind of crap. Maybe those thought, let us just steal the thing.

In explaining demonstrative variance, we considered writer-referent-addressee assumptions based on discourse goals as primary variable, and we used *genre* rather than *register* as the most appropriate denominator capturing these relational assumptions. In defining genre as well as register, discourse goals and social relations between communication partners are pivotal (e.g., Biber & Conrad, 2012). However, compared to other (spoken) language varieties, the written mode is more dependent on conventional 'genre' structures and less dependent on direct interaction and situational 'register' conditions. Earlier genre studies (Maes et al., 2022a; Peeters et al., 2025) show that specific demonstrative variants (proximal *vs* distal) are pervasive linguistic features of specific discourse genres (e.g., expository *vs* narrative), irrespective of specific register variables also known to be strong drivers of demonstrative variance, like the preference for proximal demonstratives in written or formal discourse (Patil et al., 2020; Patterson et al., 2025), or the use of distal demonstratives with familiar communication partners (with 'familiar *that*' demonstratives as a case in point, Gundel et al., 1993)[3]. As such, in future work it would be interesting to compare the effect of genre and register more directly, for instance, by eliciting or

[3]Recognitional demonstratives are always noun phrases, never pronouns. Therefore, exceptionally, in German, they are argued to be proximal rather than distal (Himmelmann 1996; Schumacher & von Heusinger, 2026) because of the absence of a regular distal demonstrative determiner, as mentioned in the Introduction.

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analyzing texts that are made to orthogonally differ in genre (e.g., narrative *vs* expository) and register (e.g., formal *vs* informal; familiar *vs* unfamiliar addressee) so as to determine the independent influence of each of these global discourse variables.

All in all, the present study shows that discourse genre predicts demonstrative use in German text. As in face-to-face spoken communication, language users actively take into account the relation to their addressee, which is reflected in the type of demonstrative they prefer to use in a given discourse setting. While experimental studies across languages so far point in the same direction when it comes to the effect of discourse genre on written demonstrative use, future research on more complex (e.g., three-term or even richer) demonstrative systems may shed light on how the selection of a demonstrative may also partially differ across languages in written text.

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