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Language is more than that

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Language is more than *that*



Valedictory address delivered by
prof. dr. Fons Maes

Fons Maes (1954) is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Communication and Cognition at the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, Tilburg University.

He studied Germanic Languages at KULeuven (1972-76), worked there as monitor (1976-77) and language proficiency teacher (1977-1983), as a teacher of Dutch in Turnhout (1977-1982), and at the translation college in Gent (1984-2002).

He has been affiliated with Tilburg University since 1983, where he also obtained his PhD in 1991. From 1983 to 1993 he worked at the Language Center, then in the Discourse Studies Group (1993-2002). Between 2002 and 2019, he was professor and head of the section, the capacity group and the department of Communication and Cognition, successively. He has been retired since June 2020.

He studies the interaction of visual and verbal sign systems in human communication. Topics include the production of referential expressions, verbal and visual metaphors, navigational communication, information visualization and the use of visuals in various application domains.



LANGUAGE IS MORE THAN *THAT*

PROF. DR. FONDS MAES

Lecture

delivered in shortened form by Fons Maes on the occasion of his farewell as professor in the department Communication and Cognition at Tilburg University on Friday 18 March 2022.

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Introduction

Only computers can tell us in 39 minutes what has happened in 39 years: give them a curriculum vitae and they give you a summary back (Figure 1): interesting topics in the field of language and communication, activities of education, research and management. But what strikes most is the smile of job satisfaction caused by many colleagues and students. More on that in part 2.

First I take you to a seemingly small topic in the field of language and communication, the use of the demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that* and more specifically to one question: why and when do we use *this*, why and when *that*?



Figure 1 – Fons Maes' resume (Wordart.com)

Part 1

Language is more than *that*

This solves the riddle of the title: language is more than *that*, it is at least a question of *this* and *that*. But there is more: *this* and *that* tell us a lot about the complexity of our communication behavior. That way, the study of *this* and *that* shows the fluid boundaries between linguistics, discourse studies and communication science and demonstrates the lasting importance of language and linguistic theory in the expanding research landscape of language and communication. There is also a personal connection with demonstratives: I studied them in two periods: in the late 1980s when I was writing my dissertation and in this Covid19 quarantine, two periods with ample research time. And finally, an outsider may well muse afterwards: “I would never have thought that so much can be said about such a small topic”.

So, demonstratives as a topic. In Dutch we have the two words *dit* (*this*) and *dat* (*that*), with two variants, *deze* and *die*, which we use with plural and with masculine and feminine nouns. *Dit/deze* and *dat/die* carry the basic meanings of near and far respectively.

There must be something interesting about those words. Too many academics worry about them¹. Demonstratives raise not only philosophical questions about how language is connected with reality, but also a multitude of linguistic and psychological questions, about their origin and evolution, their distribution in the languages of the world, their grammatical behavior, their meaning, the way we produce and process them and their function². I will limit myself to one simple question about the function of demonstratives: why and when *this*, why and when *that*? I start from this claim: in the difference between *this* and *that*, you see in detail the foundations of human language and communication. Foundations that make communication, no matter how simple or complex, successful.

When can we consider communication to be successful? For this occasion, I see four necessary conditions:

- When we succeed in combining different sign systems in an appropriate way. We call this ‘multimodality’ in technical terms.
- When we are able to share attention with the addressee.
- When we are able to build knowledge and take into account common knowledge we have with the other.
- When we succeed in building, maintaining and orchestrating a social relationship with the other³.

¹ Demonstratives are studied in philosophy, neuro- and cognitive psychology, learning psychology, cognitive science, cultural science and of course in all subdisciplines of linguistics.

² These questions are answered in the disciplines of historical and comparative linguistics, syntax and semantics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics and discourse studies.

³ Unfortunately communication can also be successful in orchestrating toxic social relations.

In the way in which we use *this* and *that*, you can see in miniature how those four conditions guide our communicative behavior.

Demonstratives in languages of the world

Demonstratives have a number of characteristics that make them important and remarkable⁴. First, we use them often; they are very *frequent*. As an estimation, one out of two hundred words we use is a demonstrative⁵. Half a percent seems little, but is a lot if you consider that we as adult language users have about 40,000 words at our disposal⁶.

Demonstratives are also *universal*. We have an estimated 7000 languages in the world⁷. It is difficult for linguists to agree on features of language that apply to all those 7000 languages. Even for obvious things like the existence of nouns and verbs convincing counterexamples can be given⁸. But so far no examples have been found of languages without demonstratives. Until further notice, they are therefore universal and that is a strong indication that they are crucial.

Demonstratives are a frustration for etymologists, who like to discover the origin of words: demonstratives are rarely if ever *derived* from another word and are often very *short* and *basic*⁹.

Demonstratives are *age-old*: in the literature we find convincing arguments to believe that they played an important role in the development of language in the human species¹⁰.

Demonstratives also show up *early* in the language development of each child, in the one-word phase between 1 and 2 year¹¹.

⁴ These characteristics are applicable to spoken languages, not necessarily to the use of demonstratives in sign or written language.

⁵ This estimation is based on a large corpus of three types of written texts analyzed in Maes et al. (2022).

⁶ A 20-year-old American knows an average of 42,000 words, ranging from 27,000 to 52,000 (Brysbaert et al. 2016).

⁷ www.ethnologue.com. Note that we have an in-depth analysis of demonstratives of only a small part of all languages (10%?).

⁸ Evans & Levinson (2009).

⁹ Again, we can only make this claim carefully, it is more sensible to say that demonstratives are conservative in terms of their morphology, as Heine et al. (2020) argue.

¹⁰ Tomasello (2008).

¹¹ Clark (1978).

Finally, languages always have *more than one* demonstrative variant. In Dutch we have two variants, like in English, French or Italian¹². German has two variants, but one (*jene(r)*) is not used often. Many languages have an intermediate form, such as in Spanish (*ese*) or Japanese (*are*). And there are interesting exceptions of languages in which demonstratives indicate whether an object is above or below, whether it is visible or known or not¹³. These are often languages without a library or internet, i.e. languages that fully interact with the real world, instead of investing in written or digital communication¹⁴.

Demonstratives are thus frequent, universal, age-old, primary, basic and never alone. The vast majority of language users in the world have two variants: something for close by, something for further away. What can we achieve in communication with this parsimonious dichotomy? Well, in these two grains of language you see the whole world of communication¹⁵. Or less metaphorically: in the difference between *this* and *that* you see the four basic mechanisms of human communication. They make the variation between *this* and *that* more complicated than we would expect.

¹² Don't think that those dual demonstrative systems function in the same way. Differences are described in hundreds of publications.

¹³ For example, the language of the Jahai, which distinguishes eight variants (Burenhult 2018).

¹⁴ Whether rich oral traditions result in rich demonstrative systems is (my own) speculation. But it is consistent with the observation that in certain 'developed' languages the demonstrative system gradually shrinks (e.g. English *here-there-yonder*, or Dutch *hier-daar-ginds/ginder*).

¹⁵ I adapt this metaphor (via Cooperrider ms) from William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*.

LANGUAGE



GESTURE



OBJECT



Figure 2 – The Basic Function of Demonstratives

Combining sign systems - multimodality

We use different channels to communicate like talking, writing or pointing. Combining channels is what we call with a technical term *multimodality*. Demonstratives are prototypes of multimodal communication. They themselves have little meaning, unlike words like 'table' or 'walk'. They receive meaning through the entities they refer to. Figure 2 shows the basic function of demonstratives: language that refers to a visible object accompanied by a hand gesture. All three sign systems contribute. It seems simple, but computer linguists in the 1970s needed quite a bit of work to make computers understand this simple act. Figure 3 shows the Media Lab of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the late 1970s, crammed with high-tech equipment. The researcher in the chair points to the world map on the wall, with a finger full of sensors and instructs the computer to *put* the purple circle (*that*) where the finger points at (*there*). At the time, the computer needed two rooms full of equipment to understand that/*that*¹⁶.

In this multimodal situation, the difference between *this* and *that* seems to be simple: we use *this* for something spatially near, *that* for far. Yet we often don't, we use *this* more often when we want to give more emphasis or be more precise regardless of distance. For example, if you give people a laser pointer to talk about an object at a distance, they have a strong tendency to use *this*: their close involvement with the topic is more important

¹⁶ Bolt (1980).

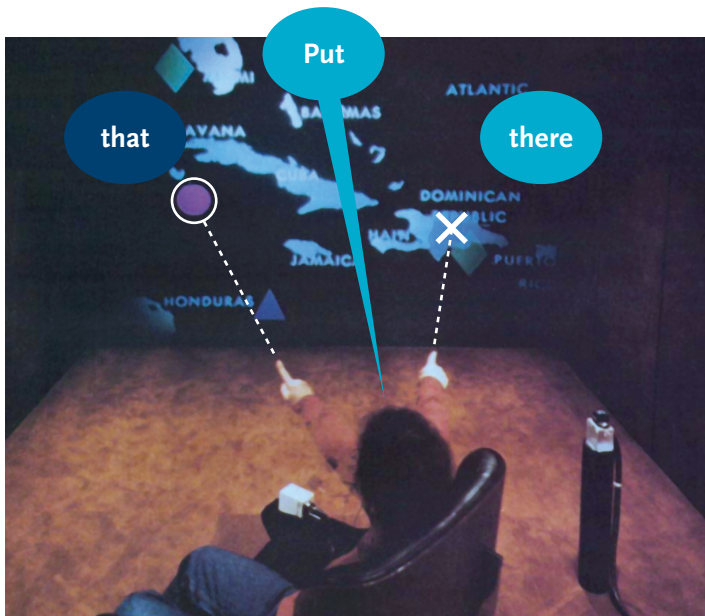


Figure 3 – MIT Media Lab

than the physical distance from the object¹⁷. So, the simplest use of *this* and *that* is more complicated already.

Sharing attention

Using *this* and *that* becomes more intriguing when there is a conversational partner around. Demonstratives seek the attention of the other and therefore may have been one of the first forms of human communication some 100.000 years ago¹⁸. Shared attention not only creates a shared physical space, but also a feeling of joint presence. That strongly influences the use of *this* and *that*. If you ask speakers to identify objects that are at different distances from the speakers, they are perfectly able to use demonstrative variants based on their distance meaning: the closer, the more *this*, the further away, the more *that*. But when you ask two people to put together a puzzle as in Figure 4, they prefer to refer to puzzle pieces using *this* regardless of distance¹⁹. Many experiments show that demonstratives are used to create a shared attention space rather than to express distance²⁰.

¹⁷ Cooperrider (2016).

¹⁸ The combination of an arm gesture and a demonstrative may well have been the first language act of the human species (Tomasello 2008; Arbib 2012). This is not to say that pointing is the only form of grabbing attention. In certain cultures, the head, nose or lips are more important pointing instruments than the arm (Cooperrider et al. 2018).

¹⁹ The first study was conducted by Coventry et al. (2008), the second one by Shin et al. (2020) with a puzzle situation similar to Figure 4.

²⁰ See for example Peeters (2015) and Peeters et al. (2021).

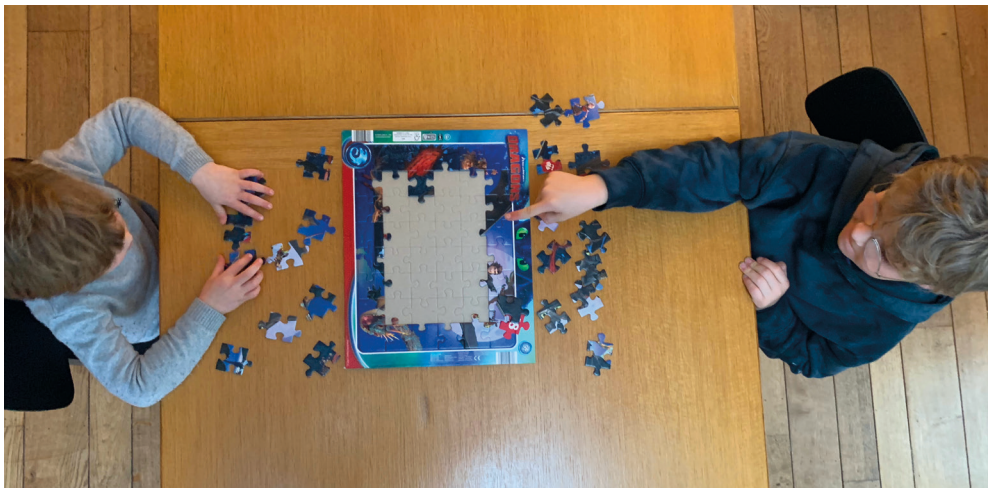


Figure 4 – Imitation of the puzzle situation

Building knowledge and common ground

Shared attention is an important block to build shared knowledge and common ground. Demonstratives play a major role when children use language to build knowledge about the world. The kitchen situation in Figure 5 illustrates one of the most complex problems of language philosophers: the indeterminacy of the meaning of words²¹. A child, with no knowledge of Alpro's cherry-flavored vegetable yogurt, asks *what is that*²²; a parent in the background tries his best to answer what the child might want to know: some kind of yogurt, something sweet, the picture of a cherry, the Alpro brand. A puzzle for the child, because of the indeterminacy of meaning, but for children, the perfect way to get to know the world via language. By repeating the *what is that* question over and over, they gradually see patterns, learn to compare, categorize and name objects.

Demonstratives also help us understand what we or our conversational partners know or don't know. Take the four sentences in Figure 6. In the first sentence it is clear that we both know about the accident, in the second it is only the listener, in the third only the speaker and in the fourth neither of us knows. The demonstrative thus gives us information about common knowledge. In Dutch we use the same signal word, but other languages, such as Andoke, an indigenous language in Colombia, have specific demonstrative variants for

²¹ Quine (1960) explains this phenomenon using the situation of an indigenous hunter shouting *gavagai* to an interested (language) researcher when a rabbit passes.

²² In this case, the child asked *Was ist das?*



Figure 5 – Demonstratives and the indeterminacy of meaning

each of these situations²³. So again, the use of the demonstrative variant *that* has nothing to do with distance, but everything with what we assume as knowledge in our listeners²⁴.

Orchestrating social relations

While communicating, we not only acquire knowledge, we also build a complete social life. This means we must take into account not only the knowledge of ourselves and others, but also what we and others think, think we know, believe, find and feel, a wide range of attitudes and affective states.

We know that pointing children in general will grow into adults who are able to reason about what others think, believe and feel. This does not mean we always enjoy this capacity. How often have we been angry “because we thought that they thought that we were speaking ill of them”, while this was not true²⁵?

And here again, demonstratives are excellent ways to give subtle signals about what we think and feel about someone or something. When people are asked to complete arbitrary words out of context with either *this* or *that*, there appears to be a curious agreement. *This* is preferred with words for friendly, innocent and manageable things, while *that* is chosen more often with words for tricky, dangerous and less manageable things²⁶. Again, it has nothing to do with physical distance, but with the positive or negative emotional value that we attach to things.

²³ Evans et al. (2018).

²⁴ Such cases of *familiar or recognitional that* have been studied extensively (e.g. Gundel et al. 1993, Himmelmann 1996).

²⁵ The ability to attribute mental states to others is known as *theory of mind*. Demonstratives are considered important tools in developing this ability (Rubio-Fernandez 2020).

²⁶ Rocca et al. (2019).

	Who knows?	Dutch	Andoke
Do you still feel the consequences of <i>that</i> accident?	both	dat	b-
Did I hear something about <i>that</i> accident?	I don't, you do	dat	k-/d-
Do you know the joke of <i>that</i> accident?	I do, not you	dat	ke-
<i>That</i> accident?	none of us	dat	ba-

Figure 6 – Demonstratives and Shared Knowledge

But in context and with a listener involved, it is again more complicated. Take the four examples in Figure 7. All four have the same distant variant. But it has a different effect. On the left it has a negative connotation and expresses the mental distance between speaker and topic²⁷, on the right it has a positive connotation and expresses the connection the speaker wants to make with his listener.

In summary, in the behavior of *this* and *that* we see the basic mechanisms of human communication: combining sign systems, attracting and sharing attention, building knowledge and common ground and orchestrating social relations.

And what about demonstratives in discourse?

Thus far, we discussed demonstratives in spoken language used to point at entities outside of language. When we write or read language, there is no direct reference and pointing to objects outside language. So you might think that we use much less demonstratives in written text compared to spoken language, just like there are less snowblowers in Mali than in Sweden. But that's not right at all. Demonstratives are active and frequent in written language. Magritte shows us that demonstratives can point within one piece of art (Figure

²⁷ *Die/that* can also express positive mental distance, for example when you express your admiration for your great, but unattainable hero.



Figure 7 – Demonstratives and Negative and Positive Connotations

8). But Shakespeare's famous phrase shows how common it is to use demonstratives to refer to something we've just written or said²⁸: "*To be or not to be. That is the question.*"

What about the variation between *this* and *that* in discourse? One answer may be: we use *this* to refer to something that we have just written or said and *that* when we refer to something further away in text²⁹. But that is not how it is, as you can see in Shakespeare's example³⁰. *This* or *that* seems to make little difference in written language. For example, we recently asked respondents to complete fragments in which one word (*this* or *that*) was missing and found a large variation in their answers as well as confusion, because they felt to have no basis for choosing one word or the other. If Shakespeare would have chosen *this*, there is a good chance that we would consider that version completely normal. Yet you will find hundreds of studies in which subtle differences are attributed to *this* and *that* in discourse³¹. The problem of these studies is that they focus on demonstratives with a clear *this* or *that* preference, leaving the question open: what about the bulk of the cases for which it apparently doesn't matter much?

²⁸ Demonstratives can also refer to something that follows in discourse.

²⁹ Ariel (1988).

³⁰ Maes et al. (in review).

³¹ Peeters et al. (2021).



Figure 8 – René Magritte, *La Trahison des Images*, 1928-9. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

This is the answer we propose: when we write and read, we have a clear goal in mind. As a writer we want to tell, explain or evaluate, while each of these goals corresponds to reader expectations built up over the years in countless reading experiences. These expectations concern the topic of the text, language use, style or structure³². But the common denominator, we believe, is the expectation that each discourse goal comes with a specific social relationship between writer, reader and topic and demonstratives are an expression of that relationship.

We explored this by analyzing the behavior of thousands of demonstratives in three types of texts: expository texts from Wikipedia, narrative news articles from Associated Press, and evaluative book reviews from Amazon (Figure 9)³³. In expository texts, the primary relationship is between the writer and his subject, a relationship that is reflected in a preference (80%) for *this* demonstratives on Wikipedia³⁴. News items are narrative and put more emphasis on the relationship between the writer and the reader. The preference for *that* demonstratives (79%) in news reports expresses the writer-reader relationship³⁵. In evaluating texts you see both movements: a writer taking responsibility for a judgment (*this*), but at the same time trying to win the reader's goodwill (*that*), resulting in a more balanced distribution (40% vs. 60%).

³² Clinton et al. (2020); Mar et al. (2020).

³³ Maes et al. (in review).

³⁴ As well as in student essays (Petch-Tyson 2000; Zhang 2015) and scientific articles (Gray 2010).

³⁵ Explaining also why *that* is more frequent in spoken interaction.

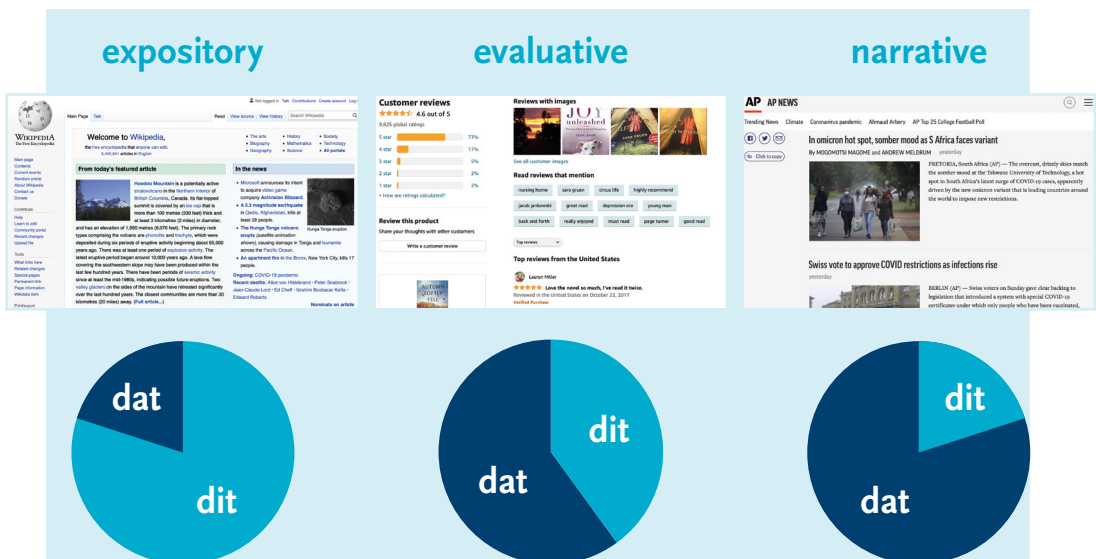


Figure 9 – Variation by text type

In sum, discourse goals connected with expectations about the social relationship between writer-subject-reader and demonstratives that subtly express that social relationship.

Part 2

Language is more
than *this* and *that*

Demonstratives mean a lot in communication and they can fill an academic career. At the same time, *this* and *that* are just a drop in a rising communication ocean.

Backward progress, 20 years later

About twenty years ago, I presented at this same place Figure 10 as a metaphor of how digital technology is moving the human species forward³⁶. We are in the kingdom of Lesotho, traveling with a guide who points in the valley at the growing share of zinc roofs, alongside older thatched roofs. That is progress, he says, and it shows you are wealthy. His parents recently also have a zinc roof, but experience more disadvantages than advantages: too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter and a thunderous concert every time it rains. A form of *backward progress*, which was reflected in many early digital applications at the time.

It's not hard to see huge progress in digital technology two decades later, but equally well curious forms of backward progress on each of the points we discussed above.

Technology makes our communication behavior more visual, interactive and *multimodal* by the day. Anyone who thought to see a gap in the market three decades ago by writing a book on instructive texts has long since been overtaken by YouTube³⁷. But the more sophisticated visual technology gets, the more our view becomes clouded by deep-fake videos, memes and manipulated pictures. *Sharing attention* is more and more replaced

³⁶ Maes (2004).

³⁷ Some yellowing copies of Maes et al. (1996) are still available free of charge from the authors.



Figure 10 – Roofs in Lesotho

by *seeking* attention. We have replaced the index finger with our thumb, the real one with which we can swipe someone in a lonely existence or a loving relationship and the digital thumb, which can be as deadly as in the time of the Roman emperors³⁸. We *share knowledge* in all formats, while *building* solid knowledge is becoming more difficult by the day. The information fog makes us insecure rather than well-informed. Serious information ends up more and more behind pay walls, while the nonsense continues to circulate freely and for free.

Digital technology has had the greatest impact on our *social relations*. Communication is becoming more and more social, but also more socially compelling. Even an eBook reader cannot escape social obligations: create an account, write a review, receive recommendations. Simple language experiments make it clear that social relations are worth more to us than a clear view of the world. When asked to fill in the missing word in a sentence like *Hillary criticized Donald because.... was mad*, language users will strongly prefer *he* over *she*. Donald was mad, which caused Hillary to criticize him³⁹. That's how we understand the verb *criticize*; that is how we understand the world of giving and receiving criticism. But once we know that the sentence is about Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, supporters of the latter will more often make the other choice: in their eyes Donald cannot be crazy⁴⁰. This shows that attitudes and convictions obfuscate a clear view of language and the world. Moreover, being well-informed is not enough as an antidote. If you ask equally well-informed Republicans and Democrats in the US to make a risk assessment of the climate threat, Republicans will systematically estimate the risk lower than Democrats⁴¹. They use more knowledge to develop better counterarguments. Fortunately, there is a small light in the tunnel. The more people are interested in and curious about science, the less they are sensitive to these attitudinal biases⁴². But this interesting insight from, for and about privileged minds is hardly the beginning of a solution to the growing polarization in society.

We may compare the condition of our communication with our climate. What has been built up carefully over centuries is threatened by overload in a short period of time. Boundaries between genres and modalities are blurring, just like our judgment of what we can achieve with pictures and when we need language, when the power of direct spoken interaction is needed and when the distance and patience of writing is better. We seem to recognize less and less the signals of information reliability and message intentions. The spicy herbs of *social presence*, *likability* and *interaction satisfaction* increasingly determine the taste.

³⁸ The *I-do-not-like-this-thumbs-down* sign was the death knell for Roman gladiators, at least in Joaquin Phoenix's modern version in *Gladiator*. Historians rather think that the thumb went up in that case (Corbeil 1997).

³⁹ This is due to the implicit causality of the verb (Hartshorne 2014).

⁴⁰ Niemi et al. (2019); Niemi et al. (2020).

⁴¹ Kahan et al. (2012).

⁴² Kahan et al. (2017). Thanks to De Correspondent for drawing my attention to this research.

But that doom-mongering is exaggerated, experienced by an ageing brain, annoyed by the entertainment items in the daily news and realizing too late that the children are not watching the next *Paw Patrol* episode, but a commercial break in between. The new generation will have time to build up experience with new genres and new conventions. Moreover, unreliable sources, deceptive intentions and fake news, that is all nothing new.

But above all: we now have a growing collection of experts ready to protect us from the worst: graduates and staff members of the programs Communication and Information Sciences CIS. We have six of these in the Netherlands, one in Tilburg. Today is a perfect occasion to tell more about the latter program and the staff responsible for it: the Department of Communication and Cognition.

CIW DCC - How did we do over the past 20 years⁴³?

It all started in 1999 with the new teaching program *Business Communication and Digital Media*, BDM. Born out of necessity⁴⁴ in a young non-traditional school with seven meticulously selected specializations, which unfortunately did not attract enough students. A broader program was needed badly, which was BDM. A badge of honor because for critics BDM was the end of scientific education at the time; I personally found the term 'bedrijf/business' aberrant, knowing that I had hardly seen a company or factory building from the inside. The first years were really exciting and scary at the same time. A small staff with different backgrounds, scarce resources available, from the start a large number of students and a lot of team spirit. It is amazing how well we got through those first years⁴⁵.

Despite the exploitation of our linguistic, discourse, cultural, computational and psycholinguistic knowledge, we lacked essential chromosomes to give BDM sufficient breadth and depth. The arrival of communication scientists and other social scientists has remedied this⁴⁶. They have given BDM and the research program a full psycho-social dimension. Does it mean that different backgrounds never resulted in domestic quarrels? Not at all. "Do they actually know anything about language, let alone language theory?"; or vice versa: "Can those language people actually analyze decently large-scale data sets?" Fortunately, preferences and backgrounds in the group continue to differ, confrontations of ideas prevent us from ending up in an echo room and they ensure real scientific progress. The questionnaires, determinants, mediating and moderating variables of communication scientists show the importance of the psycho-social tentacles of communication and the

⁴³ Since early 2019 (my end point as head of department) a lot has happened at DCC and many new people have been appointed. I will gladly leave them to my successor.

⁴⁴ Developed at the time on the table of the faculty board together with Harry as dean and Sjaak.

⁴⁵ In the first decade, there were first Nicole, Hans, Rein Emiel, Paul, Paai, soon supplemented with Peter, Pascal, Huib, Marc, Juliette, Per, Geno, Lennard, Harold and a little later with Marije, Anne, Marie.

⁴⁶ First Marjolijn, followed by colleagues like Alex, Monique, Mariek, later Loes, Peter, Christine and later Jos, Nadine, Emmelyn, Frans (plus a number of temporary staff).

often limited role of the language interventions that language people rightly consider so crucial⁴⁷.

In 2017, the new specialization *New Media Design* (NMD) was started, stemming from the idea that information products and services would gradually become more technical and personalized. It didn't go smoothly right away. "Was it really a new discipline, how did an NMD expert look like, and was there enough connection with language and communication"? But as it is now, NMD is solid as a rock⁴⁸, including a brand new Media Lab with an appropriate share of techno and psycho and a great deal of attention for socially relevant themes and for the growing importance of individual differences in communication behavior.

In all those years we have continued to invest in the specialization *Communication and Cognition* and we have kept the expertise in language broad and high, ranging from language psychology over discourse studies and language proficiency to computational linguistics⁴⁹. With my background I was able to contribute the most to this specialization, for example to the study of multimodality. I am thinking of the first course in multimodality, *tekst en beeld* and the study of metaphors: the perfect topic to understand the visual medium using a linguistic toolkit. What a pleasure to share all that with students and to work together with PhDs and colleagues⁵⁰. In parallel, the group developed groundbreaking research on spoken multimodality: how auditory and visual cues contribute to what we say. With my background in (written) discourse studies, I learned a lot⁵¹. Gradually, the fields of application for the study of the visual medium grew: health education, navigation, arguing...⁵². The current DCC research program shows the study of multimodality in many domains of health communication and social media; robots and *virtual* and *augmented reality* have added new questions and applications. And there is the growing theoretical reflection on how the verbal and visual medium converge in one brain, for example when we read comics or make gestures.

From my perspective, the topic of referential expressions deserves special mention. It was the first topic that caught my research attention once⁵³, over the years it has connected me

⁴⁷ O'Keefe en Hoeken (2021).

⁴⁸ Thanks to Suleman (NMDer avant la lettre), later Alwin, Jan, Katalin, Amalia, Lamia and more recently Nynke and Karin.

⁴⁹ Thanks to colleagues like Kiek, Martijn, Maria, Naomi, Janneke, Jacqueline, Ruud, Lisanne, Jan, Neil, Renske, Christine, Diane, Steffen, David, Emiel and Elger. And there was a strong group of computational linguists and AI experts, which went to the new department DCA in 2017.

⁵⁰ The pleasure is thanks to Joost first of all, and other colleagues. Fine memories remain also of the collaboration in the NWO project with Hans, Margot, Lisanne, Wilbert and Gerard.

⁵¹ In the first place thanks to Marc and Emiel during the joint supervision of PhDs like Lisette and Jorrig.

⁵² I found the Sanpad projects Epidasa and Hacialara on HIV/AIDS communication exciting and fun, thanks to Carel, PhDs, students and (South African) colleagues.

⁵³ Maes & van den Eynde (1981).

with many colleagues (including my predecessor and successor) and it will hopefully keep me out of trouble in the near future as well⁵⁴

All things considered, it's hard not to be very satisfied with what has happened between 1999 and now with the teaching program, the department and myself.

Not everything worked out well. It was a challenge to fit in a group of colleagues who came over from Maastricht unexpectedly. The specialization Data Journalism did not succeed, perhaps it did not fit the profile enough. And there was the bifurcation of the department. In terms of personnel it was completely understandable, conceptually much less so, although the conclusion is positive: an extra and successful department (DCA). The process of the bifurcation did not deserve a beauty prize and I would approach it differently with today's knowledge. But that too was instructive, in a somewhat special way.

A final suggestion

Let me close with a suggestion. As the size and variety of the group grows, investing in consistency and overview becomes more important. So perhaps there is room in the department for an extra research theme group with a helicopter perspective. I see inspiring research questions relevant to just about everyone. For example: *what do we ultimately expect from human-computer and computer-human communication?* Researching artificial communication in order to better understand human communication will continue to be a fruitful research perspective. But as more applications become technologically possible, the question is where to draw the line. Do we see the computer as a simple stand-in for humans? Do we really want to talk to a chatbot without realizing it⁵⁵? Do we want to enter into social relationships with a mechanical brain? Shouldn't we focus more on unique capabilities of computers rather than on skills humans will always be better at?

⁵⁴ For example because David, Emiel and I have not yet fully deciphered the enigma of demonstratives.

⁵⁵ Turing (1950).

Acknowledgments

When I drove to Tilburg on November 1, 1983, I didn't have a 40-year perspective in mind. It is thanks to many people that it lasted almost that long.

I start at the top with the successive Executive Boards and Faculty Boards. What I really appreciated is their accessibility. Sometimes I didn't get what I wanted, or I got something I didn't want, I sometimes thought that what came from above could radiate a little less perception and entrepreneurship and a little more courage and ethics, but what ultimately counts is the gratitude for the generous support I received in all those years⁵⁶.

Within the School we sometimes had to quarrel about the distribution of scarce commodities, but I mainly have good memories of the collaboration with my fellow heads of department.

I found it a privilege to work together as a head of department with the support staff more than average: they have a different perspective and have to achieve targets other than academics, but all things considered, they kept their cool more often than I did⁵⁷.

Those who enjoy teaching know that we cannot do without students and those who occasionally see departmental budgets know even better. I found teaching and supervising students inspiring. I am thinking first about the students who also became co-authors. Students sometimes cause a nuisance because they come in large numbers at the same time. All I can say is, keep doing that, we consider it an honor that you decide to choose Tilburg. Keep choosing courses unpredictably, do it now and then also outside your comfort zone and make it difficult for your teachers in a pleasant way.

⁵⁶ First, I think of Wim's support at the time.

⁵⁷ That first of all applies to Lauraine, and also to Ingemarie, Jacintha, Helma, Eva and Joke.



Figure 11 – *Taalvaardigheid, subfaculty of Arts, 1980s*

The same applies to an even greater extent to PhDs. I feel that I have learned more from my PhD students than they have learned from me⁵⁸. They are without a doubt the most dynamic and cohesive team in the department. Keep making it pretty difficult for your supervisors and keep reinforcing the social fabric in the group.

And then, there were the many colleagues. My first stop was the Language Center. I have warm memories of the relaxed atmosphere and friendly collegiality⁵⁹ (Figure 11). They taught me more than was strictly necessary for the job (Figure 12).

At about the same time, I started in Gent at the translation department the other half of the week and became part of the section and the colleagues *Nederlands* (Figure 13). I learned the pleasure of teaching there, I have kept cordial contacts and friendships⁶⁰.

In the 1990s, I joined a group of adventurous discourse study scholars in Tilburg (Figure 14). These were the most important years for me as an apprentice researcher and the years in which I built up collegial friendships with my promoter and many other colleagues, for which I am very grateful⁶¹.

⁵⁸ Thank you Anja, Sarah, Charlotte, Lisette/Eva, Lisanne, Doug, Jorrig, Elizabeth, Hans, Annemarie, Adriana, Mohamed, Yan en Eko.

⁵⁹ I think of the colleagues *Nederlands* Hans, Frans, Marc, Mira, the colleagues *Engels* Hans, Pieter, Marijke, Andrée and Guust, the head of the group.

⁶⁰ Thank you Myriam, Stefaan, Annik, Rita, Willy, Fons, Lut, Sylvianne, Dirk, Paul, Ernest en Paul, our head and later director.

⁶¹ Leo, my promoter, and the colleagues Joost, Rein, Leonoor, Per, Carel, Jan, Cathy, Anja, Erica, and in the early years the colleagues who later conquered the rest of the Netherlands: Hans, Wilbert, Gerard, Ted, José, Gisela, Luuk, Els.



Figure 12 – Preparing the Dutch language proficiency course



Figure 13 – Dutch Department, Translation college Gent, late 1980s?

And then there was the new department. I especially remember the large dose of collegiality of the early years, much needed to survive the first storms (Figure 15)⁶². Since then, many colleagues came in, but in terms collegiality nothing changed (Figure 16). There have been occasional instances of friendly fire, but what I will feel for the rest of my days is the loyalty I have experienced from all DCC employees over the years⁶³.

What is exceptional and what I have exceptionally appreciated in good and bad days is the humor, the commitment and the trust in the management team⁶⁴.

An academic work environment remains a particularly privileged bubble: supervising promising young people, no need to fight for your rights or social appreciation, turning a hobby into your job; investigating social problems such as low literacy, exclusion, polarization, poverty, migration, climate change without experiencing yourself the misery associated with them. Academics are remarkably often on the sunny side of society and may well realize this more often.

And yet, the academic work environment does not escape from toxic social relations either⁶⁵: tasks are sometimes distributed in mysterious ways, high-performing employees are intimidated because they threaten their superiors, the achievements of certain groups (women or international employees) are undervalued, 'crown princes' receive too much free play, complaints are not taken seriously or treated unequally based on hierarchy. If I should have noticed or prevented such things more, I'm still willing to be held accountable. What has been noticed is hopefully tackled expeditiously.

⁶² Thank you Nicole, Emiel, Hans, Rein and the other early birds.

⁶³ Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this feeling over the years.

⁶⁴ Big thanks to Emiel, Marc, Juliette, Marjolijn, Anne and Kiek (and good luck for Maria now).

⁶⁵ <https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/latest-news/news/archief2021/bijlagen/1007-yag-report-harassment-at-the-ug.pdf>



Figure 14 – *Werkverband Discourse Studies, 2004?*

I felt at home in Tilburg, but luckily I could go home every day. I consider myself lucky in the mosaic of my large family and my large circle of friends, even if precious pieces are missing here and there. Over the years I have felt the naturalness of your support and appreciation, for which I am deeply grateful.

And finally my real home, to which I am most indebted: Lucas, Casper and Flavia, I look forward to every Skype, every visit, every event together and will invest and enjoy it with more time and space of mind! Matteo and Daniele, there's someone here with a lot of time now, give him a hard time. And finally, Lieve: done with the admirably great energy that you, with your heavy agenda, have invested in this professor all these years. Time now for many other things and thanks for everything!

Dixi⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ Thank you Neil for checking the quality of this (*that) translation.



Figure 15 – Capacity group Communication and Cognition, 2004



Figure 16 – Department of Communication and Cognition, Malle, January 2019

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