

THE LINGUISTIC EXPRESSION OF PRECISE VS. VAGUE LOCATION

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Abstract: This contribution aims at documenting a distinction in the expression of location/direction in the languages of the world between a precise place vs. a vague one. The distinction appears to be widespread (and is possibly universal, considering the range of different language families that overtly express it).

Keywords: locatives, directionals, precise/vague location.

1 The Issue

A number of Romance languages differentiate lexically or grammatically precise vs. vague locations. Cinque (1971: 92-97) notes that **Italian** has two morphemes for 'here' and two for 'there': *qui* and *qua* 'here' and *lì* and *là* 'there'. For the most part, *qui* and *qua* can be used interchangeably (the same holds for *lì* and *là*). So, if one wishes to express something like 'Put the book here,' either morpheme (*qui* or *qua*) would be appropriate:

- (1) a. Metti il libro qui.
b. Metti il libro qua.

Despite the grammaticality of both (1a) and (1b), however, *qui* and *lì* denote a space which is "punctual/precise" while *qua* and *là* denote a general, "uncircumscribed" vague region. As such, there are certain situations where use of *qui* and *lì* will yield ungrammaticality, as in (2b) (data from Cinque 1971):

- (2) a. Girava qua e là senza meta.
(S)he roamed here and there without purpose
b. *Girava qui e lì senza meta.

The sentence in (2b) is unacceptable because roaming around requires open-ended (uncircumscribed) space, something which the morphemes *qui* and *lì* do not denote. And as mentioned above, while there are circumstances under which either (set of) morpheme(s) can be used, the choice of one (*qua/là*) over the other (*qui/lì*) yields entirely different spatial (aspectual) interpretations. Consider in this regard another example from Cinque (1971):

- (3) a. I libri erano sparsi qua e là.

^{1*} Ca' Foscari University, Venice – cinque@unive.it, [To Pusi](#), [R](#), remembering our first encounter in Berkeley, California, precisely 50 years ago.

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Commentato [GA1]: It would be helpful if you could provide inter-linear glosses as per the style-sheet requirements. Thanks!

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- the books were scattered here and there
b. I libri erano sparsi qui e lì.

Specifically, the sentence in (3a) denotes that there were books ~~were~~ scattered all over the place, while the sentence in (3b) denotes that there were books in two or more distinct points (e.g., two or more distinct piles of books).

- (4)a. Ero lì lì per cadere
Lit. I was there there about to fall 'I was almost falling'
b. *Ero là là per cadere

2 Cross-linguistic discussion

The data from Cinque (1971) thus show us that language does encode two kinds of two- and three-dimensional (i.e., non-linear) space: one which we can characterize as punctual (or bounded), and another which we can encode as non-punctual (or unbounded).
[See also see](#) Vanelli 1992: Chapter III, §2.1; 1995: §2.2).

Very similar distinctions are present in other Romance varieties. Exactly the same distinction found in Italian is found in **Spanish** between *acá* and *allá* vs. *quí* and *allí* (see Tortora 2008: fn.9).

In the **Ladin** dialect of Lozzo and Comelico in northern Italy *ka* 'here' and *là* 'there' are interpreted differently depending on whether they are preceded or followed by 'up/down' or 'in/out' specifications. If *ka* or *là* come before *su* 'up', *du/dó* 'down', *fora* 'out(side)', *inte* 'in(side)', they refer to a very specific place. Instead if they come after them they refer to an undetermined place (near the speaker or far from the speaker, respectively). See Vigolo (2007: §3), where the following sentences are cited:

- (5)a. **ka su** se sta ben
'up here (precise place) one lives well'
b. **su ka** da nòi,
'in our premises (vague place)'
(6)a. te spieto **ka du**
You (clitic) I.wait here down
'I'll be waiting for you down here (precise place)'
b. vien **dó ka**
come down here
'Come around here (vague place)'

For other Ladin varieties Irsara (2015: §3) (also see Irsara 2009: Chapter 5; 2010: 77) reports that when *ca* and *ia* precede *chilò* and *dailò* the precise location or end point of a motion is normally emphasized. In contrast, *chilò ca* and *dailò ia* indicate a generic area.

Romanian makes a similar distinction. Stavinschi (2015: 20f) notes that “[w]hen preceded by the preposition *pe*, the demonstrative adverbs indicate a vague location (*aici* [‘here’] vs. *pe aici* [‘over here’].”

The same distinction between a precise (bounded) location and a vague (unbounded) one is found in various non-Romance language too.

A comparable situation is found in the Niger-Congo (Atlantic) language **Gújjolaay Eegimaa** locative adverbs. Their agreement markers indicate “*general location or specific location*” (The demonstrative suffixes that are attached to the adverbials express proximal (-e), medial (-u) and distal locations (-ua and -a) relative to speaker or addressee). See (7), from Sagna (2008, §3.2.5.2):

- (7)a. *taute* ‘precisely here’ *baube* ‘here (general location)
- b. *tautu* ‘precisely there’ *baubu* ‘there (general location)
- c. *taala* ‘precisely over there’ *baaba* ‘over there (general location)

Ewondo (a Bantu language of Cameroon) is also reported to encode [precise/exact] locations and [vague] locations. Redden (1980) reports that “locative adverbs are marked for person, i.e. location *in relation to first or second person*, and for exactness vs. vagueness, i.e. *an exact or restricted location vs. a general area or vicinity*.” (p.145). “It is readily apparent that the system with /*vá*/ means an exact location, whereas the system with /*mú*/, though it shares the same points of reference, viz. speaker and hearer, means *somewhere in the general vicinity or area*”. (p.146).

The three locational deictic stems of **Kiowa** (Kiowa-Tanoan) combine with the following locative/ directional suffixes among others:

- (8)a. - \emptyset (zero) ‘narrowly bounded location, prototypical orientation’
- b. -y ‘widely bounded location, non-prototypical orientation’

Watkins (1984: 188) reported that the ‘zero suffix indicates a point or narrowly bounded region, the limit of the bounds being determined to some extent by the context. The presence of -y, in contrast, specifies a more widely bounded location, somewhere in the vicinity.’ In the following sentences, ‘in a chair’ is an example of a [bounded] region, and ‘near a chair’ is an example of a “widely bounded location”. Watkins’ 48 descriptions of Kiowa deictics correlate to Talmy’s (1988: 178, 2000a: 50) definition of boundedness, i.e., demarcation and individuation of a unit entity, and unboundedness, i.e., indefinite continuation of an entity. Watkins’ “widely bounded” is [unbounded] in our term.

Ahtna (Athabascan) displays the PUNCTUAL suffix *-t* and the AREA suffix *-xu* (Berez 2015). “Together these two make what could be called a boundedness distinction in

directionals. The first of these two, -t 'PUNCTUAL' [...], creates bounded locations in space, or 'points' which can ostensibly be found in the direction of the directional stem. The sense here is that the location is conceived of as having a clear physical boundary." (p.156)
"Directionals containing the suffix -xu 'AREA', on the other hand, denote regions or fuzzy-bounded regions without a clear boundary (e.g. a highlands or a hunting grounds)." (p.157)
Now, the fact that many languages in so many unrelated language families encode a distinction between a precise vs. vague location/direction does suggest that this may be a universal, possibly neutralized (underspecified) in other languages.

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