SPACE PERCEPTION IN ROMANCE MENTALITY: A COMPARATIVE VIEW ON DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS

Lavinia Seiciuc, PhD, "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract: The results of linguistic investigation often lead to the discovery of new aspects regarding the mentality of the native speakers. Such is the case with the research of deictic pronouns and adverbs in Romance languages, which allows us to classify them into two categories of languages, expressing a binary or ternary perception of space. Our paper aims at disclosing the two types of perceptions on space according to the existence of a two-way or three-way segmentation of the demonstrative paradigm in six Romance languages of the traditional classification (Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish), without lacking certain punctual references to the remaining ones (Sardinian, Dalmatian, Rhaeto-Romance or Occitan). As a conclusion, we find that the La Spezia-Rimini line can act as a switch, since when deixis is concerned, the Southern and Central Italian dialects form a linguistic continuum with the Western varieties, instead of the Eastern ones.

Keywords: Romance linguistics, space perception, deixis, demonstrative pronouns

0. Historical and comparative research on languages can - and usually is - a source of knowledge regarding certain cultural peculiarities of the peoples in whose environment those languages were born. We tend to assert that language reflects reality, sinchronically and diachronically, but this refers to a reality that is already abstracted in collective mentality, i. e. a form of conception and construction of reality that may differ from one linguistic community to another.

In this paper we aim at following the evolution of the way certain Romance peoples interpret and express in their languages (lexically and grammatically) the notion of *space*, and our analysis is based on the existence of two or three degrees of distance in the paradigm of demonstrative pronouns. We will refer, in our attempt, to six Romance languages (as considered by traditional classifications), which we mention alphabetically: Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish, though we will momentarily address other Romance varieties, when necessary.

1. Our analysis should be based on the situation in Latin, a language that was quite rich in demonstrative pronouns, albeit deictic, reflexive or indefinite. We consider that these categories should be envisaged together, as they will form, most of the times, a single morphological paradigm in Romance languages.

Concretely, we will focus on the following Latin demonstratives:

hic, haec, hoc, proximal pronoun ("this one close to me");
iste, ista, istud, medial pronoun ("this/that one close to you");
ille, illa, illud, distal pronoun ("that one close to him");
ipse, ipsa, ipsum, reflexive pronoun ("oneself");
is, ea, id, a weak demonstrative, or maybe the equivalent of a personal pronoun.

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)

We already notice that Latin knew three degrees of distance in deictic demonstratives[1], a situation that would be inherited, at least as a concept, in some Romance languages, while in others it would disappear.

The forms *hic* and *is* were not transmitted as demonstrative pronouns in Romance languages, though there are some traces in certain languages such as French (*ce* < ***ecce hoc**) or Italian (*ciò* < ***ecce hoc**), etc. Once the proximal pronoun *hic* weakened in its functions, the paradigm in vulgar Latin would readjust when the pronoun *iste* migrated towards the 1st person, a phenomenon that vacated the place that corresponded to the 2nd person.

That vacancy would later be filled by the pronoun *ipse* in Iberian Latin, but it would be slowly assimilated to the space close to the 1st person in other regions of România.

Aside from the readjustment of the demonstrative paradigm, as we have seen above, a morphological readjustment would take place of the forms in individual paradigms. Therefore, the three remaining deictic pronouns in vulgar Latin, i.e.: *iste, ipse, ille*, would undergo a morphological reaccomodation, in analogy with the Latin triple-termination adjectives such as *bonus, bona, bonum*, which had established the declension patterns for the masculine, feminine and neutral forms.

Therefore, in vulgar Latin the forms of the three demonstrative pronouns are as follows:

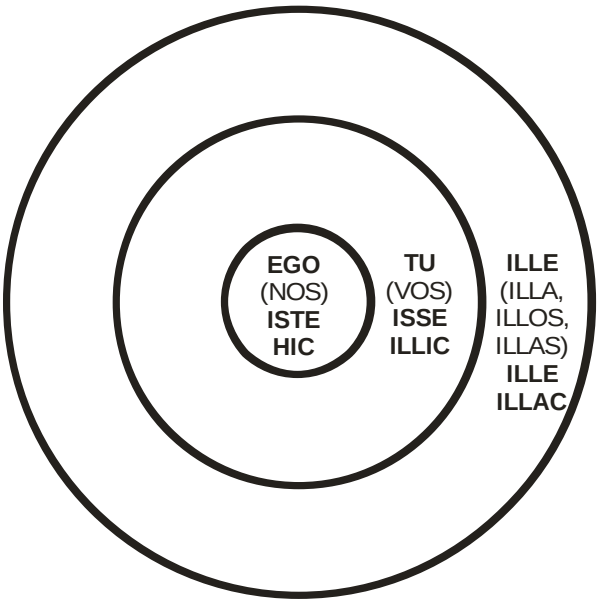
istus, ista, istum, proximal pronoun ("this one close to me");
ipsus, ipsa, ipsum, medial pronoun ("this/that one close to you");
illus, illa, illum, distal pronoun ("that one close to him").

We should also mention that the paradigms of personal, possesive and reflexive pronouns were completed with forms corresponding to all persons, in singular and plural. In Latin there were no personal pronouns for the 3rd person, but they would appear in vulgar Latin out of the necessity for symmetry and analogy with the 1st and 2nd persons. The demonstrative *illus* proves to be extremely versatile in common Latin, as it would generate, alongside certain demonstrative pronominal and adjectival forms, some new morphological classes, such as the definite article in the majority of the Romance languages, or some new paradigmatic elements, such as the 3rd person personal pronouns.

In this stage of common Latin, that is specific mostly to the Iberian Peninsula, space is perceived, most like in classical Latin, as a ternary space, formed by three concentric circles around the speaker. We can assign to these circles a series of particular personal pronouns and adverbs of place that correspond to the participants to the communication act:

1 Some studies in Indo-European linguistics show that I.E. languages manifest two (*this-that*) up to four (*this, thou, that, yonder*) degrees of distance (v. Quiles: 2011, 6.6.).

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)



We need to clarify that in our scheme above[2] the central space belongs to the speaker seen as a unique individual or as part of a group; the same thing is true about the second ring, which includes the 2nd person.

The plural forms of the personal pronouns need to be interpreted as follows:

us = + *me* ± *you* ± *him* ± *her* ± *them* (m.) ± *them* (f.);
you (pl.) = + *you* ± *him* ± *her* ± *them* (m.) ± *them* (f.).

2. From all extant Neo-Latin languages, Ibero-Romance ones continue in the most obvious way the Roman conception on space, consisting of a structure formed by three concentric rings. Beside the Ibero-Romance languages, some Occitan varieties also accept such a construction of the communication space, but we need to make clear that Occitan accepts unrestrictively a binary conception of space:

	I	**II**	**III**
Cat.	**jo** (nosaltres) **aquest** **aquí**	**tu** (vosaltres) **aqueix** **aquí**	**ell** (ella, ells, elles) **aquell** **allà**
Occ.	**ieu** (nos, nosautres, nosautras) **aiceste** **aici**	**tu** (vos, vosautres, vosautras) **aqueste** **aquí**	**el** (ela, el, eles, elas) **aquel** **ailà**

2 We have included in our scheme, for the 3rd person, the forms of the demonstrative pronoun *ille, -a, -ud*, vulg. Lat. *illus, -a, -um*, which generated the 3rd person personal pronouns in Romance languages; furthermore, the cited forms are in accusative, as these are the ones that were inherited by most Romance languages, except in Eastern asigmatic România, where the inherited forms are in nominative case: *illi*, respectively *illae* for masculine and feminine.

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)

Port.	**eu** (nós) **este** **aqui**	**tu** (vós) **esse** **aí**	**ele** (ela, eles, elas) **aquele** **ali**
Sp.	**yo** (nosotros, nosotras) **este** **aquí**	**tú** (vosotros, vosotras) **ese** **ahí**	**él** (ella, ellos, ellas) **aquél** **allí**

As we can see from the table above, both the endemic Ibero-Romance languages, i.e. Portuguese and Spanish, and the Provence-originated ones, i.e. Occitan and Catalan, can display a tripartite structure of space in the communication process, as seen in the demonstrative paradigm.

It might not be completely irrelevant to notice a similar structure in Basque; still, since we don't have enough information about the anterior phases of this language, we can only speculate that there was a ternary perception on space in the archaic culture of this population and that the similar Latin was imposed on top of it, which would have consolidated the conservation of a pre-existing form of space organization in the four languages that share, more or less, the Ibero-Aquitano-Basque substratum; nevertheless, we cannot ignore a possible Romance influence, manifested more recently, of the Spanish, Catalan and Occitan dialects that manifest this particular feature and that could have imposed it, as superstratum languages, to the system of this pre-Indo-European language:

	I	**II**	**III**
Bsq.	**ni** (gu) **hau** **hemen**	**hi** (zu, zuek) **hori** **hor**	**hau** (hori, hura, hauek, horiek, haiek) **hura** **han**

The Sardinian language also admits three degrees of distance in demonstratives, in all its dialects, and so do some of the linguistic varieties known as "Rhaeto-Romance language", but in the case of the latter, the limits between the three spaces are not as rigid, so the sectors corresponding to the 1st and 2nd persons, the actors in the communication process, merge most of the time (the examples in the table below are extracted from Romansh varieties, more precisely Grischun and Sursilvan):

	I	**II**	**III**
Srd.	**jeo / deu / eo** (nois / nosu) **custu** **inòghe/ innoi**	**tue / tui** (bois, bosatrus, bosatras) **cussu** **incùe / innì**	**issu** (issa, issus, issas) **cuddu** **incuddae / culà**

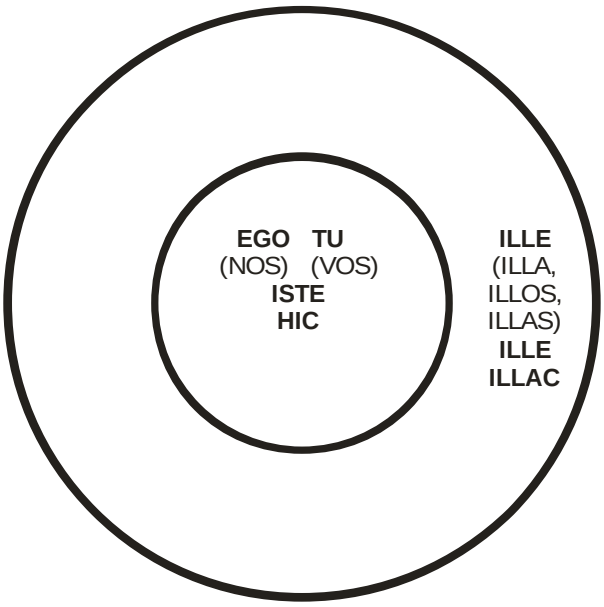
BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)

Rtr.	**jau** (nus) **quest** **qua**	**ti** (vus) **quell** **tscha**	**el** (ella, ells, ellas) **tschel / lez** **là / leu**

At the other pole of the spectrum we will find French and Oriental Romance languages.

Dalmatian dialects appear to have had a binary expression of space, organized probably around the 1st and 3rd person..

Similarly, Romanian expresses linguistically a division of space into to sectors, most like French and standard Italian. If we care to generalize things a little bit, we can affirm that the central sector, which needs to include the 1st person, might be common, in these language, for the 1st and 2nd persons, while the external ring will usually refer to the 3rd person:



Space appears to be compressed for these languages. The participants to the communication act share a common space, in opposition to the space that is occupied by the 3rd person, i.e. the subject of the communication itself. We understand, this way, that the speakers of these languages situate the actors in the communication process at the same level. The receiver is obviously granted a status that is equal to that of the transmitter, since he becomes, in his turn, a transmitter, as roles alternate.

Nevertheless, there still are certain situations when the receiver is placed in the external circle, that of the 3rd person, when physical distance comes between the participants to the communication act (communication can be made orally, face to face, but it can also be made in writing, telephonically or electronically), and space demonstratives are used exclusively as deictic. We can assert, therefore, that the boundaries between the two spaces are permeable, i.e. that the space corresponding to the 2nd person can merge with that of the 1st person or, sometimes, with that of the 3rd person, a situation that reminds us of that in Rhaeto-Romance varieties.

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)

The corresponding forms of those two space sectors, in Dalmatian, french, Italian and Romanian, are shown in the next table (we include again, beside the demonstratives, the personal pronouns that correspond to the actors in the communication process, as well as the adverbs of place that mark the space sectors):

	I + II	**III**
Dalm	**go / tu** (nos, vos) **cost** **luc**	**il** (eya, eis) **col** **cauc**
Fr.	**je[3] / tu** (nous / vous) **ceci, celui-ci** **ici**	**il** (elle, ils, elles) **cela, celui-là** **là**
It.	**io / tu** (noi / voi) **questo** **qui / qua**	**egli[4] (lui)[5]** (ella (lei), essi, esse, loro) **quello** **lì / là**
Rom.	**eu / tu** (noi / voi) **ăsta[6], acesta** **aici**	**el** (ea, ei, ele) **ăla, acela** **acolo**

Italian has a peculiar situation, though. There are certain dialects that know a three-way segmentation of space, as reflected by the three demonstrative pronouns of their paradigms, but standard Italian and common usage only accept two degrees of distance. Some lects in the Northern and Central areas continue the Latin segmentation of space into three different sectors, and the corresponding forms remind us of those in Ibero-România:

	I	**II**	**III**
S.	**chisto**	**chisso**	**chillo**
C.	**quistu**	**quissu**	**quillu**

Moreover, the very dialect that constituted the basis for literary Italian, the Tuscan (Florentine) one, has three deictic pronouns that correspond to three degrees of distance, but their origin is not identical to the situation in Latin, i.e. it continues the extreme pronouns (proximal and distal), while the medial pronoun is an Italian creation that expresses the medial distance due to the presence in its structure of the 2nd person pronoun:

3 We put the atonic pronominal forms in French, compulsory in verbal conjugation, which come from the same etymons as the personal pronominal forms in the other Romance languages.

4 From *ille*, not *illus*.

5 The oblique forms have replaced the nominative forms in modern Italian.

6 Romanian has two forms for every degree of distance, a vulgar one, from Lat. *iste / ille* (with variants: *ăsta, ista, aista* etc.), and a literary one from **ecce iste* and **ecce ille*.

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)

	I	II	III
Tsc.	**questo**	**codesto**	**quello**

The form *codesto*, almost absent in local varieties of other regions, while frequent in literature, is an agglutinated form which contains the pronoun *iste*, relative to the 2nd person in classical Latin, but assigned to the 1st person space in vulgar Latin, preceeded by the adverb *eccum*, present in numerous demonstrative Romance forms, and by the 2nd person singular personal pronoun: *codesto / cotesto* (a. Tusc.) < ***ecco tibi istud**.

3. More that space deixis, demonstrative pronouns can also express a temporal side, as they suggest the distance in time in reference to the moment of speech. In Romance languages, much like in Latin, time is normally perceived as a ternary structure of past, present and future, as reflected by the organization of the verbal system, where the category of time is better marked that that of aspect (which is expressed by the same temporal forms by morphological synchretism).

Generally, we can notice that all Romance distal pronouns are associated to past or future stages, while proximal forms refer to the present time. If there is also a medial pronoun, it shifts between the three temporal stages, as it indicates either an element from the recent past or imminent future or, in the case of the present period, the degree of envolvement or detachment of the speaker regarding the object it indicates.

4. As a consequence of our analysis on deictic elements in Romance languages and dialects, we can conclude that there is a preeminence of the ternary construction of space in Southern Roance languages (Sardinian, Centro-Meridional Italian, Occitan, Catalan, Portuguese and Spanish), and a binary perception of space in Northern (French) and Oriental România(Dalmatian and Romanian). The Rhaeto-Romance dialects and the Northern Italian ones form an intermediary zone between the two, as they manifest oscillations from one sistem to another. Therefore, where the construction of space is concerned, Romance languages can be divided into two groups, separated by an imaginary line that crosses the Italic Peninsula between Rimini and La Spezia and continues on the Valley of the Loire. Nevertheless, in this situation, the Romance varieties situated South of the La Spezia-Rimini line will not form a group with Dalmatian and Romanian, as they usually do, but form a continuum together with the Western languages.



Once more, Romanian belongs to the category of "exceptions" rather than that of generalized features, as happens to a series of characteristics it manifests at all linguistic levels: the treatment of voiceless intervocalic consonants, the grammatical genre, the plural of nouns, the verbal agreement with courtesy pronouns, the inventory of auxiliary verbs, the

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)

alternance between infinitive and conjunctive, etc. While some of these features can be explained by the Balkanic Sprachbund, others, as we see above, are shared by multiple Romance languages; such cases might well be mere coincidences or they could turn out to be perfectly explainable phenomena in the Romance context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chevalier, J.-C. (1964): *Grammaire Larousse du français contemporain*, Paris, Larousse

Formentin, Vittorio (2010): *Gramatica Storica*, în R. Simone (coord.), *Enciclopedia dell'Italiano.* Roma, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana

Lewis, Charlton T., Short, Charles (1879): *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, available on http://perseus.uchicago.edu/Reference

Manoliu Manea, Maria (1971): *Gramatica comparată a limbilor romanice*, Bucureşti, Editura Didactică şi Pedagogică

Menéndez Pidal, Ramón (1985): *Manual gramática histórica española*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe

Mišesca Tomić, Olga (2006): *Balkan Sprachbund Morpho-Syntactic Features*, "Studies in Natural Language and Linguistic Theory", Vol. 67, 2006, XXI

Nyrop, Kristoffer (1903): *Grammaire historique de la langue française*, Leipzig/New York/Paris, Ernst Bojesen

Penny, Ralph (2005): *Gramática histórica del español*, Barcelona, Ariel

Pianigiani, Ottorino (1907): *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana*, Roma-Milano, Società editrice Dante Alighieri di Albrighi, Segati, available on www.etimo.it

Quiles, Carlos (2011): *A Grammar of Modern Indo-European*, third edition, dnghu.org, available on http://indo-european.info/WebHelp/a_grammar_of.htm

Sala, Marius (1998): *De la latină la română*, Bucureşti, Univers Enciclopedic

Spano, Giovanni (2004): *Vocabulario Italiano-Sardo*, Nuoro, Ilisso Edizioni, available on www.sardegnadigitallibrary.it

Valpy, F. E. J. (1828): *An Etymological Dictionary of the Latin Language*, London, A. J. Valpy, http://archive.org

Vásquez Cuesta, P., Méndez da Luz, M. A. (1971): *Gramática portuguesa*, Madrid, Gredos

BDD-V76 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-15 01:59:58 UTC)