SPATIAL DEIXIS IN JAHAI

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1. Introduction

Jahai, a language belonging to the Northern Aslian subgroup of the Aslian branch of Mon-Khmer, is spoken by some 1,000 individuals in the states of Perak and Kelantan, Peninsular Malaysia, and adjacent parts of southern Thailand. Being mobile foragers until recently, most Jahai speakers have now settled down in resettlement villages established by the Malaysian government. They are in frequent contact with speakers of Temiar, a Central Aslian language, and speakers of local dialects of Malay, the Austronesian majority language. Most speakers of Jahai are multilingual and have a good command of Temiar and Malay.

The present paper discusses spatial deixis in Jahai, specifically its multi-term system of demonstratives, and sets out from material collected by the author among speakers of Jahai in Kampung Sungai Banun, in the resettlement area of Air Banun, Hulu Perak district, in the state of Perak, Peninsular Malaysia, during the period 1998-2000.

1.1 Previous accounts

Brief reference to demonstratives is given by Schebesta (1928:809) in his early sketch of Jahai grammar. Three basic demonstrative terms reflecting three degrees of distance are introduced (reproduced here in Schebesta’s original orthography): ən ‘this’, ani ‘that’ and un ‘that yonder’. These are said to be linked to the pronoun or noun that they follow by means of -t- (cf. the present description in Section 2).

Other Aslian languages for which we have descriptions of demonstrative systems are Temiar (Benjamin 1976:161-63), Jah-Hut (Diffloth 1976:90) and Semelai (Kruspe 1999), and a summary is given by Matisoff (to appear). Peterson (1993; unseen by the author) discusses spatial locatives in Kensiw, a
close relative of Jahai. The present account forms part of a larger descriptive study of Jahai (Burenhult, in prep).

2. Demonstrative distinctions in Jahai: an overview

Like other Aslian languages, Jahai appears to attach great importance to deictic precision. This becomes particularly evident in spatial categorisation and is reflected linguistically in an elaborate system of demonstrative distinctions. This system emanates from a set of seven terms, what will be referred to here as ‘basic demonstratives’, corresponding in meaning roughly to the adverbial demonstratives of many European languages (‘here’ and ‘there’) but expressing further distinctions of distance, elevation and visibility of locations in relation to the speaker and the addressee. These demonstratives, in turn, provide the basis for an identically categorised system of demonstrative pronouns. This section provides a brief description and overview of these categories.

2.1 Basic demonstratives

Although the basic demonstratives may occur as free forms, they are usually found in combination with any of a set of four prepositional proclitics which express location at, motion to, motion from and similarity to the location designated by the basic demonstrative:

/kə-/ ‘in/at’
/ba-/ ‘to’
/can-/ ‘from’
/pn-/ ‘like’

The following paragraphs describe each of the seven basic demonstratives.

2.1.1 Speaker-anchored proximal /ʔəh/: PROX1.

This term typically refers to a location near the speaker relative to the addressee, or to the present location of both speaker and addressee: ‘here, near me/us’. Physical contact with the location referred to may have some significance. It is sometimes also used to refer to other locations if these are
contrasted with more distant locations and therefore considered to be relatively proximate.

2.1.2 Addressee-anchored proximal /ʔon/: PROX2.

In the immediate speech situation, this demonstrative is normally used to refer to the location of the addressee relative to the speaker: ‘there, near you’. It also functions as an unmarked, ‘neutral’ demonstrative, which is used to refer to any location away from the speaker that is not saliently within the system of orientation and where more specific demonstratives therefore are not used, typically for geographically unspecified situations. It is also frequently used for anaphoric and sometimes temporal purposes.

2.1.3 Speaker-and/or-addressee-anchored medial /ʔūn/: MED.

This typically refers to locations a short distance away from both speaker and addressee: ‘there, a little away from me and/or you’.

2.1.4 Speaker-and/or-addressee-anchored distal /ʔaniʔ/: DIST.

Like /ʔūn/, this term refers to locations away from both speaker and addressee but usually at greater distance: ‘there, far away from me and/or you’. The difference in degree of distance between medial /ʔūn/ and distal /ʔaniʔ/ is not apparent and commonly the same location may be referred to by either term. Relative distance is likely to play a role as these two demonstratives are often contrasted with each other. Thus, the same location may be referred to as /ʔūn/ if discussed in relation to a more distant location, and as /ʔaniʔ/ if discussed in relation to a more proximate location. Sometimes there seems to be no difference in degree of distance implied at all, and the two are used to simply contrast different medial or distal locations with each other.

2.1.5 Speaker-and/or-addressee-anchored invisible /ʔadeh/: INV.

This demonstrative is used to refer to nearby locations that are not visually accessible to the speaker and/or the addressee at the time of speaking, e.g. locations behind their backs or on the other side of some object: ‘there, not visible to
you and/or me’. It may also refer to more distant locations, usually behind the speaker’s back.

2.1.6 Speaker-and/or-addressee-anchored superjacent /ʔitih ~ ʔotih/: SUP.

This refers to locations situated higher than the speaker and/or the addressee, proximate and visible as well as distant and invisible, frequently in the sense of ‘upstream’: ‘there, above you/me/us’. The allomorphs /ʔitih ~ ʔotih/ are in free variation and idiolectally determined.

2.1.7 Speaker-and/or-addressee-anchored subjacent /ʔujih/: SUB.

This term refers to locations situated lower than the speaker and addressee, proximate and visible as well as distant and invisible, frequently in the sense of ‘downstream’: ‘there, below you/me/us’.

2.2 Demonstrative pronouns.

The demonstrative pronouns are based on the basic demonstratives and display the same seven distinctions of orientation. They are formed by replacing the initial glottal stop /ʔ/ of the basic demonstratives with /t/.

/tōh/ ‘this, near me’
/ton/ ‘that, near you’; ‘that [neutral]’
/tūn/ ‘that, a little away from you and me’
/taniʔ/ ‘that, far away from you and me’
/tadeh/ ‘that, not visible to you and/or me’
/titiʔ/ ‘that, above you/me/us’
/tujih/ ‘that, below you/me/us’

Demonstrative pronouns may occur independently and then constitute full noun phrases:

ja-gej tōh
IRR-eat this.PROX1 ‘I will eat this’