Deictic Gestures and Definiteness-Encoding in a Language without Articles

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Mandarin Chinese, which is an articleless language, makes use of demonstratives and bare nouns to make definite references, but it is straightforward to us how these two verbal forms are semantically distinguished from each other. It is argued that the more cognitive salient a referent is, the simpler referential expression is preferred over more complex forms (e.g. it > the NP > demonstrative NP). There is ample evidence showing that deictic gestures (e.g. pointing) are commonly used with demonstratives to construct joint attention to make referents more salient. In this study, we testify whether such hierarchy of referential expressions also holds for Mandarin and how deictic gestures influence referential choices. An experimental study and a follow-up corpus study were conducted on Mandarin bare nouns and demonstrative phrase. The results reveal a more complex picture: deictic gestures can accompany both bare nouns and demonstratives in Mandarin when a referent is not salient enough; bare nouns are preferred when joint attention is achieved on a referent, while demonstratives are used to establish new joint attention. We conclude that definiteness in Mandarin is encoded by a hierarchy of verbal forms that can further be assisted by deictic gestures and joint attention.