Indefinite Demonstratives and Discourse Prominence
Klaus von Heusinger

University of Cologne

Indefinite demonstrative noun phrases, such as this guy in Then I met this guy show an interesting discourse behavior, which can best be summarized under “discourse prominence”: They are cataphoric (Prince 1981, Gernsbacher & Shroyer 1989), express noteworthiness (Ionin 2006), and show referential persistence as well as a somewhat high topic shift potential (Chiriacescu 2011, Deichsel 2015). Indefinite demonstratives also show strong referential properties such as specificity (Prince 1981) and referentiality (Fodor & Sag 1982). The talk will present studies on the referential and discourse properties of the two German indefinite demonstratives dieser ('this') and so'n ('this', lit. 'such-a'). I will investigate the link between the referential properties of these expressions and their discourse behavior. On the basis of the results of an eye tracking experiment and an ERP experiment, I will suggest that indefinite demonstratives are “direct referential” expressions (Kaplan 1977/1989, Fodor & Sag 1982), just like deictic demonstratives, pure indexicals (here, I), and proper names. The indefinite nature of demonstratives or their status of “first mentioned” then motivates their special discourse character as discourse prominent expressions.

References:
Ionin, Tania. 2006. This is definitely specific: Specificity and definiteness in article systems. Natural Language Semantics 14. 175–234.