This Adverbial Accusative:
A Corpus-Based Observation and More[1]

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Introduction

Ever since the traditional grammar (cf. Curme 1931), it has been observed that certain types of English noun phrases can behave like an adverb or an adverbial prepositional phrase on their own, i.e. without any support by a preposition. Such noun phrases have been dubbed *adverbial accusatives*. They can play virtually the same range of adverbial functions as the "real" adverbials:

(1)   Time adverbial
         I stayed there all the summer.
         I'd like to start Wednesday, the first jury day.
      Spatial adverbial
         Let's go some place.
         Come this way, please.
      Measure adverbial
         I should not mind a bit.
         She used to laugh a good deal
      Manner adverbial
         Don't look at me that way.
         They cook (the) French style.

Of these adverbial accusatives above, this paper focuses o adverbial noun phrases which are preceded by a demonstrative article *this*

Limit on Scope

Like other adverbial accusatives, *this* adverbial accusatives show the four types of adverbial behaviors above:

(2)   Time adverbial
         John met Mary this summer.
      Spatial adverbial
         Come this way, please.
      Measure adverbial
         I need a chain about this long.
      Manner adverbial
         The young ladies would not like to be hearing you talk this way.

But in this paper, only one type of the behaviors is taken up: namely, that of time adverbial. The other types of space, measure, or manner are not considered here.

Possible combinations

With the limit above, we can enumerate possible combinations of *this* and time-denoting noun heads:

(3)   Related to *day*
    a.   "this day"
    b.   "this morning"
    c.   "this afternoon"
    d.   "this evening"
    e.   "this night"

(4)   Related to *week*
    a.   "this week"
    b.   "this Sunday"
    c.   "this Monday"
    d.   "this Tuesday"
    e.   "this Wednesday"
    f.   "this Thursday"
    g.   "this Friday"
    h.   "this Saturday"
    i.   "this weekend"

(5)   Related to *month*
    a.   "this Month"
    b.   "this January"
    c.   "this February"
    d.   "this March"
    e.   "this April"
    f.   "this May"
    g.   "this June"
    h.   "this July"
    i.   "this August"
    j.   "this September"
    k.   "this October"
    l.   "this November"
    m.   "this December"

(6)   Related to *season*
    a.   "this season"
    b.   "this spring"
    c.   "this summer"
    d.   "this autumn"
    e.   "this fall"
    f.   "this winter"

(7)   Related to *year*
    a.   "this year"
    b.   "this century"

c.   "this millennium"

Explanandum based on corpus

Many examples of the above combinations can be found in corpora of real-life sentences. With a slight first glance, those phrases seem to mean only "the morning of today", "Sunday of this week" or "January of this year".   This paraphrase appears to covers all the cases and leaves nothing to be explained.   But consider the following example, which is taken from *ER*, a famous TV drama series in the U.S.A.:

(8)   Carol: Yeah, I don't think so.
          Maybe this was too soon to dive back in.
       Mark: Come on!   It's Monday, it'll be easy.
          A couple of kids who fake being sick to stay out of school.
          A few people who partied too hard *this weekend*, and Arthur.

As is clear from Mark's first line, their dialogue takes place on Monday.   Then he uses *this weekend* in his third line.   The question is what he is referring to with this phrase.   Apparently, it is *the weekend of the "last" week*.   This is clear from the past tense of *partied*, to which *this weekend* attaches.

Here is a discrepancy with the readily available paraphrase we have already seen above.   If we follow this paraphrase, *this weekend* is invariably paraphrased as "the weekend of this week".   But this paraphrase does not go with Mark's example from *ER* above.

Looking through the corpus examples with this finding in mind, we can notice many examples of certain types of *this* time adverbials which must be interpreted as referring to more distant past time prior to the speech time.

One caution is in order here.   Among the time-referring *this* adverbial accusatives, I am concerned only with those indexically referring to past or future times, rather than those deictically referring.   That is, I preclude such an example as used in a narrative sentence:

Upon this limitation, a reasonably large size of corpora is searched through to get other relevant examples.   The corpus used this time is a pile of electric texts made by *Project Gutenberg*.[2]   The whole text files were looked through by a grep software on the basis of the following template:

(9)   this _____

This slot is filled with each of the time referring nouns enumerated above and each combination is searched against the Project Gutenberg electric texts.   To get as many examples as possible, the grep search was executed with an option of ignoring whether searched letters are capitals or not.

As a result, the following numbers of combinations in question are found from the corpus:

(10)   "Day"

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[2] This project is making many literary works or others accessible in an electric form.   The homepage of Project Gutenberg is http://promo.net/pg/.   From this site one can download electric texts of various genres and authors via FTP.   Downloaded files are compressed zip files or uncompressed, plain text (txt) files.   Files are subdivided by the years when they are turned to an electric text.   Text files taken up for this paper are those in etext90 to (part of) etext00.   They constitute approximately 2600 files and 1.5 GB.

this day:	7591
this morning:	6689
this afternoon:	1832
this evening:	2575
this night:	1953

(11) "Week"

this Sunday:	32
this Monday:	32
this Tuesday:	35
this Wednesday:	39
this Thursday:	35
this Friday:	34
this Saturday:	35
this weekend:	33

(12) "Month"

this month:	384
this January:	447
this February:	140
this March:	411
this April:	451
this May:	322
this June:	450
this July:	451
this August:	416
this September:	451
this October:	453
this November:	78
this December:	451

(13) "Season"

this spring:	316
this summer:	433
this fall:	337
this autumn:	354
this winter:	283

(14) "Year"

this year:	2506
this century:	240
this millennium:	4

Among these figures, most of the examples are used as deictically referring to a past time in some narrative structure:

(15)

Voltaire and his Du Chatelet had been to Cirey, and thence been at Paris through this Spring and Summer, 1742;--engaged in what to Voltaire and Paris was a great thing, though a pacific one:

Meanwhile, is it not remarkable that Friedrich wrote more Verses, this Autumn, than almost in any other three months of his life?

But, still, we can find examples which surely refer to past or future times in an indexical manner:

(16) referring to a past time:
"Adieu, my adorable Sister: I am so tired, I cannot stir; having left on Tuesday night, or rather Wednesday morning at three o'clock, from a Ball at Monbijou, and arrived here this Friday morning at four.

[...] and in order to arrive at the truth of the said charge we have opened the present court, this Monday, the eleventh day of December, after mass [...]

Fourteen patients died as a result of a massive computer   failure this weekend at the Golda Meier Medical Center on 5th. Avenue.

(17) referring to a future time:
"You are four minutes too slow. No matter. It's enough to mention the error. Now from this moment, twenty-nine minutes after eleven, A.M., this Wednesday, the 2nd of October, you are in my service."

And the Townhall is deaf; and the men are laggard and dastard!--At the Cafe de Foy, this Saturday evening, a new thing is seen, not the last of its kind: a woman engaged in public speaking.

"What would you like, then?"
"Only to lie here, this Sunday evening, among you all."

Although the figure of indexical reference of time by *this* adverbial accusatives is relatively small against that of deictic reference, the numbers are not small enough to simply dismiss as an accident.   Even with this kind of trivial usage, English speakers' intuitions seem stable.   Then we want to know why so.

Tentative Explanans

So far we have seen from many of the real-life examples from the corpora that adverbial accusatives premodified with *this* can refer to both a past time point and a future time point.   Then why is this at all possible?   Here is a very tentative approach based on a cognitive-semantic means.

Before getting into the central idea, we first have to see the characters of the "head" nouns which can go with *this* to behave as a time adverbial.

Those candidate head nouns can be divided into two classes: ones which exhaustively segment the time axis and ones which do not.   Take *month*.   We can say *this month*.   And notice that any time point on a time axis is counted as belonging to some month.   In contrast, take *January*. Although we can say *this January*, there are time points on the time axis that are not in *January*. Some time points may well be in February, March or etc.

This distinction also applies other types of time-referring nouns.   *Week* and other week names are different.   Whereas *week* exhaustively segments the time axis (i.e. there is no time point that does not belong to any week), each week name does not segment the axis exhaustively.   That is, some time may or may not be Monday, Tuesday, or others.

With this observation in mind, the very central idea is a simple one:

This adverbial accusative refers to the cognitively closest time point from a speech time.

This formulation puts no limit on the directionality of time axis. Thus we can refer to any time points, whether past or future. This formulation can capture the fact that *this* time adverbials can refer to a past time as well as a future time.

Further, this formulation naturally rules out the cases time adverbials in question refer to "more" past or "more" future. English speakers do have an intuition that *this Friday* refers to the Friday of the last week or this week or the coming week. But they do not have an intuition that the same *this Friday* refers to the Friday of two weeks ago or two weeks later. This is because the closest time point is based on the speech time. No matter when the speech time is, the nearest Friday of past falls within the current week or the last week. Also, no matter when the speech time is, the nearest Friday of future falls within the current week or the upcoming next week. There is no possibility that Friday of two weeks ago or two weeks later are counted as the closest.

The story is the same for month names. With *this September*, we can refer to Septembers of the last year, this year or the next year; but never to September of two years later or two years ago. Whenever the speech time is, the closest *September* must be one of the former three.

As for *week, month, year*, etc, which maximally segment the time axis, the story is simpler. Since they maximally segment the axis, any speech time point falls within some week, month or year or etc. In such a situation, there is only one closest week, month, year. Namely, the week, month, year which contains the speech time. No other week, month, or year are as close as the containing one. Even neighboring ones are not. Thus, with *this week, this month* or *this year*, there is only one interpretation: the week/month/year that contains the speech time, never the last week/month/year or the next week/month/year.

The very same story appears to work out for "day" terms. But more observations are needed. Actually, it seems difficult to take *this day* referring to today. It is clear that this is because there is *today*, which is simpler way of referring to today. With some kind of blocking effect induced from *today*, *this day* may not refer to today, the day containing the speech time. This is not to say *this day* is totally un acceptable in English. This phrase cannot be used indexically, but can used deictically, referring to some date in a narrative.

This morning, this afternoon, and *this evening* need more careful consideration. They does not maximally segment the time axis. That is, some time point may not be in the morning but in the afternoon; or may not be in the afternoon but in the evening. Thus they seem to belong to the same category as the week names or the month names. But as a fact of intuition, *this morning* refers only to the morning of today, never to the morning of yesterday or tomorrow. Even if one speaks *this morning* late at night, say, 23:50, he invariably refers to the morning of today, never to the next morning. Of course, a possibility of a deictic use is precluded here.

Why is this so? If we just compute the nearest morning, it may be the next morning in the above example. At this point, I have no idea what is limiting the range of *this morning*. As a broad speculation, one might be able to say that the time unit of "day" has a very special meaning to human beings. Actually, a day is the smallest unit of human life. And it seems that a "day" is somehow encapsulated and there is a high and tough boundary between days. Thus we cannot refer to the next morning with *this morning* crossing the day boundary. Therefore only one morning is left out: the morning of today.

The intuition of the analysis can be easily perceived with the following diagram:

Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Morning	Afternoon	*Evening*	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Friday			Saturday			Sunday			Monday		
$Week_1$						$Week_2$					
February											

Suppose the speech time is the italicized Saturday evening. If one says *this January*, it is most naturally interpreted as the nearest January, thus just the last month in this case. If his utterance takes place in December, it may be January of the coming year, rather than January of the same year. It at all depends on the speaker's cognition or attention. If one says *this month* instead, it is only interpreted to refer to current February. Because *month* exhaustively segments the time axis and there is only one month left as the nearest to the speech time; namely the month containing the speech time, or February in this case.

Next, if one utters *this Thursday*, it would be Thursday of $Week_1$. It is the nearest Thursday from Saturday evening of $Week_1$. Again, it may well be Thursday of $Week_2$, depending on the speaker's cognitive status. But notice that it will not be interpreted to refer to Thursday of $Week_0$ or of $Week_3$. What about *this week*? It must be only $Week_1$, not $Week_2$ or $Week_0$. Same as *this month*, this is because *week* segments the time axis exhaustively.

Now finally let us turn to *this morning* in this case. Although Sunday morning is the nearest to Saturday evening, thanks to the encapsulated character of *days* mentioned above, referring to Sunday morning is blocked and Saturday morning is correctly referred to instead.

So far, we have seen that the peculiar ambiguity of *this* time adverbial accusatives can basically be explained by the simple closeness consideration with the nature of "head" nouns. As a final remark, this consideration seems to be directly derived from the core meaning of demonstrative of *this*. This word refers to an object of "here and now". That is the nearest object from the speaker in time and space. When *this* can be used to refer to times, its three-dimensional spatial character is dropped and the two-dimensional time character is left. Still the closeness consideration is preserved and with the two-dimensional axis, there are three possibilities: one prior to the pivot (i.e. the speech time); and one after it; and one including the pivot (consider *this week*).

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