

Deixis in Modern Linguistics

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Abstract

Modern linguistics is one of the most exceptional scientific revolutions of the twentieth century. It is related to linguistic studies where the original focus from prescriptive grammar and the purpose of improving how people write and speak shifted to the idea that a language can be viewed as a self-contained and structured system situated at a particular point in time. Pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics, studies how people understand and produce a speech act in a concrete speech situation. Deixis belongs to the area of pragmatics because it directly involves the relationship between the structure of language and the context in which it is used (Levinson 83:55). This essay will discuss deictic expressions, firstly by giving various definitions by different linguists, secondly by presenting and discussing the different deictic categories and finally by commenting on the different types of uses of deictic expressions such as deictic and anaphoric.

Keywords: Modern Linguistics, Deixis, Deictic Expressions, Anaphoric, Pragmatics

Introduction

The linguistic subfields of semantics and pragmatics are both related to the study of meaning. Semantics studies the relation between word meanings. On the other hand, pragmatics studies the way in which the context shapes meaning. Pragmatics show that the interpretation of utterances not only depends on linguistic knowledge, but also depends on knowledge about the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, such as the social information that is encoded with various expressions regarding the relative social status and familiarity, the intent of the speaker, the place and time of the utterance. Pragmatic awareness is regarded as one of the most

challenging aspects of language learning, and it often comes through experience. Deictic expressions fall into the following categories: person deixis, spatial deixis, temporal deixis, social deixis, and discourse deixis.

Deictic expressions – definitions, categories and types of uses

Deictic expressions represent a key connection between the time frame, space, and people involved. The word deictic has its roots in the Greek word “deiknynai”, meaning “to show”. A related word, “deixis”, is used in pragmatics and linguistics and it refers to a process whereby either words or expressions are seen to rely utterly on context. Levinson (1983) accentuates the role of the context; he argues that deixis is the reflection of the relationship between language and context and defines deixis as follows:

Deixis is an important field studied in pragmatics, semantics and linguistics. Deixis refers to the phenomenon wherein understanding the meaning of certain words and phrases in an utterance requires contextual information. Words or phrases that require contextual information to convey meaning are deictic. (Levinson, 1983:54)

The contextual information of the utterance mentioned by Levinson (1983) consists of information about the speaker, the addressee, the time and the place. For example, if we take a close look on the sentence *I am leaving tomorrow*, who does *I*, *am*, and *tomorrow* refer to? We cannot identify the meaning of this utterance, unless we know the time of the utterance, the place, and who the speaker is, in other words the context of the utterance. Expressions like *I*, *you*, *we*, *this*, *that*, *here*, *there*, *today*, *tomorrow*, are all indexed, and the listener needs to identify the speaker, the time and the place of the utterance to fully understand what is being said and meant. There are three deictic categories identified in the literature. These are: **personal deixis** (*I*, *you*, *we*), **spatial deixis** (*this*, *that*, *here*, *there*), and **temporal deixis** (*now*, *today*, *yesterday*). In addition to person, place and time deixis, Levinson (1983), following Lyons (1977) and Filmore (1977), adds two other deictic categories. These are: **social deixis** which covers the encoding of social distinctions that are relative to participant-roles, particularly aspects of the social relationship holding between speaker and addressee(s) or speaker and some referents, and **discourse deixis** which involves the encoding of reference to portions of the unfolding discourse in which the utterance is located.

As opposed to Levinson, Yule (1996:9) describes deixis as a way of “pointing through language”, and also refers to deixis as a technical word that comes from Greek. Yule (1996) also admits that deictic expressions have their most basic uses in face-to-face spoken utterances. In addition, Lyons (1977:377) has defined deixis as follows:

By deixis is meant the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and activities talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatio-temporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and a least one addressee (Lyons 1997:377).

In other words, an utterance containing deictic expressions such as *I will move this chair over here* requires contextual information for an accurate meaning: which chair is being referred to, knowledge about space – knowing where here is, and who the speaker is. Levinson (1983) states that an utterance can be tested as being deictic or not in terms of its truth conditions. For example, if we say *George is the husband of Maria*, the utterance can be either true or false, however if we say *He is the husband of Maria*, we cannot assess whether the sentence is true or false because it depends who the *he* is. If we take another example, such as *I'll come and see you tomorrow*, we cannot assess whether this sentence is true or false because we are not aware of when the sentence was written, therefore we do not know when *tomorrow* is. Thus, knowledge about the context in the interpretation of utterances containing deictic expressions is crucial.

For Levinson (1983:64), deixis is organised in an egocentric way, with the deictic centre constituting the reference point in relation to which a deictic expression is to be interpreted. For example, in an utterance such as *I'm over here now*, the speaker, the actual location and the actual time of the utterance are respectively the deictic centres. The term deictic centre underlines that the deictic term has to relate to the situation exactly at the point where the utterance is made or the text is written, in other words it has to relate to the position from which the deictic terms are understood. In conversations, the deictic centre is constantly changing between the partners; the speech event is conceptualised from a different point of view.

A deictic expression is a word or phrase that points out the different meaning the words have in various situations. Without a pragmatic approach, the interpretation of an utterance would be impossible to understand, therefore deictic expressions are crucial and it involves the relationship between the structure of languages and the contexts in which they are used. A word that depends on deictic indicators is called a **deictic word**, and is bound to a context. Hence, words that are deictic hold a denotational meaning which varies depending on time and/or place, and a fixed semantic meaning (Levinson, 1983).

In addition to knowing the time, place and the speaker and addressee, deictic expressions help us realise what is close to the speaker and what is not. This is defined by the following two terms: **proximal** (near the speaker), such as *this, here, now*, and **distal** (away from the speaker) such as *that, there, then* (Levinson, 1983). This concept of distance is more relevant to the study of spatial deixis. Deictic expressions also help us realise if the movement is away from the speaker or towards the speaker (*go vs come*). According to Fillmore (1977), the most obvious manifestations of deictic categories in languages are to be found in the systems of pronouns i.e *I, we, she*, demonstratives i.e *this, these*; and tenses i.e *walk, walked*.

Person deixis localises an entity in relation to the position of the speaker and/or hearer (Green, 2008). First and second person pronouns typically refer to the speaking and hearing speech participants, whereas third person pronouns designate the non-speech or narrated participant. According to Lyons (1983) the active participants are the speaker and the addressee, whereas the third person is not an active participant in the speech act.

To give an illustration of what I mean let us look at the following examples:

- 1) *I* was late.
- 2) *You* arrived early.
- 3) *I* saw *them*.

Third person pronouns may be used deictically or anaphorically. An anaphoric use of a deictic expression occurs when reference is being made to another entity that was introduced earlier in the text/speech.

Examples:

- 4) John believes *she* is beautiful. (deictic use)
 5) John thinks I heard *him*. (anaphoric use)

In English, pronouns come in singular and plural forms, several are marked for case, and the third person singular forms encode gender. This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Personal Pronouns in English

	<i>Singular</i>		<i>Plural</i>	
	<i>Nominative</i>	<i>Accusative</i>	<i>Nominative</i>	<i>Accusative</i>
<i>1st person</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>We</i>	<i>Us</i>
<i>2nd person</i>	<i>You</i>		<i>You</i>	
<i>3rd person</i>	<i>Masculine He</i>	<i>Masculine Him</i>	<i>They</i>	<i>Them</i>
	<i>Feminine She</i>	<i>Feminine Her</i>		
	<i>Neuter It</i>			

Another category of deixis is **spatial deixis**. Spatial deixis localises both the speech participants and the narrated participants in space. The most frequent words are the pronouns *this/that* and *these/those*. Other expressions that belong to this category are the adverbs *here/there* and prepositions *in/on* (Levinson, 1983). Spatial deixis also entails whether something is near the speaker or not (*this vs that*). In all languages, there are pairs of verbs such as *come/go*, *bring/take*, which are interpreted to identify the direction of the motion, towards or away from the place of speech event, hence the spatial deixis is the marking in language of the orientation or position in a space. Lyons (1977:648) states that “there are two ways in which we can identify an object by means of a referring expression: first, by informing the addressee where it is; second, by telling him what is like, what the properties it has or what class of objects it belongs to”.

Fillmore (1977) talks about the fact that deictic pointing can be achieved in different ways. He distinguishes between two types of uses: the gestural and symbolic ones. The gestural use requires monitoring the speech event in order to identify the referent, whereas the symbolic use involves

activating knowledge about the communicative situation and the referent. Levinson (1983) exemplifies the two uses with the following examples:

- 6) *This* finger hurts (gestural).
- 7) *This* city stinks (symbolic).

In the first example, we notice that the demonstrative can be accompanied by a pointing gesture which illustrates the gestural use. In the second example, which does not involve a pointing gesture and shows a larger situational context illustrates the symbolic use.

Temporal deixis is another category of deictic expressions. It refers to an event of an utterance, which takes place any time relative to the speaking time and is, therefore, represented by tense, time adverbials and sometimes by spatial prepositions such *as in the evening, at midnight, on time*. The location of an event referred to and represented by time and tense constitutes the deictic centre in the utterance of a speaker. In English, the present and the past are morphologically marked. Morphology is an area of study within grammar that describes how words are composed. A linguistic element is morphologically marked when it is more distinctively identified than another element, by adding a morpheme. A morpheme is the minimal unit of meaning. For example, the first person present tense *I work* is not morphologically marked. On the other hand, the third person *he work-s*, and the past tense *he work-ed* are marked by the morpheme *-s* and *-ed*. The future is constructed using the modal verb *will*. Another way to express the future in English is by attaching an adverb of time indicating the future illustrated in the following example:

- 8) I *go* on holiday *next week*.

More examples of temporal deixis:

- 9) My friend *is going to* sing in a concert tomorrow. (future with phrasal verb *be going to*)
- 10) They *will* bring the car in to be fixed. (future with modal verb *will*)
- 11) I *lived* in Cyprus for eight years. (morphologically marked past tense *-ed*)
- 12) She *drinks* tea *every morning*. (morphologically marked present tense *-s*, expressing an event occurring on a regular basis)

Levinson (1983:73) argues that “complexities arise in the usage of tense, time adverbs and other time deictic morphemes wherever there is a departure from this assumption, for example in letter

writing, or the pre-recording of media programmes". For example, if a letter says *I am leaving tomorrow*, we are unaware of when tomorrow is, unless we have a fixed reference point of when the letter was written.

Fillmore (1977) and Levinson (1983) note that the deictic words *yesterday, today, and tomorrow*, pre-empt the absolute ways of referring to the relevant days. Thus, the utterance, *I will see you on Thursday*, said on Thursday, can only be referring to next Thursday, otherwise the speaker should have said today. If it is said on a Wednesday, the speaker should use *tomorrow*.

Having presented the traditional deictic categories, what will now be discussed is the discourse and the social deixis. The **discourse deixis** provides a reference to an utterance backward or forward to other utterances. Levinson (1985:62) states that discourse deixis is "the encoding of reference to portions of the unfolding discourse in which the utterance is located". In other words, discourse deixis refers to all expressions and phrases that point the reader or hearer through spoken or written text.

These examples illustrate discourse deixis (Fillmore 1977):

earlier, later, the preceding x, the following s, in the following paragraphs, in the following weeks, during next month, in the next chapter

Discourse deixis can very easily be confused with anaphora; anaphora is used to refer to something previously mentioned.

Examples:

- 13) *That* was interesting.
- 14) *This* is a lie.

Examples of anaphora:

- 15) Take a look at *this* book. *This* is the best book I have read in a long time.

Anaphora is often contrasted with cataphora where the words refer forwards. It has been shown that *this* can be used both anaphorically and cataphorically, whereas *that* can be used anaphorically only.

Examples:

- 16) *This* is what I mean. (anaphoric or cataphoric reference)

17) *That* is what I mean (anaphoric reference only).

Some forms of deixis may be simultaneously deictic and anaphoric.

Example:

18) Lola is coming over later; we are having dinner together.

19) She was born in Romania and has lived there all her life.

Example 18 refers to the set consisting of *Lola and me*: the speaker component of this is determined deictically by *we* being a first person pronoun, while the inclusion of *Lola* in the set is determined anaphorically by the previous mention of her. In example 19 *there* is anaphora in that *there* obtains the interpretation, *in Romania*, from the preceding preposition phrase, but at the same time it is deictic in that it refers to a place, which includes where the utterance-act takes place.

Social deixis refers to the relation between the speaker and the addressee and third party referents (Fillmore, 1977). According to Levinson (1983:63) social deixis is ``those aspects of language structure that are anchored to the social identities of participants in the speech event, or to relations between them, or to relations between them and other referents`` (Levinson, 1983:63). In some languages, such as Spanish, French, Romanian, the singular second person pronoun has two forms: *tu* and *usted* - *vous-dumneavoastra*. The first form (*tu*) is used to address to a speaker in an informal or relaxed way. The second form (*usted* - *vous* - *dumneavoastra*) is used in a more formal or polite context. In Modern English, there is no such distinction for the second person pronoun *you*. However, in the Elizabethan English *thee*, an archaic pronoun has been widely used with the same role as *vous* in French (Hornblower, 2012).

20) I tell *Thee* what Antonio, I love *Thee*, and it is my love that speaks (Holderness, 1993)

Under the cover term of social deixis, Fillmore (1977) includes the following linguistic phenomena: devices for person marking, for example pronouns; the various ways of separating speech levels; distinctions in utterances of various types which are dependent on certain properties of the speech act participants; the various ways in which names, titles, and kinship terms vary in form and usage according to the relationships among the speaker, the addressee, the audience and the person referred to; linguistic performance which can appear in terms of social acts, such as insults, greetings, expressions of gratitude; linguistic performances which can accompany social acts, such as *there you*

go, and, finally, the various linguistic devices that helps a speaker establish and maintain a deictic anchoring with a given addressee.

Furthermore, Foley (1997) talks about the numerous Asian languages. These languages have an elaborate system of honorifics, “grammatical morphemes and special classes of words indicating social deixis among the interlocutors or the referent of a participant in the utterance” (Foley 1997:319). By the appropriate use of honorifics, one is able to label a referent or to identify oneself with a certain social standing. Levinson (1983) suggested restricting the term *honorific* to the cases in which the relations between speaker-referent, speaker addressee, speaker-bystander express relative rank or respect. This phenomenon is well exemplified in Japanese, since it is a language distinguished by a rich system of honorifics. As any other society, regardless of the form of the government, the Japanese society has social stratification. The language reflects this situation most closely, and the norms of appropriate linguistic behaviour are based on the way in which the society is stratified. The ability to use such expressions appropriately, not only in Japanese, but in some other languages too, such as European Languages with T/V distinction, such as *tu vs vous* in French, is considered to be a mark of good education and a good upbringing. Well educated intellectuals are generally more conservative regarding the use of deferential expressions.

Conclusion

There are some expressions that are not understood unless the interlocutors have some knowledge about the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, the intend of the speaker, the place and time of the utterance. These words do not have a constant meaning, and they are known as deictic words. Deictic words are a crucial element of pragmatics because they are related to the context of the utterance. In this essay, different types of deictic words and categories have been presented and discussed.

To sum up, personal deixis system in English marks distinctions in gender (in the third person only) and number (in first and third person); the second person pronoun *you* can refer to both singular and plural entities, i.e. neutralised. Thus, personal deixis can mark a number of overlapping distinctions: person, gender, number, and social status. Spatial deixis involves the specification of

locations relative to points of reference in the speech event. English has a proximal or distal distance from speaker. A third type of deixis is temporal deixis which shows the orientation or position of the referent of actions and events in time. As shown in temporal deixis section, the concept of time English is represented by three main classes: time adverbials, tenses, and time expressions. These three categories of deixis are known as traditional deictic categories. Further to this, Fillmore (1997) identified two more categories: discourse and social deixis. Discourse deixis indicates or refers to some portion or aspect of the ongoing discourse, and the social deixis reflects the social relation between the speakers, and classifiers used with human referents.

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