

UNDERSTANDING DEIXIS: CONNECTING LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT

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Abstract

Deixis is the concept that helps us understand how language connects with context. It refers to expressions that depend on their context for interpretation. This study delves into deixis from a pragmatic viewpoint, exploring its categories, functions, and relationship with indexicality. Deixis has been underexplored in the literature, so this study addresses key questions: What are the categories of deixis? How does context influence deixis? What is the relationship between deixis and indexicality? The study highlights how deixis reflects the link between context and a speaker's intention.

Key words

context, deixis, pragmatics, gestural and symbolic deixis, proximal, distal, indexicality

1. Introduction

Stephen Levinson (1983) noted that deixis is a clear way language shows its relationship with context. The term "*deixis*" comes from Greek, meaning "*pointing*" or "*indicating*." Some English sentences are nearly impossible to understand without context. For example, "They'll have to do that tomorrow, because they aren't here now," is vague without knowing who "they" are, what "*that*" is, and when "*now*" is. These are deictic expressions (they, that, tomorrow, here, now), which need context to be interpreted correctly (Yule, 1985).

Alan Cruse (2006) categorized deictic terms as definite referring expressions. Deictic expressions often refer to the speaker's location or the point of reference. For example, "Can you pass that newspaper?" refers to a newspaper distant from the speaker. Once the speaker gets the newspaper, they might say, "I'm going to have to stop buying this newspaper," indicating a change in the deictic reference.

According to Chapman (2011), deixis is used to connect language with its context. Deictic expressions, such as demonstrative pronouns and some adverbs, rely on shared context between the speaker and listener (LoCastro, 2012).

2. Proximal and Distal Deixis

Deixis involves encoding the spatiotemporal context and subjective experience of the speaker (Green, 2006). Words like "I," "here," "now," and "this" are highly context-dependent. What is "here" for the speaker might be "there" for the listener.

George Yule (1996) distinguishes between "near the speaker" (proximal) and "away from the speaker" (distal). Proximal terms include "this," "here," "now," while distal terms include "that," "there," "then." For example, in Japanese, there are three deictic terms: "kore" (near the speaker), "sore" (near the listener), and "are" (away from both) (LoCastro, 2012).

3. Categories of Deixis

Deixis interprets phrases based on time, location, participants, or other linguistic material. There are five main categories of deixis: person, spatial, temporal, discourse, and social.

3.1 Person Deixis

Person deixis involves pronouns: first person (I), second person (you), and third person (he, she, it) (Yule, 1996). Pronouns like "we" can be inclusive (including the listener) or exclusive (excluding the listener) (LoCastro, 2012). Social status can influence person deixis, using honorifics to reflect higher status (Yule, 1996).

3.2 Spatial Deixis

Spatial deixis specifies locations relative to the speech event (Levinson, 1983). Common examples are "here" and "there," with context determining their specific meaning (Chapman, 2011). Verbs like "come" and "go" differ based on direction relative to the speaker's location (Palmer, 1984).

3.3 Temporal Deixis

Temporal deixis involves signaling time-related meanings like "now" and "then." "Now" refers to the time of the utterance, while "then" refers to a different time (Yule, 1996). Temporal deixis is also psychological, with events perceived as moving toward or away from the speaker (LoCastro, 2012).

3.4 Social Deixis

Social deixis represents social identities and relationships. Terms of address, such as "Mr. Smith" or "John," indicate different social relationships (Chapman, 2011). Languages like Japanese have complex systems for expressing social status through deixis.

3.5 Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis refers to expressions that indicate their relation to the surrounding text. For example, "anyway" suggests a connection to previous discourse (Levinson, 1983). Discourse deixis is distinct from anaphora, which involves referring back to a previous term.

4. Gestural and Symbolic Deixis

Gestural deixis uses gestures and physical pointing, while symbolic deixis relies on spatio-temporal parameters (Levinson, 1983). Gestural deixis is context-specific, whereas symbolic deixis can be understood through general knowledge of the situation.

5. Deixis and Grammar

Person, spatial, and time deixis align with direct and indirect speech distinctions (Yule, 1996). In direct speech, proximal forms are used, while indirect speech shifts to distal forms, making the original event seem more distant.

6. Deictic Change

Some deictic terms, like "thou," have become outdated in spoken language but remain in written communication. Terms like "hence" and "thence" guide readers through texts, indicating a shift in their use due to increased literacy and written communication (Grundy, 2000).

7. Deixis and Indexicality

Indexicality refers to language's property of encoding context. Deictic words depend on context for interpretation, functioning as indexical signs (Grundy, 2000). Charles Peirce introduced the concept of "indexical signs," highlighting their role in referring through context.

In summary, deixis provides a crucial link between language and context, demonstrating how meaning is shaped by the speaker's intentions and the

surrounding environment. Understanding deixis enriches our comprehension of communication and its nuances.

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