Deixis and Reference

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Deixis and Reference

Deixis refers to words or expressions that rely on context to convey meaning, often linked to the speaker, listener, time, place, or situation. It plays a crucial role in language because it helps speakers navigate the world in a way that is anchored in a shared understanding of their surroundings and experiences.

Early Studies (20th Century): Deixis began to be formally recognized and studied in the early 20th century. Linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure contributed to understanding how words are anchored in contexts, even though Saussure didn't explicitly focus on deixis as a term.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the field of pragmatics emerged as a major area of study in linguistics, focusing on how context influences meaning. Key figures like John Austin and J.L. Austin in the field of speech act theory and Paul Grice with his cooperative principle explored how language functions in specific communicative situations. Deixis became a central concept in this context, as it directly relates to how meaning can shift depending on who is speaking, when, and where.

As linguistic theories evolved, Noam Chomsky's work on generative grammar helped set the stage for analyzing deictic expressions as part of formal syntax. Linguists like Emmon Bach and Robert Stalnaker began investigating deixis systematically within formal semantics and pragmatics.

Today, deixis is a fundamental topic in both syntax and pragmatics, with its own subfields like person deixis, time deixis (tense and aspect), place deixis (spatial reference), and discourse deixis (references within conversation). Linguists such as Stephen Levinson and Keith Brown have continued to explore its complexities in relation to how language functions in social contexts.

Deixis :

Deixis is a term used to refer to a word or a phrase which directly relates an utterance to time, place or people. It is a word which takes its meaning from the context or the situation (the speaker, the addressee, the time and place) of the utterance in which it is used112. Briefly stated, it is the use of certain words as a way of pointing with language. We use this device o point to things (it, this/these books), or people (I, him, them, those men).

There are three types of deixis:

1. Person deixis refers/points to people (he, she, this girl).

2. Spatial deixis refers/points to a location (here, there, near that).

3. Temporal deixis refers/points to time (now, then, last week,

tomorrow, next month).113

All these deictic expressions have to be interpreted in terms of which person, place or time the speaker has in mind. For example, if on December 10th 2012, you say: Yesterday was a very cold day. Here yesterday refers to the 9th of December. When dealing with deixis, we need to make some distinction between deictic expressions which are marked as close to the speaker (this, these, here, now) and what is marked as distant (that, those, there, over there, then). Person deixis includes the first person singular pronoun 'I' which refers to the speaker or writer, the second person singular and plural 'you' which refers to the person or persons addressed, the third person singular (he, she) and third person plural (they) which refer to some other person or persons It is worth mentioning that all types of deixis are actually referring expressions, like: you, he, they (refer to people), here, there (refer to place), yesterday, tomorrow, then, now (refer to time).

Even demonstratives (this, that, these, those) can be used with referring expressions: this boy, those girls, that house, etc. It is also remarkable to mention that the grammatical device 'tense' can be used to serve a deictic function (indicating present, pastand future time):

1. Rosemary is chatting online with her friends.

(The act of chatting happens at the same time of the utterance: present time)

2. If you say: John did it well.

(The act of doing refers to a point of time before the utterance: past time)

3. She is going to buy a new car.

(The act of buying refers to a point of time after the utterance: near future.)

1-Spatial deixis

The deictic devices in a language commit speakers to set up a frame of reference around themselves. Adverbs of location can be used deictically :

- *It's hot **here** in the sun; let's take our drinks into the shade over **there** .*

The adverbs here and there pick out places according to their proximity to the location of the speaker. We can see this because, of course, if the speaker moves, the interpretation of the adverbs will change

• Demonstratives work in a similar way:

between **this** / **these** and **that** / **those**.

Once again the current speaker occupies the reference point: items closer to her will be described as *this/these*, items further away as *that/those*.

Deictic elements related to location can also give information about motion

toward and away from the speaker:

•ex. Come and go

•Don't go into my bedroom – Don't come into my bedroom

2-Person deixis

Thus far we have concentrated on deictic divisions of space. A further deictic system grammaticalizes the roles of participants: the current speaker, addressee(s), and others. This information is grammaticalized by pronouns, typically a first person singular pronoun is used for the speaker, second person pronouns for addressee(s), and minimally, a third person category for a category "neither-speaker nor-addressee(s)."

This basic three-way system is the basis of most pronoun systems but once again languages differ in the amount of other contextual information that is included in pronouns. We can show this by continuing our comparison of Arabic and English, using just subject pronouns for brevity:

Singular	Plural	Singular plural
I , he, she , it	We , they	you

Singular	Dual	Dlural
'anna "I" 'anta "thou(m)" 'anti "thou (f) "	'antumaa"you (two)"	Nahnu "we" 'antum "you(m)" 'antunna "you(f)"

3- Social deixis

Social deixis refers to linguistic expressions that signal the social relationship between speakers and addressees. It helps convey formality, politeness, hierarchy, and familiarity in a conversation.

Types of Social Deixis

Relational Social Deixis – Shows the relationship between speaker and listener.

Example: "Can I help you, sir?" (The word sir marks respect.)

Absolute Social Deixis – Uses titles or honorifics regardless of direct interaction.

Example: "The President will speak now." (Title President shows status.)

Examples of Social Deixis in English

1. Titles and Address Forms

"Excuse me, Dr. Johnson." (Formal)

"Hey, Mike!" (Informal)

➡ Titles (Dr., Mr., Mrs., Professor) indicate formality and respect.

2. Politeness Markers

"Would you please close the door?" (Polite)

"Close the door!" (Less polite)

➡ Politeness signals social hierarchy or formality.

3. Pronoun Use (Historical Example)

Old English had thou (informal) vs. you (formal), similar to tu/vous in French.

Now, you is used for everyone, but social deixis remains in tone and address forms.

4. Honorifics and Formal Language

"May I assist you, madam?" (Respectful, formal)

"Need any help?" (Casual, informal)

4. Temporal Deixis (Time Expressions)

• Refers to points in time relative to the moment of speaking.

• Examples: now, then, today, tomorrow, yesterday, next week

• "I'll do it tomorrow." (The meaning of "tomorrow" depends on when the statement is made.)

5- Discourse Deixis:

Discourse deixis refers to words and expressions that point to parts of the conversation or text itself rather than things in the outside world. It helps speakers and writers organize their communication by referring to something already mentioned (backward reference) or something that will be mentioned later (forward reference).

1. Backward Reference (Referring to Earlier Discourse)

When a speaker refers to something they already said, they use discourse deixis.

"As I mentioned before, discourse deixis is important."

➡ "Before" refers to something said earlier in the conversation.

"That was a great explanation!"

➡ "That" points to a statement just made.

2. Forward Reference (Referring to Upcoming Discourse)

When a speaker refers to something they haven't said yet, they also use discourse deixis. "I will explain this in the next section."

➡ "This" refers to something that will be explained later.

"More on that later."

➡ "That" refers to an idea the speaker will discuss soon.

3. Using Demonstratives to Point Within Discourse

Words like this, that, these, those are often used to refer to parts of discourse.

"This shows why discourse deixis matters."

➡ "This" refers to something just mentioned.

"That's exactly what I meant."

➡ "That" refers to a previous statement.

Reference :

Reference in linguistics pertains to the way language is used to identify entities in discourse. References can be classified into two main categories:

- **Endophoric reference** – Refers to something within the discourse. It is further divided into:

    - **Anaphoric reference** – Referring back to something mentioned earlier (e.g., "John arrived late. He apologized.").

    - **Cataphoric reference** – Referring to something mentioned later in the discourse (e.g., "Before she arrived, Mary called to confirm her attendance.").

- **Exophoric reference** – An exophoric reference occurs when a word or phrase points to something outside the discourse. For example, in the sentence "Look over there!" the word "there" refers to a location that is not specified in the text but is understood through the context of the situation .

- Example:

- In a conversation, if one person says, "They're late again, can you believe it?" the pronoun "they" refers to people known to both speakers but not mentioned in the conversation .

- Context Dependence: Exophoric references require shared knowledge or context between the participants in the conversation. Without this shared understanding, the reference may be unclear or meaningless .

- Contrast with Other References: Exophoric references differ from anaphoric and cataphoric references, which refer to elements within the discourse itself. Anaphoric references point back to something previously mentioned, while cataphoric references point forward to something that will be mentioned later .

How Speakers Reference Objects, People, and Events in Different Contexts

Effective communication relies on the ability to reference objects, people, and events in a way that is understood by others. The way speakers make these references varies depending on context, shared knowledge, cultural norms, and linguistic structures. This paper explores the different ways in which speakers refer to entities in various contexts, including formal and informal settings, spatial and temporal deixis, anaphora, and pragmatic considerations. Understanding these mechanisms enhances effective communication and reduces ambiguity in interactions (Clark, 1996).

Definite and Indefinite Reference

One of the fundamental ways speakers reference entities is through the use of definite and indefinite articles. A speaker may use a **definite reference** when the listener is expected to recognize the entity being mentioned. For example:

- *The book on the table is mine.*

Conversely, an **indefinite reference** is used when introducing a new or unknown entity:

- *I saw a book on the table.*

This distinction helps manage information flow and maintain coherence in discourse (Lyons, 1999).

Pronouns and Anaphora Pronouns are another common method of referencing people, objects, and events. Their interpretation depends on previously mentioned information (anaphora) or upcoming information (cataphora):

- **Anaphoric reference:** *John bought a car. He loves it.* (He refers to John; it refers to the car)

- **Cataphoric reference:** *It was a beautiful day—the sun was shining and the birds were singing.* (It refers to the day described afterward)

These references help maintain coherence and avoid redundancy in speech and writing (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Shared Knowledge and Common Ground

Speakers often rely on shared knowledge or common ground when making references. This is particularly important in conversations where background knowledge influences understanding.

For example:

- *Let's meet at the usual spot.* (Assumes shared knowledge of the location)

- *The president announced a new policy today.* (The identity of 'the president' depends on context)

Failing to establish common ground can lead to confusion or misinterpretation (Clark & Brennan, 1991).

Cultural and Social Influences on Reference

Cultural norms influence how people reference objects and individuals. Some languages, such as Japanese, use honorifics and formal titles to address others based on social hierarchy, while English often uses first names in informal settings.

Examples of culturally influenced references include:

- *Professor Smith* (formal) vs. *John* (informal)

- *Tanaka-san* in Japanese, where "-san" conveys respect

These social nuances impact the way references are used and interpreted (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Figurative Language and Indirect References

Speakers sometimes use metaphorical or indirect references to convey meaning, such as:

- **Metaphors:** *He is a rock in difficult times.*

- **Metonymy:** *The White House issued a statement.* (Referring to the U.S. government)

- **Euphemisms:** *He passed away.* (Instead of *He died.*)

These figurative expressions add depth to language and can be used to express complex ideas more subtly (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Nonverbal and Multimodal References

Beyond spoken language, nonverbal cues like gestures, facial expressions, and body language help clarify references. For example:

- Pointing while saying *"Look at that!"*

- Using tone and emphasis to highlight certain words (e.g., *I didn't say he stole the money.* changes meaning based on emphasis).

These multimodal references help disambiguate meaning and facilitate communication (Kendon, 2004).

Translation challenges :

  Translating deixis and reference between English and Arabic can be challenging due to structural and cultural differences between the two languages. Arabic often uses more context-dependent structures, while English relies on explicit pronouns and tense markers. Here's how different types of deixis and reference affect translation:

1. Personal Deixis (Pronouns & Social Forms)

English has a single pronoun for "you," while Arabic differentiates based on gender and number.

Example 1: English "You" vs. Arabic أنتَ / أنتِ / أنتم

 • English: You are my friend.

 • Arabic (Singular, Male): أنتَ صديقي. (Anta ṣadīqī.)

 • Arabic (Singular, Female): أنتِ صديقتي. (Anti ṣadīqatī.)

 • Arabic (Plural): أنتم أصدقائي. (Antum aṣdiqā'ī.)

Translation Challenge: If translating from English to Arabic, the translator must infer gender and number from context.

2. Temporal Deixis (Time Expressions)

Arabic and English have different tense systems, and time expressions sometimes require adaptation.

Example 2: English "yesterday" vs. Arabic "أمس"

• English: I met him yesterday.

• Arabic: قابلته أمس. (Qābaltuhu ams.)

However, Arabic sometimes prefers verb conjugation alone without an explicit time marker:

• كنتُ قد قابلته. (Kuntu qad qābaltuhu.) → "I had already met him."

Translation Challenge: Arabic uses more flexible tense markers, so a translator must decide whether to add a time reference explicitly or let verb conjugation indicate it.

3. Spatial Deixis (Location Words)

English and Arabic express spatial relationships differently, with Arabic often using prepositional phrases or demonstratives.

Example 3: English "here" vs. Arabic "هنا"

• English: Come here!

• Arabic: تعالَ هنا! (Ta'āl huna!)

However, Arabic can also use "هذا المكان" (hādhā al-makān, "this place") for emphasis.

Translation Challenge: Some deictic expressions in English (e.g., "over there") may require paraphrasing in Arabic for clarity.

4. Discourse Deixis (Referencing Parts of Speech)

English and Arabic structure discourse deixis differently, especially with words like "this" or "that" when referring to previously mentioned ideas.

Example 4: English "this" referring to an idea

• English: This proves my point.

• Arabic: وهذا يثبت وجهة نظري. (Wa-hādhā yuthbit wijhat naẓarī.)

However, if referring to something in a previous sentence, Arabic might use ذلك (dhālika) instead of هذا (hādhā).

Translation Challenge: Arabic differentiates between هذا (close reference) and ذلك (distant reference), while English often just uses "this."

5. Reference: Definite vs. Indefinite

Arabic often uses definite articles (الـ, "the") more frequently than English, which can affect translation.

Example 5: English "a book" vs. Arabic "كتاب"

• English: I read a book yesterday.

• Arabic:

• قرأتُ كتابًا أمس. (Qara'tu kitāban ams.) → Indefinite

• قرأتُ الكتاب أمس. (Qara'tu al-kitāba ams.) → Definite ("the book")

Translation Challenge: In Arabic, adding الـ changes the meaning, so translators must consider whether a noun should remain indefinite or become definite.

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