

Deixis: A Pragmatics Analysis

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Abstract

Deixis owns a significant place in the study of pragmatics. Present study discusses deixis comparatively with reference to Levinson (1983) and Yule (1996) in terms of its clarification of concepts, appropriate exemplification and coherent argumentation as propounded in their respective works on pragmatics. However, it is revealed through this discussion that the approach of Yule is quite precise and comprehensive as compared to Levinson.

Keywords: deixis, pragmatics, analysis

Introduction

Levinson (1983) states that pragmatics is the scientific study of the relation between the structure of a semiotic system (notably language) and its usage in context, and along with semantics, forms part of the general theory of meaning. Inside the theory of meaning, pragmatics particularly deals with inherent meanings, presumptions and contextual interpretations: the method in which syntactical features of linguistic expressions operate on the background of presumption and inferences. Under the rubric of linguistics, pragmatics plays a significant part in general linguistic theory in part because:

- (a) it possesses significant intrinsic subject matter,
- (b) it promises explanations for other linguistic phenomena (although partial), and
- (c) it also emerges as a response to over-idealization in contemporary grammatical theory (although partial).

Moreover, it has also emerged as a field of interdisciplinary concern, with basic aids from philosophy, psychology and sociology of language and linguistics like critical discourse analysis (CDA). According to Levinson the term ‘pragmatics’ in modern semiotics

is adopted from the philosophical work of C. S. Peirce and R. Carnap as reflected in Morris (1938) *three divisions of semiotics, the study of sign systems*: 1) syntax, which probes signs to signs relationship, 2) semantics, which explores the relation between signs and things to which they refer, and 3) pragmatics, which investigates the relation between signs and their users. Since then, the term has been used in two broad perspectives: sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, along with a narrower use in terms of systematically context-dependent meanings. Topics like deixis, presupposition, speech acts, implicature, and conversational inference are central to pragmatics but in this study only deixis will be discussed in detail in the perspective of the concepts propounded by Levinson (1983) and Yule (1996).

Discussion

A Yiddish story (Levinson, 1983, p. 68):

A melamed [Hebrew teacher] discovering that he had left his comfortable slippers back in the house, sent a student after them with a note for his wife. The note read: “Send me your slippers with this boy”. When the student asked why he had written “your” slippers, the melamed answered: “Yold! If I wrote ‘my’ slippers, she would read ‘my’ slippers and would send her slippers. What could I do with her slippers? So I wrote ‘your’ slippers, she’ll read ‘your’ slippers and send me mine”

Yule (1996) portrays deixis as technical term from Greek and states that it refers to ‘pointing’ in the linguistic expressions of interlocutors in the process of communication. The corresponding philosophical term *indexicality* can be referred to Latin. The phenomenon however depicts that some linguistic expressions logically need contextual interpretation in the process of communication. For example the utterance: ‘Carry this bag to house’ demands the contextual information to make out the accurate meaning: which bag is being referred to, and to which house it is to be carried.

Levinson (1983) does not contradict with Yule’s concept of deixis and states that a linguistic expression can be very well tested as being deictic or not in terms of its truth or falsehood without taking the speaker, addressee, time or place of utterance into considerations: thus an utterances or statement ‘Dr Adulqadir Khan is a scientist’ represents a fact which can be either true or false, whereas another statement ‘He is a scientist’ depends on who the ‘He’ is: ‘He’ is a deictic expression.

According to Yule (1996), deixis is one of the most fundamental elements we discuss in the perspective of contextual interpretation of an utterance. It also refers to *pointation* through language.

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Generally, deixis refers to the phenomenon in which meanings of some words and phrases in an utterance are comprehended through contextual information. The semantic meanings of certain deictic words are fixed but their denotational meanings differ in respect of time and/or place. In the first glance it looks an easy and simple phenomenon, but the junction of contextuality adhering to intangible emblematic representation through linguistic expressions results into profound philosophical and psychological intricacies as in English almost every utterance or statement is tensed, and tense is deictic. For instance ‘It is holiday’ where ‘is’ locates the reference in time (today). Deixis also helps to clarify a variance between the meaning of a sentence and thought analogous to its utterance. Deictic expressions are also known as *indexicals*. They are found among the early linguistic expressions of young children. Languages integrate deictic context-dependency in various places in their syntax and lexicon; however, Yule (1996) discusses the following three main types of deixis:

- (i) Person Deixis
- (ii) Spatial Deixis
- (iii) Temporal Deixis

These will be briefly summarized here. Deictic expressions are those whose interpretations depend on the context, the speaker's intention and relative distance (Yule, 1996). For instance, in terms of context, interpretations of deictic expressions depend on speaker and hearer sharing same context or having their most basic use in face-to-face interaction. It is differentiated with two basic terms: proximal (near speaker) for example this, here, now and distal (away from speaker) i.e. that, there, then (Yule, 19976). In the perspective of person deixis (I, you, he) Yule furnishes the concept of deixis tripartite system: speaker (I), addressee (you), and other (he, she, it). The same is known as system of pronouns in different languages, as in English first person pronoun (I, we), second person pronoun (you) and third person pronoun (he, she, it). For sake of interpretation of a conversation with respect to these deictic expressions we need to realize that every interlocutor in a conversation shifts from being ‘I’ to being ‘You’ regularly. Spatial deixis are used to indicate the relative location of people and things. The concept of distance in the study of deixis is more relevant to spatial deixis. Yule also states that it is however, important to be aware of in the perspective of spatial deixis that setting of speaker’s point of

view may be fixed psychologically as well as physically. Examples of spatial deixis from modern English are: here, there; come, go; bring, take; this, that etc. Example of the indication of movement towards/away from in old English is *hither* (to this place) or *thence* (from that place). Under temporal deixis, linguistic expressions depend for their interpretation on knowing the relevant utterance time (Yule, 1996), for instance, *now*: time coinciding with speaker utterance, *then*: past and future time relative to speaker's present time, *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, *tonight*, *tomorrow*, *today*: tense. The tense can be further exemplified like simple present as proximal (*I work here*) and simple past as distal (*I worked there*).

Levinson (1983) generates a detailed discussion on deixis under the following two approaches:

- (i) Philosophical Approach
- (ii) Descriptive Approach
 - (a) Person Deixis
 - (b) Time Deixis
 - (c) Place Deixis
 - (d) Discourse Deixis
 - (e) Social Deixis

These will also be briefly discussed here. Philosophers usually prefer indexical (deictic) expressions or indexicals and deixis can be conveniently probed into by taking into consideration how certain usual linguistic expressions are dealt within truth-conditional semantics (Levinson, 1983). For instance the identification of the semantic content of a sentence, statement or utterance is carried out in the perspective of its truth conditions: the semantic content of 'Hafsa is the daughter of Abdullah' will be true in particular circumstances which determine that the individual known as 'Hafsa' is in fact identical to the individual who is the daughter of Abdullah. Levinson discusses this phenomenon in terms of complex structures of utterances in great detail.

Under the rubric of descriptive approaches Levinson discusses five main types of deixis: person deixis, time deixis, place deixis, discourse deixis and social deixis as mentioned above. These are precisely discussed in the following lines to watch the

differences or similarities in terms of the strategy of argumentation as compared to Yule discussed before:

Levinson starts with person deixis found in the form of personal pronouns in the linguistic expressions. In the traditional grammar these are categorized as first person (I, We), second person (you) and third person (He, She, it etc). First and second person refer to interlocutors of the speech event as present speaker and addressee contrary to the third person. Besides systems of pronouns, these are also echoed in verbal agreement and elsewhere. Levinson claims that many languages have unusual demands in this case. In South East Asian languages, for instance Korean or Javanese have dissimilar forms of the words for referring to things like kinsmen, houses, food etc. in accordance with the status of speaker and addressee (sender and receiver).

According to Levinson, a second significant parameter of linguistic utterances or deictical expressions is time. Temporal deixis also named by Yule (1996) is unswervingly reflected in words like 'now', and also manifested through tenses in English language. Time is traced through tenses used in linguistic expressions relevant to the timings of a speech event: past tense is used for proceedings preceding it, present for its inclusion in the current events, and future for events subsequent to it. Levinson asserts that all languages don't have tenses, for example, Malay in Malaysia or Chinese in China. All grammatical categories that grammarians call tenses are also not truly deictic. There are certain languages like Bantu or Papuan languages which hold six deictic tenses especially specifying something happened or the activity of the day before yesterday. Urdu and English languages also differ in terms of tenses with Arabic. Temporal deixis has a lot of other demonstrations spanning from calendarical (referring to calendar) specifications like 'yesterday' to more clandestine items like 'ago' for example, ten years ago or 'good night' which contains an assumption that speaker is parting at night.

In the parametric setting of linguistic expressions a third factor is spatial deixis as discussed by Levinson. It is manifested through demonstratives pronouns (this and that) and adverbial pronouns or adverb of place (here and there) which are used in deictical expressions to indicate the place of speech event. Systems of linguistic demonstration differ to a great extent across languages of the world. For some speaker is nucleus for measuring deictical distance, others produce a distinction between 'this' for near speaker

(sender) and ‘that’ for near addressee (receiver). There are other spatial deixis which invoke issues of attention, for instance a contrast between ‘this’ referring to someone under discussion vs. ‘that’ to whom/which your attention is being drawn. In some of the languages, for example Inuit, a big collection of demonstratives is available where they connect with the shape of things being referred to. Almost in all the languages we frequently have such pairs of verbs (come vs. go and bring vs. take), which are time and again interpreted to identify the direction of the motion i.e. towards or away from the place of speech event. There are a lot of other deictical expressions in languages which are secretly place deictics: for instance, ‘the rabbit is behind the wall’ entails that there is a wall between the speaker and the rabbit, and ‘the fruit is available in the local market near the school’ means that market is near the place of speech event.

Second last among the types of deixis propounded by Levinson (1983) is discourse deixis. It entails the possibility of anaphoric references: it provides a reference to an utterance backward or forward to other utterances, for example, ‘that was a great competition’ and ‘her efforts may be recognized like this: good job done!’ Due to use of expressions (linguistic utterances) similar to pronouns for referring to entities mentioned earlier, generally by fuller expressions, discourse deixis is graded into anaphora. The last parameter discussed as a type of deixis is social deixis. The indoctrination or programming of the social relation between speaker (sender), addressee (receiver) and third-party referents is often acknowledged as a different deictic measurement, known as social deixis. For example in some Australian languages like Dalabon, as mentioned by Levinson pronouns fabricate a reference to identifying distal relation among the speaker and the referent, or the referents in the case of plural third person pronouns. They are given representation through honorifics for example *tu* informal ‘you’ and *Lei* formal ‘you’ (Levinson, 1983), *San*: the most common honorific in Japanese; a title of respect similar to English Mr., Miss, Mrs., Ms.

Conclusion

In the perspective of above stated discussion on deixis, it is therefore, concluded that Yule (1996) discusses the phenomenon of deixis in a precise and comprehensive manner with appropriate exemplification, whereas Levinson (1983) does the same in detail although supported by accurate examples but it becomes difficult for the reader to maintain

sequential link or equal level of interest. Overall both writers have done well and delivered conceptual understanding on the topic. Both the authors have gone through significant efforts for understanding the empirical implications of deixis to demonstrate how it works, and how it can be brought within a formal theory of meaning in pragmatics. Generally most part among theoretical models miscalculates the intricacy and pervasiveness of deictic phenomena, and the affluence of contextual systems available for their support. According to (McNeill, 2000) for example, excellent studies of authentic deictic usage are exceptional, and the study of gesture is in its immaturity. Although, both Levinson and Yule have used good strategy of argumentation for elaborating the phenomenon of deixis, however, Yule is comparative better than Levinson in this regard.

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