

Deixis and Distance

Deixis is a **technical term** (from Greek) for one of the most basic things we do with utterances. It means **'pointing' via language**. Any **linguistic form used to accomplish this 'pointing' is called a deictic expression**. Deictic expressions are also sometimes called **indexicals**.

- When you notice a strange object and ask, What's that?, you are using a deictic expression (' that ') to indicate something in the immediate context.

They are among the **first forms to be spoken by very young children and can be used to indicate**

- people via person deixis (' me ' , ' you ') ,
- or location via spatial deixis (' here ' , ' there ') ,
- or time via temporal deixis (now ' , ' then ') .

All these expressions **depend, for their interpretation**, on the speaker and hearer sharing **the same context**.

Deixis is clearly a form of referring that is tied to the speaker's context, with the most basic distinction between deictic expressions being ' near speaker ' versus ' away from speaker ' .

- In English, **the ' near speaker ' , or proximal terms**, are ' this ' , ' here ' , ' now ' .
- **The ' away from speaker ' , or distal terms** , are ' that ' , ' there ' , ' then ' .

Proximal terms are typically **interpreted in terms of the speaker's location , or the deictic center** , so that ' now ' is generally understood as referring to some point or period in time that has the time of the speaker's utterance at its center . Distal terms can simply indicate ' away from speaker ' .

Person deixis

The distinction just described **involves person deixis, with the speaker (I) and the addressee (you)** mentioned. **The simplicity of these forms disguises the complexity of their use**.

To learn these deictic expressions, we have to discover that **each person in a conversation shifts from being ' I ' to being ' you ' constantly**.

All young children go through a stage in their learning where this distinction seems problematic and they say things like ' Read you a story ' (instead of ' me ') when handing over a favorite book.

Person deixis clearly operates on a basic three - part division, exemplified by the pronouns for first person (I ') , second person (' you ') , and third person (he ' , ' she ' , or ' it ') .

In many languages these **deictic categories of speaker, addressee, and other (s) are elaborated with markers of relative social status** (for example , addressee with higher status versus addressee with lower status) . **Expressions which indicate higher status are described as honorifics**.

The discussion of the circumstances which lead to the choice of one of these forms rather than another is sometimes described as social deixis.

In deictic terms, third person is not a direct participant in basic (I-you) interaction and, being an outsider, is **necessarily more distant**. Third person pronouns are consequently distal forms in terms of person deixis. **Using a third person form, where a second person form would be possible, is one way of communicating distance (and non - familiarity).**

The distance associated with third person forms is **also used to make potential accusations less direct**, or **to make a potentially personal issue seem like an impersonal one**, based on a general rule. Of course, the speaker can state such general 'rules' as applying to the speaker plus other (s), by using the first person plural ("we").

Spatial deixis

The concept of distance is clearly relevant to spatial deixis, where the relative location of people and things is being indicated.

Contemporary English makes use of only two adverbs, 'here' and 'there', for the basic distinction, but in older texts and in some dialects, a much larger set of deictic expressions can be found. Although **'yonder' (more distant from speaker)** is still used, words like **'hither' (to this place)** and **'thence' (from that place) now sound archaic**. These last two adverbs include the meaning of motion toward or away from the speaker.

Some verbs of motion, such as 'come' and 'go', retain a deictic sense when they are used to mark movement toward the speaker (Come to bed!) or away from the speaker (Go to bed!).

One version of the concept of motion toward speaker (i.e. becoming visible), seems to be the first deictic meaning learned by children and characterizes their use of words like 'this' and 'here' (= can be seen). They are distinct from 'that' and 'there' which are associated with things that move out of the child's visual space (= can no longer be seen).

In considering spatial deixis, however, it is important to remember that location from the speaker's perspective can be fixed mentally as well as physically.

It may be that the truly pragmatic basis of spatial deixis is actually psychological distance. Physically close objects will tend to be treated by the speaker as psychologically close. Also, something that is physically distant will generally be treated as psycho-logically distant (for example, 'that man over there'). However, a speaker may also wish to mark something that is physically close.

Temporal deixis

We have already noted the use of the proximal form **'now'** as **indicating both the time coinciding with the speaker's utterance and the time of the speaker's voice being heard (the hearer's 'now')**. In contrast to 'now', the distal expression **'then'** applies to both past as in 7a. and future 7b. time relative to the speaker's present time.

a. November 2.2.nd, 963? I was in Scotland then.

b. Dinner at 8:30 on Saturday? Okay, I'll see you then.

The psychological basis of temporal deixis seems to be similar to that of spatial deixis. We can treat temporal events as objects that move toward us (into view) or away from us (out of

view). **We also seem to treat the near or immediate future as being close to utterance time by using the proximal deictic 'this',** as in 'this (coming) weekend' or 'this (coming) Thursday'.

One basic (but often unrecognized) type of temporal deixis in English is in the choice of verb tense. Whereas other languages have many different forms of the verb as different tenses, English has only two basic forms, the present as in 10a., and the past as in 10.b.

10. a. I live here now.

b. I lived there then.

The present tense is the proximal form and the past tense is the distal form.

The past tense is always used in English in those if-clauses that mark events presented by the speaker as not being close to present reality.

SO, we have to recognize that, in temporal deixis, the remote or distal form can be used to communicate not only distance from current time, but also distance from current reality or facts.

It should not be a surprise to learn that deictic expressions were all to be found in the pragmatics wastebasket. Their interpretation depends on the context, the speaker's intention, and they express relative distance. Given their small size and extremely wide range of possible uses, deictic expressions always communicate much more than is said.