

Pragmatics 2 – Deixis and distance

deixis (technical term from Greek) is ‘pointing’ via language
deictic expressions (indexicals) are any linguistic forms used to accomplish this ‘pointing’

deixis: a/ person deixis (honorifics, social deixis, T/V distinction)
b/ spatial deixis (deictic projection, psychological distance)
c/ temporal deixis

proximal terms (e.g. *this, here, now*) - near speaker

distal terms (e.g. *that, there, then*) - away from speaker

Proximal terms are interpreted in terms of the speaker’s location, i.e.

deictic centre.

honorifics – expressions which indicate higher status

social deixis – forms used to indicate relative social status

T/V distinction – French forms ‘*tu/vous*’, German ‘*du/Sie*’, Spanish ‘*tú/Usted*’

The choice indicates something about the speaker’s view of their relationship with the addressee.

Examples:

1. *I’ll put this here.* (It can be easily understood by the people present.)

2. *Would his highness like some coffee?* (ironic or humorous purpose)

3a. Somebody didn’t clean up after himself.

b. Each person has to clean up after him/herself around here.

4. *We clean up after ourselves around here.* (potential ambiguity)

There is an exclusive ‘*we*’ (speaker plus other(s), excluding addressee)

and an inclusive ‘*we*’ (speaker and addressee included)

spatial and temporal deixis

There are only two adverbs *here* and *there* for the basic distinction in present E.
Location from the speaker’s perspective can be fixed mentally as well as physically.

deictic projection – speakers are able to project themselves into other locations prior to actually being in those locations (*I’ll come later.*).

5. *I am not here now.*

6. *I was looking at this little puppy in a cage with a sad look on its face.*

It was like, ‘Oh, I’m so unhappy here, will you set me free?’

Some verbs of motion retain a deictic sense when used to mark movement towards the speaker (*Come to bed!*) or away from the speaker (*Go to bed!*).

7a. *November 22nd, 1963? I was in Scotland then.*

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

The truly pragmatic basis of spatial deixis is actually psychological distance (*I don’t like that*).

8. *Back in an hour.*

9. *Free Beer Tomorrow.*

10a. *I live here now.*

10b. *I lived there then.*

11a. *I could swim (when I was a child).*

b. *I could be in Hawaii (if I had a lot of money).*

12a. *If I had a yacht, ...*

12b. *If I was rich, ...*

In temporal deixis, distal terms can be used to communicate not only distance from current time, but also distance from current reality or facts.

The basic distinctions between proximal and distal deictic terms can be seen at work in one of the most important structural distinctions made in English grammar, namely that between direct and indirect speech:

direct speech: ‘*Are you planning to be here this evening?*’

indirect speech: *I asked her if she was planning to be there that evening.*