Spatial and Temporal Deixis in English and Persian

Elkhas Vaysi
Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, Payame Noor University, I. R Iran

*Leila Salehnejad
Department of Linguistics, Islamic Azad University, Ahwaz, Iran
*Corresponding author

Abstract

The present study aims at studying the spatial and temporal deictic expressions in English and Persian. The values of deictic are uncontroversial determined pragmatically but are also input to semantic interpretation. The deictic devices in a language commit a speaker to set up a frame of reference around her. Every language carries an implicit division of the space around the current speaker, a division of time relative to the act of speaking, and, via pronouns, a shorthand naming system for the participants involved in the talk. While languages contain such deictic divisions of space and time, their use has to be calculated by the participants in actual contexts. The present study is a descriptive-analytic research. By comparing some sentences from English and Persian, we argued that in order to reach the exact interpretation of the place and time deictic expressions, the speaker uses the most economical means to describe a particular place and time.

Keywords: deixis, spatial, temporal, English, Persian.
1. Introduction

The division of labour between semantics and pragmatics when it comes to explaining meaning is far from clear-cut. 'Deictic' expressions are a category of linguistic expressions that form perhaps the single biggest problem for truth-conditional accounts of meaning, and also pose some of the most severe difficulties for linguists trying to establish the existence and the location of the semantics/pragmatics borderline. This is a category of expressions whose very purpose is to link uses of language to the context in which they occur. (Chapman, 2011: 39-40)

Yule (2002) states that 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. 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'). 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', but, in some languages, can be used to distinguish between 'near addressee' and 'away from both speaker and addressee'. (Yule, 2002: 9-10)

Deictic expressions according to Birner (2013) are a subtype of indexical expression. The class of indexicals includes deictics, anaphoric pronouns, and even tense – all of which are linguistic mechanisms for identifying the intended meaning of the current expression through its relationship to elements of the context of utterance. In the case of tense, an event described in the current utterance is "indexed" with respect to its temporal relationship to the time of the utterance, with (for example) a simple past-tense form indicating that the event described in the current utterance occurred prior to that utterance. In the case of anaphoric pronouns, the referent of the current pronoun is co-indexed with some previously evoked entity. In the case of deixis, a phrase is interpreted relative to the time, location, or interlocutors of the linguistic exchange in which it occurs, or relative to other linguistic material in that same exchange. (Birner, 2013: 114)

2. Literature Review

2-1. Spatial and temporal deixis

In contrast to other referring expressions, deictic expressions cannot be interpreted without reference to features of the context of utterance. Spatial deixis is used to pick out a location relative to the location of the speaker or addressee. (Verschueren, 1999: 18) The prototypical cases of spatial deixis are 'here' and 'there' in English and '?inja' and '?anja' in Persian. 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 as in (1) or away from the speaker as in (2) (Yule, 2002: 12):

1. Don't come into my bedroom.
2. Don't go into my bedroom.

This explains why the sentences in (3) and (4) below sound odd at first:

3. ?Fred went to me.
4. ?Fred came from me.

We have to interpret the situations described in a rather complicated way to accept these sentences. (Saeed, 2013: 193-194)

Chapman (2011) states that the difference between 'come' and 'go' is a difference in direction in relation to the current location of the speaker. That is they differ in terms of their relationship to the 'deictic centre', a feature which is dependent on context. (Chapman, 2011: 41)

Verschueren (1999) believes that variables along the time dimension – and any other dimension – have no absolute values. Even to determine the deictic centre, the point of reference from which the dimension is looked at, information is needed about the deictic context. (Verschueren, 1999: 18)

Saeed (2013) maintains that the adverbs 'here' and 'there' pick out places according to their proximity to the location of the speaker. We can see this because if the speaker moves, the interpretation of the adverbs will change. When the speaker and her addressee in (5) have moved, they can call the shade 'here' and their original place in the sun 'there', as in (6):

5. It's too hot here in the sun, let's take our drinks into the shade over there.
6. I'm glad we moved here, I was melting over there.

Demonstratives work in a similar way: English has a two-term opposition between this/that 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. While languages contain such deictic divisions of space, their use has to be calculated by the participants in actual contexts. For example, how big an area is meant by 'here' depends on context: a speaker might use 'here' to refer to a country, a city, a room, a part of a room, etc. This plasticity is inherent: the use of 'here' does not even always have to include the location of the speaker. We can use 'there' pointing to locations on a map, but there will be an actual or implicit contrast with 'there', a place further away from the speaker. (Saeed, 2013: 191-192)

The semantics of the language specifies the meaning of 'yesterday', but we need to know about where the speaker and hearer are located before we can be certain exactly where it refers to. We often need to know more than the simple location of speaker and hearer. We might also want to know what gestures if any the speaker was making: 'here' and 'there' are often accompanied by pointing. So straightaway it becomes apparent why deixis sits right at the borderline between semantics and pragmatics. Without some semantic knowledge of the language we wouldn't be able to explain the difference in meaning between 'here' and 'there',
but without some pragmatic knowledge of context we would never be able to know where is being referred to. (Chapman, 2011: 40-41)

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). (Yule, 2002: 12)

Yule (2002) believes that in considering spatial deixis, it is important to remember that location from the speaker's perspective can be fixed mentally as well as physically. Speakers temporarily away from their home location will often continue to use 'here' to mean the (physically distant) home location, as if they were still in that location. Speakers also seem to be able to project themselves into other locations prior to actually being in those locations, as when they say 'I'll come later' (= movement to addressee's location). This is sometimes described as 'deictic projection' and we make use of its possibilities as more technology allows us to manipulate location. If 'here' means the place of the speaker's utterance (and 'now' means the time of the speaker's utterance), then an utterance such as (7) should be nonsense.

7. I am not here now.

However one can say (7) into the recorder of a telephone answering machine, projecting that the 'now' will apply to any time someone tries to call her, and not when she actually records the words. Indeed, recording (7) is a kind of dramatic performance for a future audience in which one projects her presence to be in the required location. A similar deictic projection is accompanied via dramatic performance when one uses direct speech to represent the person, location, and feelings of someone or something else. For example, I could be telling you about a visit to a pet store, as in (8).

8. I was looking at this little puppy in a cage with such a sad look on its face. It was like, 'Oh, I'm so unhappy here, will you set me free?'

The 'here' of the cage is not the actual physical location of the person uttering the words (the speaker), but is instead the location of that person performing the role of the puppy. According to Yule (2002), it may be that the truly 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 psychologically distant (for example, 'that man over there'). However, a speaker may also wish to mark something that is physically close (for example, a perfume being sniffed by the speaker) as psychologically distant 'I don't like that'. In this analysis, a word like 'that' does not have a fixed (i.e. semantic) meaning; instead, it is 'invested' with meaning in a context by a speaker. Empathetic deixis is the metaphorical use of deictic forms to indicate emotional or other psychological 'distance' or 'proximity' between a speaker and a referent, for example the use of 'this' to indicate the speaker's empathy, and the use of 'that' to indicate the speaker's emotional distance. (Yule, 2002: 12-13)

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'). According to Yule (2002), in contrast to 'now', the distal expression 'then' applies to both past (9) and future (10) time relative to the speaker's present time.
9. November 22nd, 1963? I was in Scotland then.
10. Dinner at 8:30 on Saturday? Okay, I'll see you then.

It is worth noting that we also use elaborate systems of non-deictic temporal reference such as calendar time (dates, as in (9)) and clock time (hours, as in (10)). However, these forms of temporal reference are learned a lot later than the deictic expressions like 'yesterday', 'tomorrow', 'today', 'tonight', 'next week', 'last week', 'this week'. All these expressions depend for their interpretation on knowing the relevant utterance time. If we don't know the utterance (i.e. scribbling) time of a note, as in (11), on an office door, we won't know if we have a short or a long wait ahead.

Similarly, if we return the next day to a bar that displays the notice in (12), then we will still be (deictically) one day early for the free drink.

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). One metaphor used in English is of events coming toward the speaker from the future (for example, 'the coming week', 'the approaching year') and going away from the speaker to the past (for example, 'in days gone by', 'the past week'). 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'. (Yule, 2002: 14)

2-2. Levinson's theory of presumptive meanings

Levinson (as cited in Chapman, 2011) believes that the amount of information we want to convey might threaten to overwhelm the time and energy we have available to express it if it all had to be spelled out fully and literally. For Levinson the solution to this potential problem is expressed in the following general principle: 'let not only the content but also the metalinguistic properties of the utterance (i.e. its form) carry the message' (Levinson 2000:6). He has developed the theory of GCIs into an account of presumptive meanings or preferred interpretations. These will accompany the use of certain expressions by default, because of the general pragmatic principles he has outlined, rather than because of either linguistically encoded meaning on the one hand or context-specific inferences on the other. (Chapman, 2011: 101)

Levinson argues that it is not possible to maintain a theory of meaning in which semantics is autonomous from pragmatics, because 'generalized conversational implicature seems to play a role in the establishment of truth-conditional content'. (ibid.: 166). He gives many examples of this process, including the following that involve the resolution of deictic expressions in context. He suggests that the values of deictics are uncontroversially determined pragmatically but are also input to semantic interpretation. His case is that general pragmatic principles, resulting in GCIs, are required to explain this process:

13. This sofa is comfortable; come over here.
14. California is beautiful; come over here.
15. The meeting is on Thursday.
Levinson states that in the interpretation of the place deictic expression 'here', the hearer can assume that what the speaker is describing is stereotypical; that the speaker is using the most economical means to describe a particular place. Thus 'here' is given the very specific interpretation 'to where I am sitting' in (13) but the much freer reference to 'to the State in which I live' in (14). Imagine that example (15) is uttered on a Wednesday. The hearer will most probably interpret "Thursday" as meaning 'not tomorrow but Thursday next week". But this interpretation would have been much more informative for the speaker to have said 'tomorrow' if that is what she means; the hearer can infer that since she didn't say 'tomorrow' she didn't mean it. (Chapman, 2011: 101-102)

2-3. Extensions of spatial deixis

According to Saeed (2013), systems of spatial deixis are also used in other domains. For example they are often used as a form of orientation within a discourse, in what we could therefore call 'discourse' or 'textual deixis', as when we say:

16. Here our argument runs into some difficulties.
17. At this point we have to look back to our initial premises.

In many languages too, spatial deixis terms, such as demonstratives, are extended to refer to time. An example of this use of the demonstratives is below:

18. That year was much hotter than this one is.

The transference is often described as a metaphorical shift from the more concrete domain of physical space to the more abstract domain of time. The belief that there is a general human tendency to extend spatial terms in this way to a range of other linguistic domains is sometimes called 'localism' (as in for example Lyons 1997). A common example which is sometimes quoted in the use of the verb 'go' in English and other languages for immediate future tenses as in the future tense reading of (19):

19. He is going to leave the country.

Here the idea of spatial movement away from the speaker is mapped into time as a future event. (Saeed, 2013: 195-196)

3. Analysis and Discussion

In this part of the article we attempt to find out the similarities and differences between English and Persian in the light of the discussion implemented in the preceding part with a view to locate the points of similarity and difference between the deictic systems of the two languages. We aim at pointing out the semantic features and pragmatic uses of deictics in English and Persian. It will be restricted to the two kinds of deixis, namely, spatial and temporal.

3-1-1. Spatial deixis: similarities and differences

The comparison between English and Persian includes the demonstrative system and the locative adverbs of the two languages. First of all, let us check the concept of demonstrative in the two languages. The concept in both the languages is similar since it is used to focus the attention of the hearer or addressee by picking out an object or entity from the real world and identifying it by referencing or pointing. The spatial system of the two languages appears to
be tremendously different. The spatial system of both English and Persian is a two-term system, i.e. they distinguish two points in the distance scale, which are proximal and distal from the speaker centre.

3-1-2. Demonstratives in English and Persian: similarities and differences

Both languages use demonstratives to identify a physical object, entity, or a person in the surrounding space or expressing a mental state like notions or ideas. Demonstratives are used to draw the hearers' attention to the referent in the two languages. However, the two languages exhibit a deictic difference. English has only two-dimensional points to denote whether the referent is near (proximal) or far (distal) which are this/here and that/there respectively. Unlike English, Persian displays more deictic points in the space since it specifies three dimensions from the speaker's location (the deictic centre), i.e. three proximal, and three distal which are, 'in' (this) /'inja' (here) / 'hæminja' (exactly here), and '?an' (that) /'anja' (there), 'hæmanja (exactly there) respectively.

Illustrative examples from both languages are the following:

20. /?in ketabe mæn ?æst/ [proximal]
   this book-my is

21. /ketabe mæn inja ?æst/ [proximal]
   book-my here is

22. / ketabe mæn haemija ?æst/ [proximal]
   book-my exactly here is

23. /?an ketabe mæn ?æst/ [distal]
   that book-my is

24. /ketabe mæn anja ?æst/ [distal]
   book-my there is

25. /ketabe mæn hæmanja ?æst/ [distal]
   book-my exactly there is

26. This is my book. [proximal]

27. That is my book. [distal]

28. My book is here. [proximal]

29. My book is there. [distal]

As mentioned above, some verbs of motion, such as 'come' and 'go', retain a deictic sense when they are used to mark movement toward the speaker as in (1) or away from the speaker as in (2)
1. Don’t come into my bedroom.
2. Don’t go into my bedroom.

The Persian counterparts for ‘come’ and ‘go’ are ‘?amædæn’ and ‘ræftæn’ respectively as in the following sentences:

30. /be otaq xab-e men ne-jə/ to bedroom.Gen my NEG-come-2nd SG

31. /be otaq xab-e men ne-ro/ to bedroom.Gen my NEG-come-2nd SG

As was mentioned earlier, the sentences in (3) and (4) below sound odd at first:

3. ?Fred went to me.
4. ?Fred came from me.

Their equivalents in Persian with ‘?amædæn’ and ‘ræftæn’ are (32) and (33) respectively:

32. /fred be sæmt-e men ræft/ Fred toward me go- past-3rd SG
33. */fred Æz sæmt-e men amæd/ Fred from side me come-past-3rd SG

(32) is odd in most situations and acceptable in just one case, i.e. when the speaker is conceiving herself as a ghost who is speaking about her body as a corpse. This kind of situation is restricted to fictions. But (33) is completely ungrammatical in Persian.

As was mentioned earlier, the adverbs ‘here’ and ‘there’ pick out places according to their proximity to the location of the speaker. We can see this because if the speaker moves, the interpretation of the adverbs will change. When the speaker and her addressee in (5) have moved, they can call the shade ‘here’ and their original place in the sun ‘there’, as in (6):

5. It’s too hot here in the sun, let’s take our drinks into the shade over there.
6. I’m glad we moved here, I was melting over there.

We see the same process in Persian too:

34. /?inja be-xater-e ?aftab hæva gærm Æst biya nuşidæni ra ?anja
   drink Obj there
dar saye boxorim/
in shade
drinking-1st PL

be-3rd SG let’s

3-2. Temporal deixis: similarities and differences

Temporal deixis denotes the orientation or position of actions and events in time. English and Persian have lexical words and phrases that are naturally marked for temporal deixis, like the English terms now, then, yesterday, today, tomorrow, last year, next year, etc and their
counterparts in Persian like 'hala', 'sepæs', 'diru:z', 'fäerda', 'parsal', 'sal-e-?ajænde', etc. In addition, temporal deixis can be marked through tense, which is encoded in the form of the verb with affixes or expressed in an independent morpheme. According to Saeed (2013), systems of spatial deixis are also used in other domains. For example:

16. **Here** our argument runs into some difficulties.
17. **At this point** we have to look back to our initial premises.

We have the extensions of spatial deixis in Persian too as in (35):

35. /bahs-e ma dær ?inja ba moškel movajeh mi-šævæd/
   argument-GEN our here with difficulty run-3rd

Here the transference is a metaphorical shift from the more concrete domain of physical space to the more abstract domain of time.

4. **Conclusion**

As seen, the spatial deictic systems in the two languages show more differences than similarities, i.e. English demonstratives is a two term system and Persian demonstratives is a three-term system. The temporal deictic systems of the two languages exhibit similarity in expressing the event with connection to the moment of speech, i.e. the primary tenses in the two languages are, to a great extent, similar.
References


