Deixis, indexicals and referring expressions

Deixis: the process of pointing via language
  • deixic expressions = indexicals, are acquired early
  Types of deixis:
  1. Person deixis (me, you)
  2. Spatial deixis (here, there)
  3. Temporal deixis (now, then)

• Most useful in face-to-face conversations: I just found this here

• Most basic distinction in deixis: near to speaker (proximal terms) vs. away from speaker (distal terms)
  Speaker = deictic center (space/time)

• Distal terms: can indicate near listener or away from speaker and listener, cf. Japanese

Types of deictic reference 1

1. Person deixis: in conversations constant shift of I/you
   • Many languages include social status (higher vs. lower)
   • Indication of higher status: honorifics (cf. social deixis)
     • German du/Sie contrast, aka T/V-distinction from
     • French tu/vous
     • Spanish Ud/Usted → 3rd person → indicates distance
     • English His excellence, please this way!

   3rd person distance: used in accusations
   Somebody made a mess in the kitchen

2. Spatial deixis: modern English: here/there, but older forms are yonder
   (more distant from speaker)
   Place + motion: hither (to this place), thence (from this place)

Types of deictic reference 2

This/here: acquired early, can be seen, experienced because close
That/there: acquired late

• Deictic projection: (parked car) I’m over there!
  • Anthropological basis of spatial deixis: psychologically close
  • Physically close objects are psychologically close,
  • Some physically close objects can be psychologically distant (e.g. food on plate)

3. Temporal deixis
   • Yesterday/tomorrow: depend on knowing the utterance time
   • Similar to spatial deixis, events are conceptualized as objects
     • Present = proximal, past = distal
   • Unlikely situations: marked distal if I had 1 mio $...
     • Reported speech: I asked her if she was planning to go there...
     • Focus shifts to new relative center

Deictic expressions depend on: context, speakers intention; used for relative distance

Referring expressions 1

Reference: act from speaker to enable listener to identify something

• Referring expressions:
  a) Proper Nouns (Mary),
  b) Definite NPs (the pianist),
  c) Indefinite NPs (a woman),
  d)PRO (she)

• Choice based on speaker’s assumptions what listener knows

  • Shared knowledge in shared visual contexts: Look at her/them!
  • Shared memory: Remember that weird guy in the first semester?
  • Shared perception: Invent names: Mr Aftershave is late today

• Shared world knowledge: We need to find a cop (entity is unknown but can be assumed to exist)

• Shared knowledge about descriptive properties:
  He needs a rich wife (who/whatever fits the description)

• Successful reference is collaborative

Referring expressions 2

In discourse: collaboration in reference

• Intention to identify
• Recognition of intention

• Context makes difference between persons/objects
  • Person as object: Can I borrow your Shakespeare?
  • Object as person: Where is the lobster sitting?

• Convention at work:
  a) Shakespeare takes up the top shelf
  b) I rated Shakespeare at school

• We’re going to see Shakespeare in London

• Pragmatic connection between proper names and objects
  • Invites listener to make expected inference

• Role of context:
  a) Japan wins world cup
  b) Japan wins trade talks