

Deixis as a Reference to an Alleged Shared Situation in Persuasive Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Frequent attention has been paid to deixis within the paradigm of pragmatics, especially concerning its implications in discourse analysis. The present paper attempts to explain the presence of indexicals in monological utterances in mass persuasive discourse, which aims to create an illusion of intimacy based on a common physical ground, where the addressee is more easily drawn to the speaker's own purposes. Examples are proposed from newspaper editorials and, most specifically, from commercial consumer advertising.

Introduction: the case of non-canonical deixis

Traditionally, deixis has been defined as the encoding through language of spatial or temporal contexts. Utterances such as "This shouldn't be here at all," and countless other examples proposed are suggested to prove that a number of linguistic elements (*I, this, here, now*) can only be understood by referring to a special set of circumstances surrounding each individual utterance. It is, therefore, to a physical context (or *context* itself) that deixis refers, as in the italicized words in (1):

- (1) Take *this* and drink it *here* and *now*

Such constraint, which requires the presence of both speaker and addressee when the utterance takes place, is the reason why deixis is normally associated with dialogue, for words such as *here* and *now* can only be defined by the place and the time of the utterance. Conversely, we may be led to think that no utterance in which both speaker and receiver are not present may contain indexicals. In the example proposed, for example, it would be impossible to know what to drink and where to do so, if no further context is provided.

A second kind of deixis, defined as text deixis (Kurzon 1985), is based on the relations between the elements in language as a linear manifestation. The meaning of expressions

like *this*, *here* or *now* is not to be found in real space or time, but in text as a figured spatial-temporal environment (or *cotext*):

- (2) They left before the film was over. *This*, however, displeased Mary utterly
- (3) Once the nature of signs has been established, *now* let us move on to polysemy

Both kinds of deixis allow addressees to find the referent somewhere around the utterance; in both cases the identification of deictic tokens is made by making reference to elements *present* before the addressee, either physically or on a piece of paper. However, this rule may not always hold, as in the case of *today* in the following fragments, the first taken from De Bono (6), the second imitating the style in beauty product advertising:

- (4) [W]e must realize that logic is unlikely to solve those problems which need a new idea for their solution. Today the world is rather full of such problems
- (5) Today can be the first day in a new life

Were we to follow a strict definition of deixis such as the ones given above, the previous examples would not fit into any of the two categories, for the explanation of *today* can be found neither in the physical context of the utterances, nor in their cotext. Since both belong to a written text, the writer is anything but present before the reader, and the adscription of *today* is rather a dubious one: should it be when I'm speaking, or rather when you read the text, which can hardly be the same? Neither can we say that the previous utterances provide a referent establishing a clear date, unless we take the year of edition in the third page or the date on the front cover of a magazine as relevant data for communicative purposes.

Of course, we might argue that, in the first example, the use of *today* is a lexicalized form meaning "nowadays" or "at present"; even accepting such objection, the second example may be interpreted only as "when you read this article," which represents a double problem: first, it is addressee's time, and not speaker's time, which matters, which clearly violates indexical unity (the deictic must mean the same to both participants), and second, there is not even a stable reference, for the text is intended for an unlimited number of readers, and *today* may be October 21, 1992, or October 22, or two months later (if somebody reads an old magazine at the dentist's), or *today*, for all we know, and in spite of such blatant inaccuracy the reader may enjoy the article and, what's worse, be persuaded by the article.

We are coming, thus, to a kind of deixis which is based, not on the real context or on the cotext of an utterance, for there may be none, but on a new situation which is created, as if it were a speech act, the very moment the utterance takes place, which we shall call *presupposed deixis*; such is the power of deixis, since, according to Lyons (656), "in so far as the very fact of pointing to something commits the person who is pointing to a belief in the existence of what he is pointing at, the use of a deictic pronoun carries with it the implication or presupposition of existence."

From the point of view of stylistics and the interactional function of language (as in Brown and Yule 1), this usage of presupposed deixis as a rhetorical device has the purpose of joining both speaker and addressee within the same context. Lyons (677) mentions this effect as “empathetic” deixis, which entails a call for shared expression, i.e. an attempt to presuppose such a common stance between the speaker and the addressee that, regardless of the many differences and great distance existing between them, the addressee is ready to accept any kind of “advice.”¹

This “common ground” effect is particularly useful in those cases in which the speaker is interested in creating a feeling of closeness, previous to a persuasive attempt. This leads us to the two areas in which language is used to act upon others: political propaganda and advertising, or mass persuasive discourse. These are two fragments from a *Times* leader in January 1989, dealing with local riots in Britain:

- (6) The Muslim community must not try to bring about a de facto ban *here* by strong arm methods
- (7) We cannot have the intolerance of the mullahs *here*

How are we to decode these utterances? Following the “principle of local interpretation,” also suggested by Brown and Yule (50), addressees seek the closest referent for indexicals within their own context. In the case of these utterances, however, little support is given by either the physical context (somebody’s living room when reading the paper) or the linguistic context or cotext (the leader, or the whole newspaper).

Therefore, if we use a rather narrow definition of indexicals, certainly we cannot say that the author of the editorial and the addressee share a “speech” context in the strictest of terms; should we consider speaker, hearer, time, place and subject the five tenets of context,² we would have great difficulty in attributing a clear referent to any of the previous fragments, since only the subject is clear (that of the newspaper article, as determined by the title “In praise of tolerance” or “Islamic Intolerance”). As for the other components, it is not only that participants are not facing each other when the utterance takes place. Furthermore, the speaker’s identity can only be deduced with a certain amount of imagination, for the real author of the article is hidden behind the general mask of the newspaper; none of the thousands of potential readers will most probably ever meet the author, and as for time and place, the text is written at a remote distance in space (though less so in time) from the reader’s context.

Since the author is not known, how are we to decide such time and space? In this case, the genre conventions of the written press may be used as a help, and we are to adopt a definition of *here* as “a space of variable dimensions having as its center the speaker of an utterance” (as suggested by Brown and Yule under the heading “the expanding context”). However, it does not suffice to say that the context refers to Britain, either; it is impossible “We cannot have the intolerance of the mullahs *in Britain*” as a paraphrase, for it does not “mean” the same, the connotations not being present. The whole reasoning is based on a sympathetic use of *here*, meaning “our country, our home,” and would neither work in the same way if addressed to a foreigner living in Britain, since the referential component would be there, but not the emotional one.

Deixis as a stylistic device in advertising

With the exception of Leech (145), who only mentions deixis as a textual cohesion device, most studies on advertising touch upon the use of these markers as a strategy to involve the reader. Peninou (qtd. Albou 226) mentions the “presentative” use of deictics, in order to introduce a new product, referring to frequently quoted formulae such as *it’s here, just arrived* and *now*. However, this is only one of the possibilities offered by such devices, and the reason for its apelative success remains unexplained; we have to resort to a definition provided by Cardona and Berasarte (63), for whom these words produce “an impression of identity between the brand and the receiver of the advertising message, of a great marketing value,” and, moreover, “[such devices] create a semantic link of (mutual) dependence, as they refer to entities given or suggested by the context of the advertisement” (my translation).

The individualizing properties of deixis, also acknowledged by Greven (267), spring from the way they create a unique spatial and temporal frame, common to both speaker and addressee, where all references coincide. Thus, the role of all deictics is to contextualize and place the text within a certain environment: the addressee’s. Therefore, if advertising, a form of communication that takes place at a distance, relies on a device belonging to dialogue, we may infer that there is an underlying purpose in the copywriter, which in our hypothesis we may define as the creation of a presumed (and obviously false) time-space frame where advertiser and consumer coexist. According to Cifuentes (26), deixis turns spaces into “stages” (*ámbitos*), where human beings meet in language.

While accepting that in television commercials deictics have an objective role, for they refer to the image (“*here* is the stain ... and *now* it’s gone”), in the case of press advertising, given the lack of spatial and temporal reference, we must think of an implied frame, superficially inexistent but nevertheless present in the addressees’ minds. In the same way that adverts sometimes incorporate cultural elements belonging to the previous knowledge of their potential receivers, deixis is based on the usage of the receivers’ environment itself, for the mechanism of deixis, quoting again Cifuentes (73), involves a consideration of the role played in the process of enunciation by both participants in dialogue.

We shall analyse in this section all forms which have been traditionally considered as deictic markers or indexicals, such as time deixis and place deixis, for the same parameters seem to apply to this “imagined situation.” We shall include pronouns under a third heading, that of person or participant deixis, following Tanz (1), for they are also defined by means of other indexicals, and are always context- or cotext-dependent.³

It is to be noted that, since advertising aims to be a more private exchange than politics, the kind of context used here is less universal and more particular; while reference is still made to a past experience shared by both participants, the intimation is made that in this case it is only these two protagonists that are present, as if confidential information was being passed on. The reason makes sense: politics is self-appointedly *res publica*, the common good, while advertising, as we might expect, awakens our selfish ego.

a. Time deixis

In order to understand the use of time deixis, we have to see it as one of the devices implying reference to a presumed time frame, as in the following example, in which the presence of *these days* places the advertiser and the consumer within the same age (that of “modern times”):⁴

- (8) *These days*, Mercedes Benz conduct crash tests every week. And today, as they have since 1951 . . .⁵
- (9) As you’d expect *these days*, a catalytic converter is also fitted (Renault Clio 16 Valve)

This implied time frame is the one justifying the use of *now*, which functions here as a deictic marker, presupposing a “context common to both utterer and addressee”:

- (10) One of Britain’s finest cars—*now* made finer! (Rover)
- (11) 0% finance over 12 months is *now* available on the entire Fiat Uno and Panda ranges (Fiat)
- (12) The new Fiesta is *now* the best selling small car in Britain (Ford)
- (13) *Now* may seem the worst possible time to be thinking of buying a new car (Peugeot Diesels)
- (14) *By now*, most people know that 4-wheel drive systems clamp you to the road (Vauxhall Cavalier)
- (15) One day, no doubt, the Golf GTi will eventually be overtaken. But *right now*, we can’t see it

In some cases *now* may convey a feeling of “lost opportunity,” which reinforces a wider view of buying based on present enjoyment, an extreme manifestation of the prevailing hedonism (in this case, *soon*, as a relative adverb defined as “within a short time from now” [see Lasch]):

- (16) Order and register a new AX Jazz *between now and the end of January* and we’ll send you a cheque for £250 (Citroën AX)
- (17) Unfortunately, like most tax loopholes, this one will close *soon*. The Citroën XM Prestige is available in limited numbers⁶

We shall quote the case of *today* and other deictics that place the addressee within the same time frame as the utterer’s or, in other words, which create the impression that the utterer materialises her/himself right before the addressee:

- (18) *Today’s* diesels save you money in many ways (Peugeot Diesels)
- (19) *Today*, as always, Porsche do what other manufacturers don’t (Porsche)
- (20) *Yesterday’s* prices. *Today’s* value (Nissan)

However, we mentioned before that this usage of *today* might be readily discarded as a non-indexical, for it could be understood to be synonymous with *at present*, *nowadays*

or similar expressions. Nevertheless, while it still could be held that such expressions continue to require a minimum common temporal experience between speaker and hearer (for they must live in the same age), further examples could be proposed in which the time span delimiting *today* is a 24-hour period:

- (21) For a written quotation you should see your Ford dealer *today* (Ford Sierra)
- (22) One day, all this could be yours. How about *tomorrow*? (Rover 200)

But *today* is in no way an isolated case; here are other time indexicals having the same function of creating a precise atmosphere:

- (23) At this rate it could *soon* be a vanishing species (Fiat Panda)
- (24) So hurry down to your local dealer *soon* (Vauxhall Vans)
- (25) *Over the past few years*, Uno has earned more praise than any other car in its class (Fiat Uno)
- (26) *In ten years time*, you may just see this advertisement again (Peugeot 205)
- (27) Britain's Ford dealers are offering amazing reductions. Why? Because we have to make way for *next year's* models. And quick. (Ford)
- (28) Whether you want a car *next* month, or *next* year, ring now to join Rover's pre-purchase information programme
- (29) Various Sierras, Escorts and Fiestas *already* have lean burn engines and not at premium prices (Ford)
- (30) 1,000,000 *already* sold (Ford Fiesta)
- (31) It was only *recently* that we introduced the more powerful 2 litre overhead camshaft engines . . . (Ford)
- (32) *This* is a Rover *year* (Rover)
- (33) There's never been a *better time* to buy one (Fiat Tipo)
- (34) Not least is the knowledge that *at last* you can drive a European quality car built precisely as the designer intended (Rover 800)

b. Place deixis

As an introduction to place deixis, let us propose this example featuring the use of *here*:

- (35) "Lean burn" is part of the future, an elegant solution to a difficult problem. And it's *here* today. (Ford)

Such a revolutionary answer is "here," but where? In our opinion, the position at the end of the sentence causes this *here* to go beyond the presentational, initial usage of deictics ("Here's the solution") and is actually meant as an indication of place in space. Then, assuming the rule of relevance is followed, we have to understand the utterance by supposing that the speaker, the addressee and the car itself are in the same place, which means that the consumer has the answer in his or her own home.

Of course, such immediacy is not a strict one, for the "expanding context" we mentioned earlier presupposes a larger frame, encompassing not only the consumer's

house, but a general space loosely defined as “the society where you and I live.” Whatever the definition, though, it is finally the mention of participants that solves the referential question, for however wide the circle is, it has always *you* and *I* as its centre.

As in the time deictics we saw above, when one of these forms occurs in an advert it may entail the advertiser providing a space where the addressee is invited to enter (“Here you will find lots of friends,” YMCA), or the copywriter moving into the space of the addressee (“Get there in the legendary Suzuki Samurai 4x4”). The common factor is the union of both participants in the message.

THIS/THAT: As with other indexicals, we have to discard those occurrences in which the deictic element has either a cataphoric or an anaphoric (textual) usage, which is to be found in any text, as in this summary of advantages:

(36) Output up. Overheads down. Could *this* be the businessman’s dream? (BMW)

Apart from these, which are the only ones Penttilä (36) associates with advertising, we also come across other less direct references, of the kind we are discussing:

(37) Of course, since the United Kingdom is an integral part of Europe, these terms are also available during your journey in *this* country (Mercedes)

Parallel to its more frequent demonstrative usage, *this* refers to a present common ground, whereas the occurrence of *that* in advertising is to be understood as a reminder of an even less objective space, supposedly common to both participants, with a strong evocative, emotional connotation. Leech (158) suggested as a name for this effect “subjectively absolute uniqueness” (“*That’s* better,” “You’ve got *that* feeling”). However, in our opinion this particular indexical is not exactly referring to a *present* shared situation, but to a past one, belonging exclusively to the hearer’s memory, and is more an evocative element than a deictic one.

These are other cases of spatial deictics we have found in advertising, all involving a presumed space common to speaker and addressee:

(38) Just [visit] your *nearest* Citroën dealer

(39) So call 0800 282671 to find your *nearest* Citroën dealer

(40) A hard day’s work shouldn’t have to include the drive *home* (Mercedes)

(41) There’s great news *down* at your Vauxhall van dealer

(42) It’s *where you want to be* (Isuzu Trooper)

(43) Unlike most of the bargain cars *around* at the moment, Peugeots are the ones people actually want

c. Person or participant deixis

As we have seen in the case of both time and place deixis, the final decoding of indexicals is made by referring to *you* and *I*, either by talking about “the time when you and I are

speaking” or “the place where you and I are present.” Person deixis is, therefore, the one providing the ultimate key to understanding deictic expressions in normal, dialogic discourse; hence, all indexicals in written discourse are also to be understood as based on two fictitious participants in conversation. In this section we shall focus on the usage of *you* and, to a lesser extent, *we*, as the pronouns capable of including both participants.

WE: What do we mean by *we*? Perhaps it is one of the most ambiguous of words, which might not be expected of a pronoun, since only one thing is clearly defined, i.e. one of its components is a speaker. As for the other “members” of *we*, its scope is mostly determined by whether it includes also the addressee, for it may mean (amongst a number of combinations⁷) practically anyone. One thing cannot be doubted: should it only mean [*I* + somebody else], it would lack any stylistic value in persuasive discourse, as proven by the rare occurrence of *I* in such cases.

According to Greven (33) the role of *we* is to place the speaker and the addressee within the same perspective concerning the product suggested, in such a way that a fraternal solidarity between both ends of the marketing chain is born. Such the effect achieved in the implicit form [“we consumers”] in an example proposed by Leech (46): “At last we have high-fashion knitwear that can be washed by hand.” Here are a few examples in which *we* refers to {*I* + *you*}, something which would only be possible if there were some kind of simultaneous presence of both participants:

(44) Come ride with *us* (Honda)

(45) At a time when finances are a little on the tight side for *all of us* (Rover 800 Series)

(46) For *the rest of us*, suffice to say that it combines raw power with astonishing economy (Range Rover)

In these fragments, the advertiser places her/himself within the same frame of reference as the addressees, either by performing identical actions (*ride with us* sounds like an invitation to join the group of roadhogs about to start a journey), either by presupposing that both speaker and addressee are in a similar situation (either economic deprivation or technical ignorance).

YOU: Advertising theorists, such as Zacher (209), recommend copywriters to write copy in the second person and in the present tense and insist that, even when universal examples and situations are used, the message is to be thought of as directly addressed to an individual. Considering the following fragment,

(47) It’s a unique opportunity to buy the car *you* want at a price *you* can afford (Ford)

we may observe that the appearance of the pronoun *you* offers a number of advantages. In the first place, it is the most direct of addresses, perhaps the conversational utterance *par excellence*, for the second person pronoun is the main deictic marker of dialogue, the unmistakable reference to a (number of) addressee(s) present. The impression that advertising is speaking to us is in this case more real than ever.

On the other hand, and as an added feature, through this placement as a grammatical subject the consumer is given the main role in the action described in the advertisement, which flatters our individualism. Thus, when the caption says *You can do it in an MG*, the reader instantly pictures her/himself as the driver at the wheel, as in the following cases, in which the pronoun, either as a subject or as an object, becomes the protagonist:

- (48) If *you're* more interested in saving fuel than in saving time, the dashing new AX Debut will be right up *your* street (Citroën AX Debut)
- (49) You can see for *yourself*, with a glance at the table on the right, just how competitive our rates are (Ford)

By entering each addressee's individual space, the usage of *you* conveys a high degree of presupposition, since our future decisions as consumers are taken for granted. Of course, what is presupposed is that we are ready to purchase the goods advertised (which, at the same time, allows the utterance to discard those not interested and therefore select its own addressees):

- (50) Will *you* pay the price of a BMW and still not own one?
- (51) What *you* are looking for is years of safe, reliable motoring and that is precisely what *you* get with Hyundai

These devices contribute to the flattering illusion that the addressee is already the owner of the car offered, since both reader and vehicle share the same fictional space. For such purpose, the strategy producing most direct effect is the possessive determiner, which presupposes ownership with no money involved (or at a "reasonable" price). In utterances like "This is why your car is the remarkable car it is," the phrase *your car* involves presupposition P_1 : {"You own the car"}, which we cannot negate since it is not the main one in the sentence⁸:

- (52) BMW puts the pleasure of driving within *your* reach.
- (53) The car shown here is *yours* for £20,525 (Vauxhall Carlton)
- (54) It's *your* deal. Proof, surely, that Vauxhall sticks to the budget which really matters. *Your own*.
- (55) One day, all this could be *yours*. How about tomorrow? (Rover 200)
- (56) What's *yours* called? (Renault)

Conclusions

Both in newspaper leaders and in advertising, and in any other example we might conceive of persuasion at a distance, neither the editorialist nor the advertiser can use any paralinguistic device to create a warm atmosphere, since they cannot physically smile at, or lean forward towards the consumer. Therefore, all devices are to be found within the words themselves.

In any text, the introduction of deictic terms confers a specific character to the situation described. If in dialogue the presence of indexicals confirms the existence of a surrounding time-space frame in which the conversational exchange takes place, in non-dialogic discourse, as we have seen, deictic terms create an, as it were, alleged context where participants in persuasive discourse can, even at a distance, feel as if they were facing each other.

Therefore, in a language such as the English used in newspaper leaders or in advertising, we might conclude that indexical frames are no longer two, as grammarians would have it; to the spaces corresponding to either participant in discourse we may add a third one, which could be described according the following pattern:

<i>Real</i>		<i>Presupposed</i>
here	there	here (there) and now (then), where you and I meet
now	then	
I	you	

For the decoding of these indexicals, there is, of course, a strong experiential component, which makes us equate the occurrence of such linguistic elements to previous examples featuring the same apparent “abnormality”; all the more so in a genre like advertising, in which these deictics are a recurrent formula, although in most cases they do have a genuinely presentational function, as we said before.

Commercial consumer advertising violates the general idea suggested by Brown and Yule (13) that in our society spoken language is interactional, while written language is used for the transfer of information. Therefore, should we take that rule to be correct, it seems reasonable to assume that, whenever written discourse aims to be directive, it will have to take on the shape of spoken language; one of the common features of such discourse is the usage of physical context to supplement reference data absent in the utterance.

Notes

1. A stylistic usage of deixis in its normal form (i.e. based on the physical context of the utterance) is the following, which can be read in many shops in Spain: “No credit given today. Tomorrow we will.” Whatever reading we may suggest of this notice, it is clear that it is impossible to buy things on credit, for at the time we read the text, no credit is given. Perhaps this is the linguistic explanation for the common proverb “Tomorrow never comes.”

2. For a more detailed account of context coordinates, see again Brown and Yule (52ff).

3. I am using, therefore, the concept of deixis in the sense referred to by Nurnberg as *indexical*, i.e. the linguistic encoding of a contextual element, not to be confused with anaphora, which, in some way, could be seen as a kind of textual deixis.

4. The promise of well-being, central to commercial consumer advertising, includes here rescuing the addressee from a painful and prehistoric past, as in the example “Gone are the days when you’d find yourself lumbering along the slow lane of the motorway” (Vauxhall Astra),

where the advertiser supposedly uses the product to solve the addressee's "problem" in such a way that both live the same age of progress, as in "BMW have responded to the times in which we live."

5. All the examples, unless otherwise specified, come from press advertising, published in British newspapers between 1990 and 1995. None of the indexicals analyzed had any connection with pictures or urban environments which might have provided a reference for them.

6. Evidence of the widespread usage of "now or never" as a justification is the appearance of devices opposed to it, as in "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Or buy a Volkswagen," which builds on a quieter strategy based on permanent quality and not on urgent, short-lasting bargains.

7. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (41) lists many combinations, from the simple "inclusive we" ([I + nobody else]), exclusively implying first person, to [I + you] (first and second), [I + you + he] (first, second and third) or [I + he] (first and third). It is only by sheer way of repetition that we have managed to live with such blatant linguistic inaccuracy.

8. For reasons of space, we shall not analyze the usage of presupposition in advertising and its likely effects. Suffice it to examine a single example, such as *You know/Did anyone tell you that Ford is a great car?*, which includes P₁: {"Ford is a great car"}; should we answer "No," we imply that we do not know that it is a great car, or that we have not been told, but we cannot deny that it is unless we break the conversational exchange.

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