

Deixis

[Slides 14-16]

The denotation of many words is not stable, but subject to changes from one utterance to another. This becomes particularly evident when examining the so-called deictic expressions. Deictics are characterized by the fact that only part of their meaning is fixed, while their denotation, or reference, **depends entirely on the context**. They can potentially point to different entities; therefore, they can only be fully understood when contextual information is taken into account. This phenomenon, known as deixis, is well exemplified by pronouns such as “I” and “you”, as well as adverbs like “here” and “now”, and demonstratives like “this” and “that”.

Deictics like the one just mentioned stand out because **their meaning is solely defined by the context in which they are used**. To illustrate this concept, let's consider the pronoun “I”. Its semantics is fixed and well defined, always portraying the subject of a sentence; however, the actual reference shifts according to the identity of the speaker. To which referent does the pronoun “I” point? The answer constantly varies depending on the individual speaking. Likewise, the same principle applies to the pronoun “you”. Its reference shifts based on the context, specifically depending on the person or group the speaker is addressing.

The same characteristic can be observed in the word “today”. What “today” refers to is determined by the context: if used in a statement made at this very moment, “today” would indicate the date on which I am formulating the sentence. Likewise, the word “here” denotes the location where the statement is being made, but that location changes and is not an inherent part of the word's meaning.

A crucial concept associated with deixis is that of **deictic center**, which serves as reference point for interpreting deictic expressions, since it establishes the relevant context and provides the coordinates useful for identifying the referents.

By default, the deictic center **coincides with the point of origin of the utterance**, typically the speaker. This means that expressions like “today” refer to the moment of speaking, “here” indicates a position close to the speaker, “I” refers to the speaker themselves, and so on. In summary, deictics are usually interpreted according to the speaker's perspective.

However, **the deictic center is not necessarily fixed to the speaker** and can be shifted to provide a different perspective. For instance, when we pronounce an utterance such as “enter the corridor, the bathroom is on the right”, the word “right” indicates a position relative to the corridor itself, independent from the speaker's or listener's current viewpoint. We may consider one more example: the verb “to come” generally implies

movement toward the speaker, as in “come here”. Nevertheless, during a phone conversation, if someone says "are you at the bar? I'm coming" the verb indicates an approach towards the listener, signaling a shift of the deictic center to their position.

In conclusion, deixis involves words that shift their reference according to the deictic center, resulting in the identification of **different referents depending on the context**. As a result, their meaning is only partially determined, as their denotation can only be established in relation to a specific context.

Typically, the context coincides with the time and place of the utterance, although a different deictic center can be assumed.