2.5: Deixis and Person

Utterance Contexts

Exercise (PageIndex{1})

Consider the sentence *I love you*. What changes in the interpretation of the words *I* and *you* when different speakers say this to different hearers?

Each time a Speaker refers, there is a word (or more) that is uttered, that is, a form, and there is a referent, the thing that is being referred to. (Of course the referent may be something imaginary, but we can still talk about it existing in the mind of the Speaker.) But for each reference, there are always in addition several other things: the Speaker, one or more Hearers, the time and place of the reference, a set of things that the Speaker and the Hearer are currently aware of, and possibly some other language that has just been produced by the Speaker, the Hearer, or somebody else. A particular instance of language is an utterance. An utterance needs to be distinguished from a particular word, phrase, or sentence because an utterance has an utterance context, a particular Speaker, Hearer, time, place, available things, and recent language, in addition to its own linguistic form. I'll sometimes refer to the Speaker and Hearer as utterance participants. For example, we can put the English words *I*, *like*, and *it* together to make the English sentence *I like it*, but this sentence is a different utterance each time it is uttered.

Each utterance has its own context, and, as we will see below, for each context the sentence has a different meaning. That is, meaning always changes from one utterance context to another. The figure below is one way of representing the elements of an utterance context. Each of the elements is a role in the context, a kind of slot that gets filled by something in each different situation. For example, the Speaker role is filled by a particular person, and the Location role...
is filled by a particular place. We will meet the concept of role again later in this book; in fact it is one of the most fundamental notions in cognitive science.

Deixis

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\)

How does the notion of utterance context help us understand how words like I and you refer?

Now we'll examine how our Lexies can use the idea of utterance context to come up with a new way to refer to some of things around them. Each person in the tribe has a name, and when referring to members of the tribe, a Speaker can use the name of the referent (a proper noun such as Philip). Proper nouns have an unusual property; unless there is more than one individual with the same name, proper nouns always refer to the same individual in the world, no matter when, where, and by whom they are uttered. (Note that this is not true of common nouns; we can use the noun apple at different times to refer to any number of different individual apples in the world.)

**Referring to Someone in Terms of their Utterance Role**

Now consider an approach to reference that is in a sense the opposite of that taken with proper nouns, which are completely independent of the utterance context, one in which the meaning depends completely on the utterance context. Say Clark is speaking to Lois and wants to refer to Lois. He could use her name, a proper noun. Or he could use a word which refers to the Hearer, whoever that might be. This is how the English word you works. Without knowing the utterance context, or at least knowing who the Hearer is, we have no idea what the referent of you is. The figure below illustrates the meaning of you. The referent of a you utterance is joined by the meaning arrow to the role of Hearer rather than to a particular individual (as for proper nouns) or a category (as for common nouns).

For each utterance of you, the word gets its interpretation from the utterance context, that is, who it is that fills the role of Hearer. So in our example, with Clark as the Speaker and Lois as the Hearer, the situation is as shown in the figure below. There are question marks in the Location and Time roles because we don't know what these are, and the number at the end of "utterance" is meant to indicate that this a particular utterance, not the general prototype for utterances shown in the previous two figures.
You is an example of a deictic expression, an expression that gets its meaning directly from the utterance context, that makes reference to one or more of the roles in the utterance context: the Speaker, the Hearer, the location, or the time. The noun form of the word is *deixis*.

You may already have figured out where we’re going next. Just as we have an English word to refer to whoever the Hearer is, we have a word to refer to whoever the Speaker is: *I* (or *me*). *I* gets its meaning from the utterance context just as *you* does. *You* and *I* are examples of personal pronouns words which refer directly to participants in the utterance context. All languages apparently have personal pronouns, a quite striking universal property, though languages differ greatly in the details, as we will see later on.

### Person

Exercise \(\PageIndex{3}\)

What information is conveyed by the word *her* in the sentence *I love her*? Does (or could) the meaning of the word change with the utterance context as it does for *I*?

The personal pronouns *I* and *you* are alike in a number of ways; they differ with respect to their person, that is, which utterance participant they refer to. Conventionally we call reference to the Speaker *first person* and reference to the Hearer *second person*. Note that reference that *includes* the Speaker as well as other people is considered first person; thus *we* is a first person pronoun. The commonality between *I* and *we* is not something that is reflected in form in English, but we should not be surprised to find it elsewhere. In Japanese, there are many words for *I*, but each of these words has a corresponding form ending in *-tachi* that means ‘we’: for example, *watashi*, *boku*, *ore* ‘I’; *watashitachi*, *bokutachi*, *oretachi* ‘we’.

Reference that does not include the Speaker but includes at least the Hearer is considered second person; thus the Southern English pronoun *y’all* and the Spanish pronoun *ustedes* are second person. Notice that many English dialects use the same pronoun, *you*, for both reference to a single Hearer and to multiple Hearers or to the Hearer and other people. First and second person seem to be universal categories in languages; they appear not only in the form of pronouns, as we’ll see in Chapter 7.

What about reference to things (or abstractions) that are (or include) neither the Speaker nor the Hearer? Here things get a little more complicated. Clearly any reference which is not first person or second person belongs to this category, which is known as *third person*. So in the following sentence, the expressions in bold are third person.

1. *Clark* told *his sister* about the movie.

This sentence makes reference to three different things, and none of these either is or includes the Speaker or Hearer. None of these references seems to be deictic either since their meanings do not seem to depend on the utterance
context, on who says the sentence to whom and on when and where it is said. (This is not quite true — the interpretation of the movie in this sentence does depend on the utterance context — but we will not worry about this aspect of deixis.)

Just as we have first and second person pronouns which say nothing more about the referent than that it is (or includes) the Speaker or Hearer, we have third person pronouns which say little more about the referent than that it does not include the Speaker or Hearer. Third person pronouns in English include she, he, it, and that. Notice that these pronouns do provide a little more information about the referent than that it is third person (neither Speaker nor Hearer). They also tell us something about the gender of the referent. He refers to something that is not the Speaker or Hearer and is perceived as male. (Note that the referent doesn't have to be male in a biological sense. In informal English we often use he in informal English to refer to animals without actually checking first to make sure we have their gender right. Another way to look at this usage is to think of the male pronouns as the default, the form we use for animals when we don't know the gender.) Similarly, she refers to something that is not the Speaker or Hearer and is perceived as female, and it and that refer to something which is perceived as non-human.

**Pronouns as Speaker-oriented Shortcuts**

Note how third person pronouns act as shortcuts; in this sense they are Speaker-oriented. To refer to something, a Speaker can just say "it" and not bother coming up with the name of the thing or a common noun for its category. Of course the burden is then on the Hearer to figure out which non-human thing the Speaker is referring to. This implies two things about language learning. First, people have to learn how to interpret such pronouns. This is not trivial, and it has proven to be one of the most difficult language behaviors to get computers to do. Second, people have to learn in what situations it is appropriate to use such pronouns. Consider the following sentence uttered at the beginning of a conversation.

2. Did you find it?

This sentence sounds silly unless the Speaker somehow knows that whatever it refers to is on the Hearer's mind and that nothing else the Hearer might have been looking for is.

Let's summarize what we've given our Lexies in this section. Personal pronouns don't actually allow them to refer to any new things in the world that they couldn't already refer to; they already had proper nouns or common nouns for this purpose. Instead personal pronouns give them a new way to refer, using the roles of the utterance context directly. As we have seen, utterance contexts have more than just a Speaker and a Hearer, and we can expect languages to have deictic words that refer to the other roles as well. Words such as here and now do exactly that.

**Learning Deixis**

Exercise (PageIndex(4))

If young children learning English treat the word you like a proper noun instead of a person pronoun, what kinds of mistakes will they make?
Pronouns May be Easy to Produce, But in the Beginning They’re Hard to Figure Out.

As we have seen, young children must learn to refer using words that point directly to individuals (proper nouns), words that point to categories of things (common nouns), and words that point to deictic roles. Deixis seems to be the last of these to emerge. Early on children often treat first and second person pronouns as though they were proper nouns. So when the Speaker uses the word you to refer to the Hearer (the child), the child may also use the word you to refer to herself, who is now the Speaker. Perhaps deixis is hard for a child because it requires switching perspective. The child can't simply imitate the adult usage because the roles of Speaker and Hearer switch when this happens, and deictic words like I and you change their referents. In some sense the child has to understand a word like you from the perspective of the Speaker, realizing that that person then fills the you role when she becomes the Speaker.

Third person pronouns are difficult for children in a related way. As we have seen, their appropriate use depends on the ability to know whether the Hearer can interpret them, that is, in some sense on the ability to put oneself in the position of the Hearer. Because this is apparently difficult for children, they often produce sentences like the following in a situation where the Hearer would have no way of figuring out who he is.

3. He hit me.