

The Role of Deixis in World-building in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract:

The research explores how deixis is a powerful tool in world-building within Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, "The Handmaid's Tale." Deictic expressions, including temporal, spatial, personal, and discourse deixis, are essential to constructing and reinforcing oppressive social structures, hierarchical relationships, and the protagonist's subjective experience. The study employs a qualitative analysis approach, focusing on textual evidence and linguistic patterns to examine the role of deixis in shaping the reader's perception of the narrative world. By delving into deixis theory, including concepts of deictic center and deictic projection, the research aims to provide new insights into Atwood's masterful use of language to craft a convincingly reasonable dystopian world. Through detailed examination and close analysis of deixis, the research elucidates how Atwood effectively immerses readers in the narrative, enhancing their understanding of the protagonist's constrained world and fostering more profound engagement with the text.

Keywords: (The Handmaid's Tale, Deixis, World-building, Deictic expressions, Deictic center, Deictic projection).

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, "The Handmaid's Tale," has captivated readers with its chilling portrayal of a totalitarian society. Within its narrative, the building of this oppressive world relies heavily on linguistic elements, particularly deixis. Deictic expressions help to highlight language variables and link them to the real world. As a result, context is crucial in determining the meaning of utterances (Verschuere, 1999, p. 18). Additionally, deictic expressions may further connect the reader or hearer of the text to the contents by placing the reader's or listener's consciousness into the text concerned (Jeffries, 2010, p. 150). Deictic expressions also facilitate the reader's further exploration of the text's complexities. As a result, comprehending the deictic expressions of the narrative is necessary for the reader or listener to enter its world (Bussmann, 1996, p. 286).

This research explores how deixis functions as a powerful tool in world-building within Atwood's narrative. By examining how deixis constructs and reinforces oppressive social structures, hierarchical relationships, and the protagonist's subjective experience, This research aims to provide new insights into Atwood's masterful use of language to craft a convincingly reasonable dystopian world through a close analysis of deixis.

1.1 Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does the use of deixis in "The Handmaid's Tale" contribute to the overall world-building process?
2. In what ways does deixis shape the reader's perception of the protagonist's subjective experience within the novel's dystopian world?

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Deixis Theory

The term "deixis," which is derived from a Greek word that means "pointing" or "indicating," is now used in linguistics to refer to the localization and identification of subjects about the spatiotemporal context established and maintained by the act of expression and the participation in it, typically consisting of a single speaker and at least one addressee (Lyons, 1977, pp. 636- 637; Trask, 2007, p.66; Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018, p.162).

Consequently, deictic expressions in English often comprise first and second-person pronouns, demonstratives, tense, specific place and time adverbials, and some verbs such as 'come,' 'go,' 'bring,' 'take,' and 'get.' Such deictic terms convey specific characteristics of the speech event and cannot be understood without considering contextual parameters (Marmaridou, 2000, p.65). Moreover, according to Bussmann's

dictionary, deixis is defined as an "Act of pointing out or indicating elements of a situation by gesture or linguistic." It refers to the personal, temporal, or spatial aspect of any given utterance act and whose designation is, therefore, dependent on the context of the speech situation (Bussmann,1996, p. 286).

According to Segal (1995) and Stockwell (2002), deictic expressions like I, now, and here immediately implicate the context. These relate to the speaker, the occasion, and the setting of the speaking act. Think about the phrase, "I am here now." When used appropriately, this sentence often alerts listeners of a particular person's presence. However, the statement needs more sense when taken from its context and analyzed independently (Segal,1995, p. 10; Stockwell, 2002, p.41). Subsequently, deixis is dependent on a narrative's context, circumstance, and relationships. Every language has expressions known as deictic terms, such as I/you, here/there, now/then, this/that, yesterday/today/tomorrow. In any narrative, these terms relate to a person, a time, or a place that has already been mentioned or, less commonly, that has yet to be mentioned (Dylgjeri & Kazazi, 2013, p. 90). However, our embodied cognition is the foundation for perceiving deictic expressions. This fundamental principle of cognitive linguistics emphasizes that our understanding of language is based on physical interactions with the world around us. Deictic components often include pronouns, demonstratives, and adverbs, yet deixis is not limited to any single word class (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018, p. 162).

Levinson (1983) identifies five distinct forms of deixis, which are as the following: **(1)** location deixis, the first contains information about an object's or entity's location in space. Adverbs like "here" and "there" are examples of pure place deictic, entirely dependent on the reader's or listener's location. Deictic expressions, like "this" and "that," are also instances of pure place deictic since their meanings are dependent on the location of the speaker or author (pp. 79-85).

Additionally, in utterances, location deixis is crucial. First, deixis is egocentric; thus, a speaker is an entity in space, creating human utterances in that location. Participant roles, social identification, and discourse formation are imprinted in place. Second, because the speaker's position may change over time, place deixis inherently integrates a temporal component of the speech event. In addition to location deixis, languages relate to objects by identifying, characterizing, or placing them in space (Marmaridou, 2000, p.86; Lyons, 1977, pp. 690-691).

Moreover, Stockwell (2002) described the deixis as it was adapted to the literary context in this category as spatial deixis - expressions locating the deictic center in a place, including spatial adverbs "here/there," "nearby/far away," and locatives "in the valley,"

"out of Africa," as well as demonstratives "this/that" and verbs of motion "come/go," "bring/take" (p.45).

(2) The second type of deictic is the temporal deictic, which encodes the time from the time of the speech or writing. We can think of now, then, yesterday, today, and tomorrow as pure temporal deictic expressions. Temporal deixis can also be communicated by temporal phrases like last week, several years ago (Levinson,1983, pp. 73- 78; Dirven & Verspoor, 2004, p. 5). Furthermore, time deixis refers to speech event participants, notably the speaker, revealing its egocentricity. Time deixis refers to cultural time concepts and measurements. In most languages, time is measured in cycles that refer to the 24-hour day and the ways it is divided into significant sociocultural sub-sections, such as the month and its sub-division into the 7-day week cycles, and the year, which is the highest and most frequently used temporal cycle (Green, 1992, p. 15; Marmaridou, 2000, p.82).

The English language uses the adverbs "now" and "then," as well as "soon" and "recently," and verb tense, as the most common means of expressing temporal deixis. The expressions "today," "tomorrow," and "yesterday" are examples of temporal deixis that operate in conjunction with calendric units of time to pinpoint where a statement was made about the passage of time (Semino, 2014, p. 34; Marmaridou, 2000, p.82). On the other hand, storytelling focuses more on time than location. A story is given to the reader only partially at a time. The reactions of readers to a story develop gradually. Time progression through a story is what we mean when discussing narration (Segal, 1995a, p. 65).

Adjectives like "next" and "last" and demonstratives like "this" and "that" are common ways to communicate time deixis about individual time cycles and their respective names. Place deictic adjectives include "this room," "that room," "next stop," "last station," "this," "that," "next," and "last paragraph." It is believed that the similarities in the expression of time, space, and discourse deixis may be explained by an experienced account of deixis (Marmaridou, 2000, p.84).

Moreover, Stockwell (2002) described the deixis as it was adapted to the literary context in this category as temporal deixis - expressions locating the deictic center in time, including temporal adverbs "today/yesterday/tomorrow/soon/later" and locatives "in my youth" and "after three weeks"; particularly tense and aspect in verb forms that differentiate "speaker-now," "story-now," and 'receiver-now' (p.46).

(3 & 4) Personal and social deixis encode the identities of the speaker and the audience and their positions about one another in each scenario. I, you, he, she, and others are all examples of personal pronouns that express person deixis (Levinson,1983, pp. 68-72). Consequently, the deictic aspects stretch beyond a specific person, place, and time.

The participants in the narrative have a relational quality regarding their social connections and how each perceptual deictic center appears to view the other participants. This is a deixis issue because characters in a scenario are socially rooted in one another rather than absolutely (Stockwell, 2002, p. 44).

Like person deixis, social deixis encodes how far two characters are from one another in the social hierarchy. You may do this by using first names and short forms to convey social proximity, such as first name (Stephen) or titles and honorifics to express social distance (e.g., Professor Levinson) (McIntyre, 2006, p. 98; Levinson, 1983, pp. 89-93).

According to Marmaridou (2000), person and social deixis demonstrate that they must be handled together. Social deixis naturally connects to speaker and addressee roles stored in person deixis; hence, it cannot be a different deictic framework. Social deixis also adds pragmatic significance to speech event roles. Since one pragmatic parameter necessitates the other, distinguishing between participant roles and social roles in the speech event is neither analytically required nor conceptually preferable (p.74). Person deixis generally refers to the speaker as the addressee and the deictic center of the speech occurrence. It is usual for the deictic center to transition from one conversational to the other when participants take turns in the speech event and alternately become speakers and addressees (Green, 1992, p. 23; Marmaridou, 2000, p.75).

Consequently, Stockwell (2002) defined the deixis as adapted to the literary context in this sub-category as perceptual deixis, which are expressions concerning the perceptive participants in the text, such as personal pronouns (I, me, you, they, it), demonstratives (these, those), definite articles (the man, Bilbo Baggins) and mental states (thinking, believing). Taking cognition seriously, he maintained, meant that referring to anything is a socially situated, interactive, and deictic act since it is a mental representation (p.45). Moreover, the pronouns "I," "you," and "we" are used to denote the speaker, the addressee, and any group that includes or excludes the speaker and the addressee. Additionally, it has been noted that the decision to include or exclude the addressee from "we" depends on factors unrelated to language, such as the context of society (Semino, 2014, p. 33; Marmaridou, 2000, p.80).

(5) Finally, deixis in discourse encodes mental state. Take the question, "So, tell me about this new colleague of yours," for instance, and replace "this" with "that." Though context may also play a role, the second may give the impression that the speaker has fewer favorable views towards the colleague in issue than the first (Levinson, 1983, pp. 85-98; Dirven & Verspoor, 2004, p. 5). Furthermore, discourse deixis occurs when one part of

a discussion is referred to in another; moreover, discourse deixis also applies to texts. Whether written or spoken, text is inextricably linked to location and time. In particular, when a text is created verbally, it appears simultaneously to the speaker and the intended recipient. There is a temporal and spatial dimension to textual communication between a speaker and an audience. Discourse deixis is encoded with phrases referring to specific locations or times (Semino, 2014, p.35; Green, 1992, p. 25; Marmaridou, 2000, p.93).

2.2 Deictic Center and Deictic Projection

The conceptual framework of the deictic center is essential to understanding deixis (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018, p. 162). In addition to referring to a speaker's or hearer's physical location in space and time, this also describes their standing within a social hierarchy. Also, deictic center term is similar to zero-point or origo (Stockwell, 2002, p. 43). It is from this complicated deictic center that they interpret deictic expressions. Because language is egocentric, we automatically believe that we are at the exact center of the world (McIntyre, 2006, p. 92).

According to Segal (1995), all the components of the present moment, or phenomenal present for the deictic terms' user, are included in this deictic center. Moreover, according to the Deictic Shift Theory, when reading a fictitious narrative, authors and readers change their deictic centers from a scenario in the actual world to a representation of themselves in a setting within the narrative's world. This place is shown as a cognitive structure that frequently includes details from a specific time and place in a fictional setting or even a fictional character's personal space (p. 15). Furthermore, the deictic center is an effort to represent what happens when we remove deixis from its physical anchors in the speech context (here, now, I, and you) and place it instead in the purely literary domain of fiction (Trask, 2007, p.66; Zubin & Hewitt, 1995, p. 130).

Consequently, the reader's deictic center is switched from the current circumstance in reality to a vision of themselves in a setting within the fictional world. From this deictic center, which may shift as the narrative develops, the reader experiences and understands the narrative (Gibbons & Whiteley, 2018, p. 162). The narrative author can manipulate the reader's deictic center by telling the story from a point of view, such as first-person narration or represented speech (Duchan et al., 1996, p. 448). In other words, the interpretations are known to be restricted by context. The reader can localize those narrative features accurately if a deictic center has been formed. The deictic center is not static inside the narrative but moves as it progresses (Segal, 1995, p. 16).

In this sense, according to Marmaridou (2000), the zero point, or origo, of the deictic field of language is determined by the speaker (I), the location (here), and the

moment of discourse (now). Moreover, the symbolic domain comprises nouns and verbs that serve as symbols of meaning (p.66). However, according to Galbraith (1995), the person who comprises the origo of the deictic field in fiction is not the speaker "I" (real I-origo, writer, narrator), but rather a third-person figure. In general, in fiction, the conceptions of here, now, and self are formed on the plane of the narrative rather than in the act of telling (p. 25).

In brief, Zubin and Hewitt (1995) argue that stories are feasible because readers can absorb knowledge from the typical and hypothetical worlds into the narrative world, creating an illusion of a cohesive reality. This shared belief in the unitary character of experience anchors comprehension of the text, transforming from fictitious to impersonal narration (pp.130-131).

The other side of deictic shift theory is deictic projection. Understanding our ability for deictic projection might help us better grasp how we can change our perspective to see things as others or literary characters might. It is possible to project a deictic center by using phrases like "on your left" or "it is behind you" (Stockwell, 2002, p. 43; Stockwell, 2002a, p.79).

The frequent notion of a reader "getting inside" a literary text is modeled by deictic shift theory as the reader assumes a cognitive position within the mentally generated text. With this imaginative ability, the reader can interpret projected deictic expressions relative to the altered deictic center. In other words, readers may see things practically from the character or narrator's perspective inside the text world and build a rich context by resolving deictic statements from that perspective. The shifted deictic center explains a literary text's coherence (Stockwell, 2002, pp. 46- 47; Stockwell, 2009, pp.128-129). Pinpointing the boundaries of deictic fields is essential for shifting deictic centers (Stockwell, 2002a, p. 79).

3. Data Analysis and discussion

A qualitative data analysis approach would be most appropriate for this research. Since the focus is on examining the linguistic elements (deixis) within the text and understanding their role in world-building a qualitative analysis would allow for a detailed examination of textual evidence, linguistic patterns, and contextual meanings.

Analyzing the opening extracts of "The Handmaid's Tale" can provide valuable insights into how deixis sets the tone and establishes key themes from the outset. The opening extracts set the stage for the dystopian world and introduce the reader to the protagonist's perspective.

Extract 1:

"We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair"(Atwood, 1985, p. 2).

In extract (1) from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, deixis plays a significant role in grounding the reader within the narrative's spatial and temporal context. Many distinct types of deixis, including the following, play significant roles in the narrative.

Temporal deixis: *"what had once been the gymnasium"* refers to a past state or time, indicating that the gymnasium existed in the past but no longer does, thus indicating a temporal aspect. Also, *"for the games that were formerly played there..."* The term *"formerly"* is an example of temporal deixis, indicating a change in the past. It establishes a temporal reference point for the events described.

Spatial deixis: *"We slept in what had once been the gymnasium."* Here, the demonstrative pronoun *"what"* refers to the gymnasium, which serves as a spatial deixis. It points to a location in space and time, anchoring the reader's understanding of where the characters slept and all the locations mentioned in the extract.

Person deixis: *"We slept..."* The pronoun *"we"* serves as person deixis, indicating the individuals involved in the action. The narrative presents itself from this perspective. *"I thought I could smell,"* the first-person pronoun, indicates the narrator is a protagonist.

Discourse deixis: The demonstrative pronoun *"this"* is implied in the phrase *"I thought I could smell this,"* referring to the sensory experience described in the preceding sentences.

In this extract, deixis is essential for directing the reader's understanding of the text by indicating specific locations, times, referents, and perspectives. It helps to create a sense of logical connection and comprehension within the narrative framework.

This extract's deictic center lies in the narrator's perspective, impacting the reader's experience. The narrator describes sleeping in the gymnasium using first-person pronouns

like "we" and "I." Readers can experience the new place at this deictic center through the narrator's senses and memories. Deictic projection happens when readers imagine themselves in the story and agree with the narrator. The details draw the reader into the varnished wood floor, painted stripes and circles, sweaty smell, and lack of basketball nets. This projection helps readers explore the gymnasium's progression, providing geographical and temporal orientation. The deictic center and projection work together in the text world to create a personal connection, subjective experience, and realistic spatial-temporal awareness.

Extract 2:

"The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two, around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy" (Atwood, 1985, p. 3).

Extract (2) identifies various types of deixis, each of which plays a specific role in directing the meaning or understanding within the text:

Temporal deixis: *"Twice daily"* indicates the frequency of the walks, providing a temporal context within the individual's confined routine. *"Now"* highlights how the football field has changed, enclosed by a chain-link fence with barbed wire.

Spatial deixis: The phrase *"inside the building"* denotes a specific spatial location that establishes the restrictive environment where the narrator finds herself. *"Outside it"* refers to the area beyond the chain-link fence, specifying where *"the Angels"* are positioned around the narrators. *"Around the football field"* describes the path of the narrators' walks, providing spatial context within the restricted area.

Person deixis: *"The guards"* refers to specific individuals, directing attention to a particular group within the building's environment.

"we" refers to the narrators or individuals narrating the experience within the confined space. *"our"* and *"us"* refer to the collective group to which the narrators belong, distinguishing them from *"the Angels"* and *"the guards."*

Discourse deixis: "*That was our fantasy*" refers to previous statements and experiences, summarizing the narrator's longing for interaction and exchange with the Angels, shaping her aspirations and desires within the text.

These various deixis provide crucial contextual information and clarify the text's spatial, temporal, personal, and discourse-related references. They assist in orienting and shaping the reader's understanding of the confined environment, the characters' emotions, and their desires for interaction.

Extract (2) establishes the deictic center from the narrators' perspective, represented by "*we*." The narrators' confined experiences within the building, like the restriction to "*our walks*" around the football field and the mention of "*our bodies*," are pivotal elements that define the narrative viewpoint. This perspective shapes the narrative's focal point, providing insight into the narrators' limited spatial context and emotions.

The deictic projection extends from this center, emphasizing spatial and emotional relationships within the text. References such as "*inside the building*," "*our walks*," and "*our bodies*" portray the narrators' confined spatial boundaries and experiences. Additionally, the description of the Angels standing "*outside it*" (referring to the fenced football field) illustrates the spatial relationship between the narrators and "*the Angels*," highlighting the external positioning of these entities from the narrators' confined perspective.

These deictic elements delineate spatial boundaries, emotional landscapes, and relational dynamics within the text world. They establish the narrators' limited interactions, perceptions, and desires, exemplified by their fear of the Angels and yearning for interaction or exchange. The deictic center and projection collectively craft a narrative viewpoint that summarizes the narrator's confined experiences, emotions, and aspirations, offering readers an understanding of her constrained world from her specific and restricted standpoint.

4. Conclusion

Deixis, which grounds the reader in the narrative's physical, temporal, and personal contexts, is essential to the entire world-building process in Margaret Atwood's "*The Handmaid's Tale*" extracts. While spatial deixis, such as descriptions of the gymnasium and the use of personal deixis like "*we*" and "*I*," immerse the reader in the narrator's

perspective and enhance the vividness of the environment, temporal deixis in extract (1), such as "*what had once been*" and "*formerly*," establish the historical context of the setting. Inferred references, such as "*this*," serve as an example of discourse deixis, which ensures coherence in sensory experiences. Similarly, in extract (2), personal deixis defines the narrators' individual experiences, while temporal deixis, like "*twice daily*," and spatial deixis, like "*inside the building*," define the setting and its bounds. Discourse deixis summarizes the narrators' wishes in sentences like "*that was our fantasy*," which helps viewers better comprehend their limited reality.

Moreover, in response to the second research question, deixis strongly influences how the reader interprets the protagonist's subjective experience in the novel's dystopian setting. References to previous states or eras, such as "*had once been*" and "*now*," exhibit temporal deixis, which gives context for the changes in the narrative world and shapes the reader's perception of the scene. Using spatial deixis, which creates concrete locales like "*what had once been the gymnasium*" and "*around the football field*," helps readers visualize the characters' surroundings and captivity. Person deixis puts readers in the protagonist's shoes by using pronouns like "*we*" and "*I*," which helps them empathize with her experiences. Discourse deixis provides insight into the protagonists' innermost wishes and thoughts by becoming entangled with their thoughts and reflections.

Utilizing deixis, Atwood creates rich worlds that amplify the reader's involvement with the narrative and its characters. Furthermore, by utilizing deixis in these diverse ways, Atwood skillfully immerses readers in the story world of "*The Handmaid's Tale*," influencing how they interpret the protagonist's subjective experience in the repressive society.

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