



DISCOURSE DEIXIS IN TEXTS

Shermatova Gulnoza Djumakuziyevna

A PhD student at Andijan State University

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Abstract: This article is devoted to discourse deixis constitutes a significant yet frequently underestimated component of textual communication. By enabling linguistic expressions to refer reflexively to elements of the discourse itself, discourse deixis plays a crucial role in establishing textual coherence, expressing evaluative stance, and organizing the structural flow of texts. The investigation of this phenomenon occupies an interdisciplinary position at the intersection of semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics.

Keywords: discourse, deixis, text, interpretation, pragmatic, cognitive, genre, linguistic phenomenon, metaphor, metadiscursive nouns, anaphora, prosody and gesture.

Discourse deixis refers to the use of linguistic expressions that point to portions of the discourse itself, such as clauses, propositions, or stretches of text. Unlike person, time, or place deixis, discourse deixis operates within language as a self-referential system, allowing speakers and writers to organize, evaluate, and guide interpretation of discourse. This article examines discourse deixis in written texts from a linguistic and pragmatic perspective. It explores theoretical foundations, formal markers, cognitive processing, textual functions, genre variation, and interpretive challenges. By analyzing discourse deixis as a central mechanism of textual cohesion and coherence, the study demonstrates its importance for discourse analysis, pragmatics, and text interpretation.

Deixis is traditionally defined as the linguistic phenomenon whereby meaning depends on contextual factors such as speaker, time, and place. Classic categories include person deixis (“I,” “you”), temporal deixis (“now,” “then”), and spatial deixis (“here,” “there”) (Levinson, 1983). Discourse deixis, however, refers to expressions that point to elements of the discourse itself rather than to the external situation. Words such as *this*, *that*, *the former*, *the following*, and *above* do not merely refer to objects or events in the world; they refer to portions of text or speech.

Discourse deixis plays a crucial role in structuring texts, guiding readers through arguments, narratives, and explanations. It allows language to be reflexive, enabling speakers and writers to comment on, evaluate, and organize their own discourse. This article provides a comprehensive account of discourse deixis in texts, focusing primarily on written discourse, where spatial metaphors and textual navigation are especially prominent.



The concept of discourse deixis is most commonly associated with pragmatic and discourse-analytic frameworks. Fillmore (1975) introduced the idea of deixis as a semantic category dependent on context, while later scholars expanded deixis to include discourse-internal reference. Levinson (1983) distinguishes discourse deixis from anaphora, noting that discourse deixis refers to propositions or discourse segments rather than nominal referents.

Discourse deixis also overlaps with text deixis, a term sometimes used to emphasize reference to textual location rather than content (Lyons, 1977). For example, *in the previous section* refers to a location in the text, while *this argument* refers to a conceptual unit. Many scholars treat text deixis as a subtype of discourse deixis. From a cognitive perspective, discourse deixis relies on the reader's mental representation of the unfolding discourse. It presupposes shared attention to the text as an object and requires readers to dynamically update their discourse model (Webber, 1991).

Discourse deixis is realized through a range of linguistic forms. Demonstrative pronouns and determiners (*this, that, these, those*) are the most common markers. In written texts, *this* often refers to the immediately preceding clause or proposition, while *that* may signal greater conceptual or emotional distance (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

Other forms include adverbs (*here, above, below*), metadiscursive nouns (*argument, claim, point, section*), and fixed expressions (*the following, the foregoing*). For example:

This suggests that language change is socially motivated.

In the following discussion, we examine...

These expressions do not introduce new content but direct attention to existing or upcoming discourse segments. Their interpretation depends not on the external world but on the organization of the text itself.

Discourse deixis is often contrasted with anaphora, though the distinction is not always clear-cut. Anaphora typically involves reference to a previously mentioned noun phrase, as in *A dog entered. It barked*. Discourse deixis, by contrast, refers to larger discourse units, such as events, propositions, or arguments.

Consider the sentence: *John resigned from the committee. This surprised everyone*. Here, *this* does not refer to *John* but to the entire proposition *John resigned from the committee*. Such cases illustrate discourse deixis rather than nominal anaphora (Webber, 1991). The ambiguity between anaphoric and deictic reference can pose interpretive challenges, particularly in complex texts. Readers



must determine whether a demonstrative points to an entity, an event, or an abstract discourse segment.

Understanding discourse deixis requires readers to construct and maintain a coherent mental model of the text. According to discourse representation theories, readers segment texts into hierarchical units such as clauses, sentences, and discourse topics (Givón, 1995). Discourse-deictic expressions cue readers to retrieve and re-evaluate these units. Psycholinguistic studies suggest that discourse deixis imposes a higher cognitive load than simple anaphora because it requires accessing abstract representations rather than concrete referents (Cornish, 2007). However, it also facilitates comprehension by signaling relevance and coherence.

In written texts, where immediate feedback is absent, discourse deixis serves as an important navigational tool. It compensates for the lack of prosody and gesture that often accompany deixis in spoken discourse.

Discourse deixis fulfills several key functions in written communication. First, it contributes to textual cohesion by linking clauses and paragraphs. By referring back to previous arguments or forward to upcoming sections, discourse deixis creates continuity. Second, it has an evaluative function. Expressions such as *this problem* or *that assumption* allow writers to express stance and attitude toward parts of their own discourse. This aligns discourse deixis with metadiscourse, which reflects authorial presence in texts (Hyland, 2005). Third, discourse deixis plays a structuring role. Academic and technical texts rely heavily on deictic markers to signal organization, as in *this chapter*, *the next section*, or *as discussed above*. Such markers guide readers through complex argumentative structures.

The use of discourse deixis varies significantly across genres. Academic writing employs explicit discourse deixis to ensure clarity and coherence, particularly in argumentative and expository texts. Legal documents, manuals, and policy texts also rely heavily on text-deictic expressions to maintain precision. In literary texts, discourse deixis may be more subtle or stylistically motivated. Authors may exploit deictic ambiguity to create irony or narrative distance. For example, a narrator's use of *this story* can foreground the act of storytelling itself, contributing to metafictional effects. Digital texts, such as hypertexts and online articles, introduce new dimensions of discourse deixis. Expressions like *click here* or *see below* interact directly with the physical layout of the text, blending linguistic deixis with technological affordances.



Despite its utility, discourse deixis can also introduce ambiguity. Long or densely structured texts may contain multiple potential antecedents for a single deictic expression. Poorly used discourse deixis can confuse readers, particularly when the scope of reference is unclear. Cross-linguistic variation further complicates analysis. Languages differ in their demonstrative systems and textual conventions, affecting how discourse deixis is realized and interpreted (Diessel, 1999). Translators must often resolve ambiguities or restructure texts to preserve deictic clarity.

Discourse deixis is a fundamental yet often underappreciated feature of textual communication. By allowing language to refer to itself, discourse deixis enables coherence, evaluation, and structural navigation within texts. Its study bridges semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics. In an era of increasingly complex written communication, understanding discourse deixis is essential for effective writing, critical reading, and linguistic analysis. Far from being a marginal phenomenon, discourse deixis reveals how texts function as self-organizing systems of meaning, guiding readers through the intricate architecture of discourse.

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