

1 Preliminaries

1.1 The concept of deixis

The reference of certain kinds of expression is determined in relation to features of the utterance-act: the time, the place, and the participants, i.e. those with the role of speaker or addressee. This phenomenon is known as **deixis** and the expressions concerned are called **deictic**. Examples of such expressions are given in:

- [1] i *I bought a new stereo system yesterday.*
 ii *Do you feel any pain here now?*
 iii *Could you pick this up and put it with those boxes, please?*

Yesterday in [1i] and *now* in [1ii] are interpreted in relation to the time of the utterance: *now* refers to a time including that of the utterance, while *yesterday* refers to the day before that on which the utterance takes place. This is a matter of **temporal deixis**.

Here in [1iii] refers to a location close to the speaker, and in [1iii] *this* refers to something located close to the speaker and *those boxes* to boxes that are further away. This is **locative deixis**.

Finally, *I* in [1i] refers to the speaker, and *you* in [1ii–1iii] to the addressee. This is called **person deixis**.

It will be recalled that we are using such terms as ‘utterance-act’ and ‘speaker’ to cover written as well as spoken language. Example [1i] could be used with the same interpretation as readily in writing as in speech; the others are unlikely to be used in writing because the reference of *here*, *this*, and *those boxes* is determined by very local features of the utterance-act, whereas it is characteristic of writing that writer and addressee are in different places. But of course they don’t have to be: if I had lost my voice, for example, I might communicate [1ii–1iii] to you in writing in your presence.

■ Varying reference

It follows from what we have said that the reference of deictic expressions potentially varies from one utterance to another. This of course applies to referring expressions generally: different utterances of *Where’s Kim?* potentially involve reference to different people called Kim. What is significant for deixis is that the shifting reference is systematically tied to features of the utterance-act itself. The meaning of deictic expressions explicitly relates them to features of the utterance-act; for example, the difference in meaning between deictic **this** and **that** is primarily a matter of relative closeness to the speaker. Variation in the reference of *Kim*, by contrast, is simply due to the fact that many different people bear that name.