



THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF DEICTIC EXPRESSIONS IN NEWS HEADLINES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In linguistics, deictic expressions are also known as indexical. These linguistic elements depend on the context of the utterance. In media discourse, particularly in news headlines, deixis plays a significant role in framing events, positioning readers, and constructing opinions. This research examines how different types of deixis, such as person, time, place, social, and discourse deixis, are pragmatically engaged in English-language news headlines. The study draws on theoretical frameworks from Levinson (1983) and Fillmore (1997) to investigate the strategic use of deictic expressions across selected five national and international newspapers. This paper opted for a qualitative approach. It is explored that deixis not only converts complex events into digestible information but also guides the audience's perception, emotional engagement, and interpretation. This paper argues that the pragmatic use of deixis in headlines is crucial for effective communication, manipulative framing, and the construction of social realities. By viewing the linguistic tactics of news media, this study contributes to broader discussions on language, power, and ideology in media discourse.

Keywords: *Deixis, Media discourse, News headlines, Pragmatics functions, Ideology*

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1. Introduction

Language is not only for communication it is a strong medium by which people share their ideas and create reality. Under the broad scope of language, we deal with pragmatics too. The study of language within a specific context is known as pragmatics. It is the pragmatics which tells an individual when to communicate and how to communicate in a given context. In pragmatics, there is a key phenomenon known as deixis. Deixis means pointing. It tells about the expressions of the utterances.

Deixis shows the relationship between speaker, addressee, time, and location. The expressions like here, there, now, I, you, yesterday, this, tomorrow, and that, are all called deictic expressions or deictic markers. These deictic expressions play a crucial role in situational context (Levinson, 1983). Deixis has roots in linguistic studies but it gained worth with the rise of pragmatics in the late 20th century. There are five major types of deixis; person deixis, temporal deixis, place deixis, discourse deixis, and social deixis (Fillmore, 1975). It is widely used and further explored by Levinson (1983) and Yule (1996).

Person deixis deals with the pronouns. The speaker, listener, and others that are the part of context are included in person deixis. As, I, we, you, he, she, they.

Place deixis deals with the location relative to the speaker. It is also known as spatial deixis. As, here, there, this, that.

Temporal deixis deals with the time frames of the expressions as now, tomorrow, yesterday, and later.

Discourse deixis refers to the discourse itself. As, this, that.

Social deixis deals with the relationship between the speaker and addressee according to the context. As, sir, madam, Your Honour.

In today's modern world, social media is a powerful tool to convey the message in every corner of the world. News channels use some headlines to show any important news

about the facts. News headlines carry a strong weightage of words indeed with the use of a smaller number of words but convey a clear and broad message. Headlines frame the public opinion in their words so that they can understand it in no time. The tactics used by journalists for creating headlines come under the umbrella of linguistic strategies. In the creation of news headlines, deixis plays a key role (Cap, 2013). The use of linguistic strategies and deixis in headlines helps to create an emotional link to the reader before reading the article (van Dijk, 1988). Moreover, the use of deixis in news headlines conveys proper meanings, shapes the reader's thoughts, and recreates the reader's ideology.

In the socio-political context, deixis in newspapers or headlines is a prominent figure. Media language shapes the perception of a society and it creates the social reality. This is the reason media language is far from neutral (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1991). With the use of deictic markers, newspapers or new channels can suggest urgency ("now"), construct insider-outsider dynamics ("we" vs. "they"), and shift temporal perspectives ("today," "yesterday," "soon") to suit political, ideological, or sensationalist agendas (Fillmore, 1997).

Moreover, the globalization of news consumption in the digital age has made headlines even more impactful. International readers may not share the same spatial, temporal, or sociocultural context. For instance, when an American newspaper headlines "Our Heroes Return Home," the deixis ("our," "home") assumes a nationalistic stance that may not fit according to the international audience. Thus, understanding deixis in news headlines is not only a linguistic inquiry but also a critical step toward media literacy.

The current study is majorly focusing on Levinson's framework while dealing with the media-oriented approaches to discourse analysis that were proposed by van Dijk and Fairclough. These perspectives emphasize that linguistic strategies, especially in institutionalized media forms are rooted within power structures and ideological frameworks.

A significant number of studies are available on the media discourse but a few have focused on the pragmatic functions of deixis in news headlines. In previous research stylistic and ideological features are studied (Bell, 1991; Fowler, 1991). The use of deixis which carries the attention of readers was overlooked. It is observed that readers skim headlines more often than reading a whole newspaper. In this way, pragmatic markers hold a significant part of news headlines. The current study contributes to filling a significant gap in media linguistics and pragmatic research by studying pragmatic deixis. It provides an empirical exploration of how news language guides public perception, emotional involvement, and social alignment through deictic strategies.

1.1. Research Questions:

- What types of deictic markers are most commonly used in English-language news headlines?
- How do these deictic expressions function pragmatically to position the reader temporally, spatially, and socially?

2. Literature Review:

Deixis is a fundamental concept within the field of pragmatics that refers to linguistic elements whose interpretation relies heavily on situational context. The term derives from the Greek word meaning "pointing" or "indicating," and has been extensively studied in linguistic pragmatics (Levinson, 1983). Deixis involves words and phrases that act as pointers, linking the discourse to specific aspects of the communicative situation Fillmore (1975). These linguistic markers perform an essential function in the given context and make communication more coherent.

The critical role of deixis in effective communication has been discussed widely in pragmatic theory. Communication without deixis would lose much of its situational specificity which may result in ambiguity and misunderstanding between speaker and hearer or writer and reader Yule (1996). In media discourse, particularly in news headlines, deixis acquires an even greater significance because headlines are considered to be highly compressed forms of language. The linguistic economy characteristic of headlines entails pragmatic strategies such as deixis to engage readers swiftly and forcefully.

Pronouns in media texts serve not just grammatical purposes but also ideological ones. It aligns readers with or against the subjects that are described about the event Brown and Yule (1983). Similarly, place deixis directs readers' attention to specific locations where news events occur, contributing to the immediate spatial grounding of the narrative (Fetzer, 2013). Temporal deixis shows expressions such as "today" or "yesterday," which plays a crucial role in creating a sense of urgency, emphasizing the timeliness of reported events (Blommaert, 2005). Social deixis, although less frequently highlighted in the study of media texts, emerges in the ways that social titles or forms of address reflect societal values and power relations (Cook, 1992). Discourse deixis, meanwhile, is sometimes embedded within the structure of news texts, guiding readers through the article by referring to the evolving narrative.

Besides, in a news article total of 806 deixis were used, consisting of any five types of deixis. The use of deixis influences the understanding of the reader. It simplifies the

context, social relations, focus, and message of the article. Without the use of deixis, a reader may encounter ambiguity in understanding the whole context Fonna (2024). Headlines are deemed an appropriate medium to be manipulated in the expression of desired perspectives and ideologies (Farrokhi et al, 2019). Newspapers headlines because of their unique linguistic features and functions have been extensively studied from different perspectives e.g. (Abba & Musa, 2015; Monsefi and Mahadi 2017).

Additionally, the relationship between deixis and pragmatics is particularly important for understanding how meaning is generated in communication. Pragmatics deals with the aspects of meaning that are derived from context, speaker intention, and the inferencing skills of the hearer or reader Thomas (1995). In this sense, deixis is inherently pragmatic, requiring an awareness of shared knowledge and contextual cues to decode meaning. In news headlines, which must summarize entire stories in minimal words, deictic expressions efficiently invoke shared cultural, political, or temporal references, achieving pragmatic compactness that is central to journalistic communication.

Pragmatic theories of language as a theory of speech acts suggest that utterances do not merely convey information but perform actions Searle (1969). In the same vein, headlines are not just summaries, they act pragmatically to warn, accuse, celebrate, or alarm, depending on the context. The use of deixis amplifies these pragmatic functions. A headline such as "We Must Act Now" is not merely stating a fact, it is performing the act of urging or commanding. The deictic elements "we" and "now" play crucial roles in constructing this functional force.

In addition, several scholars have investigated how deictic expressions contribute to ideological positioning in media discourse. van Dijk (1991) argues that news language is inherently selective and constructed, using linguistic tools to shape readers' interpretations subtly. Deictic elements are key instruments in this ideological shaping. Fowler (1991) similarly asserts that the process of "selection and presentation" in news involves choosing linguistic forms that present events in ways that are never neutral but reflect particular worldviews. Headlines that utilize first-person plural pronouns ("we," "our") often seek to foster identification and solidarity with the readership, while third-person pronouns ("they," "them") can create distance and otherness.

In critical discourse analysis, deixis has been recognized as an important marker of ideological stance. Fairclough (1995) points out that media discourse often embeds ideological positions within apparently factual reporting, and that deixis helps to construct relationships of power, solidarity, and exclusion. van Dijk (1998) extends this idea by noting that deictic markers can position social actors within ingroups and outgroups,

thereby influencing reader attitudes toward them. Wodak (2001) similarly emphasizes that linguistic choices, including deictic choices, contribute to the naturalization of particular perspectives and the marginalization of others within public discourse.

Moreover, previous research focused specifically on pragmatic meanings in news headlines provides a valuable understanding into the strategic use of deictic elements. A study on political news headlines was conducted and discovered that proximal deixis (e.g., "here," "now," "us") tends to present subjects or events positively by associating them with the reader's immediate environment, whereas distal deixis (e.g., "there," "them") often serves to distance and negatively evaluate others Cap (2013). This finding is verified by Taiwo (2007), who analyzed Nigerian newspaper headlines and observed that the use of person deixis, especially first-person plural forms, enhances the emotional appeal of headlines and constructs collective identities among readers.

Iranian newspapers were analyzed and found that temporal deixis, such as references to "today" or "tomorrow," was employed manipulatively to either stress the urgency of political issues or diminish the perceived responsibility of certain actors Bonyadi (2010). The strategic use of temporal deixis thus allows news organizations to frame events in ways that align with their editorial stances. Such findings underline the point that deixis is not merely a grammatical feature but a powerful pragmatic and ideological tool within journalistic practices.

Furthermore, news headlines from media discourse demand significant consideration. Headlines serve as the gist of words and attention grabbers that convey an impact on the reader. Headlines are "compressed texts" that must perform the dual function of informing and attracting the audience or reader simultaneously Bell (1991). In such compressed formats, deictic expressions provide efficient means of situating events within time, space, and social relations without the need for elaborate exposition. Pragmatic phenomena such as presupposition and implicature are often cited in headlines, with deixis enhancing the reader's inferential abilities (Yule, 1996).

Cultural and geopolitical contexts also influence deictic strategies in news headlines. The understanding of deictic markers like "here" or "now" is dependent upon the cultural positioning of the audience Blommaert (2005). For instance, "here" in a British newspaper might refer to domestic issues within the United Kingdom, while the same word in a Pakistani newspaper could highlight local and national concerns. This contextual variability complicates the analysis of deixis but also enriches it, highlighting the role of audience expectations and background knowledge in the decoding process.

However, the challenges of analyzing deixis in media discourse are significant. Deictic expressions are fundamentally context-dependent and may be ambiguous when isolated from their broader discursive environments (Cutting, 2002). Moreover, the rise of digital and globalized media platforms has blurred traditional notions of spatial and temporal deixis. In digital communication, terms like "here" and "now" can have multiple referents that depend on the reader's physical and temporal location Thurlow and Mroczek (2011).

Nonetheless, despite these challenges, deixis remains a rich field of study within pragmatics and media discourse analysis. It serves as the cornerstone of pragmatics. The strategic use of deictic expressions in news headlines provides critical insights into how news organizations frame events, construct identities and ideologies, and influence public opinions.

3. Methodology:

This study adopts qualitative methodology to investigate the pragmatic use of deixis in news headlines. As the study focuses on interpretation and meaning rather than numerical analysis, that is the reason the qualitative approach is suitable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The data for this study has been observed from five prominent newspapers, *Express Tribune*, *DAWN*, *The Times*, *The Nation*, and *The Daily Times*. These sources for data collection were selected to represent both national and international perspectives. A corpus of 100 headlines was taken from all these newspapers. All selected headlines were on the front page of the newspaper but the genre of headlines varies. The time frame for the data collection was February 2025 to April 2025.

This method promised a convenient and manageable corpus for analysis, while also allowing thematic diversity across political, economic, and social issues. For analytical purposes, Stephen Levinson's (1983) model of deixis was implemented as the primary framework. The analysis of the gathered corpus was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the headlines were reviewed to identify and categorize deictic expressions according to Levinson's typology. Particular attention was paid to context, as understanding deixis often requires situational inference. In the second stage, the pragmatic and ideological functions of the deictic markers were interpreted. How a reader is positioned relative to the events and location, is also focused.

The limitations of the study are that it focuses only on English-language newspapers. The sample could be small in number. Moreover, it is observed that headlines are the limited use of words to explain necessary information, which can make the

interpretation complex. All headlines are publicly available and no human is directly involved in this study, so ethical considerations are minimal.

4. Data Analysis and Findings:

The analysis focuses on the pragmatic functions of deixis within the selected corpus of 100 headlines collected from *Express Tribune*, *DAWN*, *The Times*, *The Nation*, and *Daily Times*. The deictic expressions were explored, classified according to Levinson's (1983) model, and then analyzed for their pragmatic and ideological functions.

4.1. Identification and Classification of Deixis

Each headline was first investigated to locate deictic expressions. Five major categories of deixis were analyzed:

- **Person Deixis:** Use of pronouns and titles.
- **Spatial Deixis:** References to locations.
- **Temporal Deixis:** Refers to the time frames.
- **Discourse Deixis:** Referring to parts of the discourse itself.
- **Social Deixis:** Markers of social relationships and status.

Out of the 100 news headlines:

- Person deixis appeared in **72%** of headlines.
- Place deixis was present in **65%**.
- Time deixis was used in **50%**.
- Discourse deixis appeared less frequently, only in **15%**.
- Social deixis was found in **30%** of the headlines.

These initial results already show a strong preference for person and place deixis.

4.2. Person Deixis

Person deixis is investigated as the most dominant category in the selected corpus of news headlines. News-headlines used pronouns consistently such as "we," "they," and "you" or proper nouns that refer to individuals or collective entities (e.g., government bodies, organizations).

For example:

- "We will not back down," says Prime Minister" (*DAWN*)
- "They demand justice after protests turn violent" (*Express Tribune*)
- "EU leaders clash over new migration rules" (*The Times*)

The use of first-person plural pronouns ("we") is particularly striking. Such usage of person deixis creates an *inclusive* relationship with the reader. It establishes a sense of solidarity and shared identity. Furthermore, third-person references ("they") distance the reported group, constructing an *us vs. them* narrative that is typically used in political or conflict-based reporting.

In some cases, the speaker (e.g., a government official) is directly quoted using first-person deixis, which makes the headline appear more immediate and credible. This usage has a strategic pragmatic effect, which projects the reported entity's perspective directly onto the reader.

4.3. Place Deixis

Place deixis was observed prominently in the headlines, anchoring news events to specific physical or conceptual locations. It explains the location of the events.

Examples include:

- "Tensions Rise in Kashmir After Latest Attack" (*The Nation*)
- "Floods Devastate Northern Pakistan" (*Express Tribune*)
- "Talks Resume in Brussels Over Brexit Deadlock" (*The Times*)

Spatial references serve several purposes. They provide essential contextual information, allowing readers to localize events geographically. However, spatial deixis can evoke emotional responses. Words like "devastate" paired with place references show the perceived impact of disasters.

Place deixis often interacts ideologically with notions of proximity and distance. Locations "closer" to the target audience tend to be described with greater emotional intensity, while distant locations are treated with more neutrality or detachment.

4.4. Temporal Deixis

Temporal markers also featured in half of the analyzed headlines. Typical expressions included "today," "yesterday," "soon," "next week," or explicit dates.

Examples:

- "Government to Announce New Policies Tomorrow" (*DAWN*)
- "Protests Erupt Hours After Verdict" (*Daily Times*)
- "Summit Set for Next Month Amid Rising Tensions" (*The Times*)

Time deixis serves the dual purpose of situating events chronologically and creating a sense of urgency. Immediate future references ("tomorrow," "next week") refer to the prediction. Such deixis also derives curiosity and engagement among readers. Meanwhile, backdated references ("yesterday," and "hours after") suggest relevance to the event that happened in the past.

Since headline writing is marked by temporal compression. Time deixis is essential for conveying the narrative's temporal status in a brief amount of space.

4.5. Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis is comparatively rare in use but it plays an important role in news headlines. It occurs when headlines refer internally to parts of the story or discourse itself.

Examples:

- "This Decision Changes Everything" (*The Nation*)
- "Such Events Have No Place in Our Society" (*DAWN*)

The use of "this" or "such" points to the headline's belonging story and creates a direct connection between the headline and the body of the article. Thus, discourse deixis serves as a teaser that draws the reader's attention to the full report.

This category is more frequent in opinion pieces and editorials, where interpretative commentary requires connecting statements across different parts of the text.

4.6. Social Deixis

Social deixis reflects societal relationships and hierarchies, often through titles, honorifics, or marked references to status.

Examples:

- "President Orders Immediate Evacuation" (*Daily Times*)
- "Prime Minister Condemns Violence" (*Express Tribune*)
- "Queen Approves New Trade Agreement" (*The Times*)

The pragmatic function of social deixis is to index authority, power, and formality. When a title like "President" or "Queen" appears, it signals not only who is acting but also what level of social weight their actions carry.

The use of social deixis varies across newspapers. For instance, *The Times* tends to emphasize titles and formality more than *Express Tribune* or *DAWN*. It appears as the cultural differences in media traditions.

The analysis of observed data shows that pragmatic deixis in news headlines lead to ideological and social perspectives. The corpus of headlines reveals that **person deixis** is a dominant strategy for positioning readers relative to social actors. By using pronouns like "I", "we" and "they," newspapers subtly include or exclude groups, shaping readers' empathy or opposition. In reporting politics and issues, this category is highly effective. In addition, **place deixis** is focused on localizing events geographically but also carries emotional weightage. Locations closer to the readership are often described with heightened urgency, while distant locales may be reported with greater detachment. This reflects a pragmatic strategy of relevance that makes news more important based on its spatial proximity. The frequency, tone, and functions of deictic expressions across newspapers is different. The political section of newspapers show more ideology behind the words. The use of person deixis enhances the ideological patterns of a newspaper. The spatial deixis in the newspapers expresses the hierarchies. It is observed that the use of spatial deixis shows the status and hierarchy among speaker and reader.

Furthermore, **time deixis** establishes the immediacy or historicity of events, creating urgency or signaling newsworthiness. Future-oriented deixis projects anticipation and hope or threat, depending on the context, while past-oriented deixis establishes the continuity or breakage of events. Moreover, **discourse deixis**, though less frequent, is strategically used in editorials and opinion pieces to create cohesion between headlines and articles. It strengthens narrative coherence and reader engagement. Finally, **social deixis** reinforces societal hierarchies and authority. Its usage reflects both the event's formality and the newspaper's cultural norms. High-status individuals are framed with respect and gravity. It also shapes the perceived importance of their actions. Discourse deixis plays a role of bridge between complete article and the main message. Sometimes journalists use deixis to show the intense of situation or any event. Deixis in the newspapers serve as the wrapped words that convey a hidden but complete message.

Across the five newspapers, some trends were consistent while others varied. For example, *The Times* showed more formal deixis usage (particularly social deixis) compared to *The Nation* or *Express Tribune*, which sometimes adopted a more populist or

urgent tone. Another important finding is that deixis often works collectively. A single headline may layer person, place, and time deixis together to maximize relevance, urgency, and emotional engagement. For example:

"We Mourn Victims as Floods Hit Sindh Today" (*Express Tribune*)

Here, **person deixis** ("we"), **place deixis** ("Sindh"), and **time deixis** ("today") are used together to focus on an immediate, localized, collective emotional appeal. In newspapers ideological and stylistic variation can be seen. The percentage of readers engagement to all newspapers also varies. So, it is the deictic expressions that bring engagement of the readers to the event.

Overall, deixis emerges not simply as a grammatical feature but as a powerful pragmatic tool for *framing*, *positioning*, and *influencing* public perception through the highly condensed genre of news headlines.

5. Conclusion:

Deixis is not the marginal feature of news headlines indeed it is the central pragmatic feature. It contributes to the several functions in the conveying of meanings and developing the perspectives of the readers. It develops the emotional, social, and ideological relations with the readers. Moreover, pragmatic expressions of deixis collectively convey a message across different categories. With the limited use of words, it can control the perceptions of a reader.

The findings of the study highlight that pragmatic analysis through the lens of deixis contributes to uncovering the use of language by media discourse. It indicated that media discourse frames reality with the use of pragmatic expressions. It is recommended that future research can be conducted on non-English newspapers.

In conclusion, it is stated that the use of expressive language in news headlines is never neutral instead it carries a deep meaning. The language of news headlines is dynamic and shapes the perceptions of readers. News headlines use strategic language. Deixis plays a crucial role in conveying strong and hidden messages in news headlines. Finally, deixis is a pragmatic feature that shapes social ideologies, reality, and positions the readers within complex socio-political realities.

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