Deixis in Yule's *The Study of Language*

Introduction to Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that studies the use of language in context. While semantics focuses on meaning that is encoded in the language itself, pragmatics considers how speakers use and interpret language in actual communicative situations. One of the core concepts in pragmatics is "deixis." This lecture will explore deixis in detail, examining its types, functions, and relevance to understanding meaning in real-life communication.

What is Deixis?

The term "deixis" comes from the Greek word deiktikos, meaning "pointing" or "indicating." In linguistics, deixis refers to words and phrases that cannot be fully understood without additional contextual information. Deictic expressions "point" to things in the physical or linguistic environment, and their meaning is anchored to the speaker's location, time, or situation.

For example, consider the sentence:

> "I'll meet you here tomorrow."

Without knowing who is speaking, where "here" is, and when "tomorrow" occurs, we cannot fully interpret the sentence. This is the nature of deixis: it depends on context.

Types of Deixis

George Yule identifies three primary types of deixis:

1. Person Deixis

Person deixis refers to pronouns and expressions that indicate who is involved in the communication. The basic categories include: First person: the speaker (e.g., I, me, we, us) Second person: the addressee (e.g., you, your) Third person: other entities (e.g., he, she, they, them) The referents of these pronouns shift depending on who is speaking. For example, "I" refers to the speaker in one instance, but a different person in another.

2. Spatial Deixis (Place Deixis)

Spatial deixis refers to expressions that locate something in space, relative to the speaker or listener. These include: Adverbs: here, there, above, below, nearby Demonstratives: this, that, these, those For example:

> "Put it there."

The location "there" is meaningful only if the listener can see or understand the spatial reference. Spatial deixis can also reflect social or psychological distance. For instance, "this" may suggest closeness or familiarity, while "that" may indicate distance.

3. Temporal Deixis (Time Deixis)

Temporal deixis refers to expressions that locate an event in time, relative to the moment of speaking. Common time deictic expressions include: Adverbs: now, then, soon, later, yesterday, tomorrow Tense: past, present, future forms Example:

> "She left yesterday."

To interpret "yesterday," we need to know when the sentence was uttered.

Deixis and Context

The interpretation of deictic expressions requires an understanding of the context in which they are used. Key contextual elements include: Physical context: Who is speaking? Where are they? What is the environment?

Linguistic context: What was said before? What are we talking about? Cognitive context: What do the speaker and listener assume to be shared knowledge? Deixis is an excellent illustration of how pragmatics relies on situational awareness.

Summary

Deixis is a fundamental concept in pragmatics, reflecting how language is tied to context. Without understanding deixis, communication would be vague and incomplete. By examining person, spatial, temporal, discourse, and social deixis, we see how speakers use language to "point" to people, places, times, and ideas in their environment. As George Yule emphasizes, language is not just about words—it's about using those words in meaningful, contextually grounded ways. Deixis is a prime example of this interaction between language and context.

Discussion Questions

1. How does deixis differ from semantics?

2. Can you identify examples of deixis in everyday conversations?

3. How would deixis function differently in written vs. spoken communication?

4. What challenges might deixis pose for AI or translation systems?

Suggested Reading

- George Yule, The Study of Language, Chapter: Pragmatics (especially sections on deixis)
- Levinson, Stephen C. Pragmatics (1983) further discussion of deixis and context
- Fillmore, Charles (1975), "Deixis" in Syntax and Semantics