

An investigation of deictic expressions in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to explore the function of deixis in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath. The prime interest is to study the role of deixis in unfolding the existing ambiguity in poetry and to explore the interdependency of deictic expressions and unique poetic style which exhibits the mind style of the poetess. The use of deixis shows a close association between the subjectivity of the speaker, the context of speech event and structure of language. Eight poems are selected through purposive sampling for the present study. It is a qualitative research; employing Levinson's described categories of deixis. The main focus is on person, spatial and temporal deixis. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) by M.A.K Halliday is used for textual analysis. The finding exhibits the dominance of first person pronoun in all its forms (I, my, we, and us) occurring 140 times. The use of personal pronouns, spatial and temporal adverbs assists the poetess to relate her personal experiences and her visions in a specific spatial and temporal framework. The current study proposes that the use of lexicogrammatical patterns like deictic expressions with other elements of language have the capacity to convey the textual message.

Keywords: deictic expressions, systemic functional grammar, style, lexicogrammatical pattern

1. Introduction

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols which performs the function of communication. The function of language is determined by the situations and circumstances in which it is used. Therefore, the meaning of sentences is affected by several factors, and to avoid ambiguity language

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demands a study which goes beyond the structural meaning of sentences. Pragmatics is an influential field of language study which takes into account the context of speech event. Levinson (1983, p: 9) states that Pragmatics is the study of those relationships between the language and context which are encoded in the structure of language. So, the usage of language is governed by the physical context and the social and mental needs of language users.

Interpersonal context is the prime interest of pragmatics which studies the role of participants in any interaction. These participants are speaker, listener, reader and writer. Physical setting of an utterance, background knowledge of the participants, their beliefs personal life and their social role play an important role in interpreting any piece of utterance. Pragmatics studies all those aspects of language which go beyond language structure. If we assume that pragmatics studies meaning in broadly viewed 'context'. Deixis studies the relationship between context and language structure. Deixis is the main phenomenon which captures the features of context by means of lexical and grammatical means. Deixis is a universal pragma-linguistic concept. These pointing words accomplish the task of when, where and what. The available literature defines deixis as 'pointing via language'. These linguistics forms are termed as deictic expressions.

According to Levinson (1983) deixis is the encoding of spatio-temporal context in an utterance and subjectivity of language users. Deixis encodes the contextual information through lexical items. Levinson describes five types of deictic expressions. These are person, temporal, spatial, discourse and social deixis. These types are used to categorize marked expressions in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath.

Sylvia Plath is an important voice of confessional poets. She is regarded as modern Helen of Troy; a woman who launched thousands of Ph.D. thesis. Her poetry is highly autobiographical. Her poetry depicts her mental anguish and violent emotions which she experienced in her real life. According to Ted Hughes self-identification is an important theme in her poetry. It is not easy to interpret her poetry. The interpretation of her poetry requires background knowledge and the knowledge of her personal life. Deictic expressions are used to refer to specific person, time and location. These expressions are semantically analyzed. These expressions show direct relation to context. The aim of this study is to identify the usage of

deictic expressions in selected poems. It is valuable to know the reason of the usage of the most dominant type of deictic expression. The present research will enrich the existing knowledge of deixis and encourage new researchers to work in new field of literature.

Taking into account the background knowledge the researcher formulates following questions of the problem:

1. Which forms of deictic expressions are used in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath?
2. How various forms of deictic expressions contribute to construct the context of selected poems of Sylvia Plath?
3. What is the significance of dominant/different types of deictic expressions in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath?

2. Literature Review

Deixis are those linguistic features which demand semantic value as well as speech situation for their interpretation. According to Green (1992) deixis is the identification of objects, persons, process and events that are being talked about or referred to in a spatio-temporal context. This context is fabricated or determined by an act of utterance with participants involved in this act. There is at least one speaker with an addressee. Grundy (2000:23) states that deictics are lexical items and they encode context. Broadly speaking deixis marks the encoding of personal experience and spatio-temporal context of an utterance. Deixis is generally organized in an egocentric way. Egocentricity means speaker by virtue of being the speaker casts himself in the role of ego and everything is relevant to his perspective. (Lyons, 1995: 305)

The interpretation of deictic expressions varies from context to context depending upon the context in which they are used. The speaker and audience should share the same context in order to interpret expressions in similar way.

Levinson (1983) states five types of deixis. These are personal deixis, temporal deixis, spatial deixis, discourse deixis and social deixis.

2.1 Person Deixis

According to Levinson (1983:62) person deixis deals with encoding the role of participants in a speech event. It works on three parts division exemplified by pronoun system; first person, second person and third person pronouns. The pronoun system is destined to locate referent in relation to the speech event. The use of pronouns requires the identification of speaker and addressee for interpretation.

2.2 Temporal Deixis

According to Levinson (1983: 62) temporal deixis is a reference to the time that is relative to a temporal reference point. This is moment of utterance. It is important to differentiate between time of utterance and time of acceptance. Time deixis are well interpreted if both the speaker and listener identify the purpose and time of utterance. In temporal deixis both proximal and distal forms are used where distal deixis shows both physical and mental distance.

2.3 Spatial Deixis

Spatial deixis is about the specification of location. The listener must consider the time and place of utterance for successful interpretation. Locative expressions (here, there) are used. These expressions show space close to the speaker and away from the speaker. Spatial deixis require contextual information of place of utterance. Yule (1996:12) states that location from speaker perspective can be fixed mentally and physically.

2.4 Social Deixis

Social deixis deals with those features which are influenced by certain realities of social status in which speech event occurs. Social deixis encodes the social status of the interlocutors through linguistics marks. Languages have these linguistic expressions to mark the relative social status of the interlocutors.

2.5 Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis are lexical or grammatical elements which refer to some portion of the ongoing discourse. Discourse deixis are also labeled as text deixis. In written and spoken discourse we usually make reference to already mentioned segment of discourse or to upcoming part of discourse for example this and that.

The main concern of the present study is to analyze the functional aspects of deictic expressions; the researcher will adopt M.A. K. Halliday (1985) systemic functional grammar as an analytical model. It studies not only the structural properties of language but also discourse properties of language in specific social and cultural situation. This study adopts three metafunctions of language proposed by Halliday; ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions for textual analysis. The ideational metafunction focuses on the field of discourse or subject matter; interpersonal metafunction deals with the tenor of discourse, the existing relationship among the participants of a discourse situation. This relationship determines the language employed in a speech event. Textual metafunction studies the internal organization and communicative nature of the text. It deals with the 'content' of what is said and written. Field analysis describes the participants, process and the circumstances in which the text is formulated. This aspect of Halliday's model is crucial to our analysis. This analysis would suggest that Sylvia Plath's poetry is replete with deictic expressions. The use of deictic expressions at such level not only enhances the expressive beauty of her work but also helps to capture the real motive and to capture the desired meaning and effects on readers. In current study only three types of deictic expressions person, spatial and temporal expressions are noted.

3. Research Methodology

The current study opts for mixed approach. The main framework is provided by qualitative research employing descriptive method but there is inclination to quantitative approach. The data for the current study is purposive as the selected poems of Sylvia Plath are included in master's degree programme offered by various universities of Punjab.

4. Discussion

The current section presents an analysis of eight poems: Morning song, you're Poppies in October, Lady Lazarus, Daddy, Ariel, Arrival of the bee box and the bee meeting. The use of personal pronouns 'I', 'me' and 'my', temporal deixis 'now' and 'then' and locative deixis 'here' and 'there' are important discourse strategy in these poems. The text is replete with deictic expressions and facilitates the poetess endeavor to relate her proposition to specific person, place and time. In other words these expressions help the poetess to relate her experience and register her vision within specific temporal and spatial framework. Each aspect of these deictic expressions

will be discussed in this section and try to evaluate their contribution in fabricating the context of each poem.

4.1 Person Deixis

Gelderen (2010; 37) says that pronoun system is another way to shorten the sentence. It is labeled as pronominalization. Person deixis include i, we, you, she, he and they. Person deictic performs the basic function in a speech event. The speaker in a speech event is labeled as first person, the addressee or the person to whom the speaker is speaking is called second person and the person who is neither speaker nor addressee is termed as third person. Personal pronouns can be singular or plural. A plural form can be used even for a single referent; this referent can be a group. One important feature of the selected poems is the abundance use of personal pronouns particularly first and second person pronoun. The first person pronoun in all its form subjective 'I', possessive form 'my' and objective form 'me' is dominating type in the selected poems. This aspect of the poems testifies the facts that these poems are highly subjective and autobiographical dealing with the personal life and experiences of the poetess. This autobiographical aspect is further enhanced by the images employed in these poems. To make our stance more clear and supportive here are some examples from the text:

I have done it again
One year in every ten (L1, 2)
I am only thirty (L 20)

These are the opening lines of the poem 'Lady Lazarus'. The first person pronoun is abundantly used in this poem. Only the subjective case 'I' occurs 20 times. First person pronoun in all its form is used 32 times. This continuous use of first person pronoun draws our attention to the subjective nature of the poem. The third person pronoun 'it' in the opening line refers to something that has already been mentioned. The standard interpretation of the poem suggests multiple suicide attempts of the poetess. So 'it' in first line refers to her recent suicide attempt. The four time use of first person pronoun confirms the autobiographical inclination of the poem. In the line (L20) number 30 may be interpreted as a reference to her age when she committed suicide. Third person pronoun 'It' is used eleven times. The referent of third person pronoun is death. As in these lines the poetess makes a direct and clear reference to death

Dying (L 43)

Is an art... (L 44)

I do it exceptionally well. (L 45)

Another selected poem 'you're' written in 1960 when she was about to give birth to her first child. This poem is an address of a mother to her unborn child. Although there is very little usage of person deictic expressions but the details with which the poetess describes her pregnancy period is not possible without personal experience. Moreover, you're in title confirms the assumed presence of an addressee. The phrase 'our travelled pawn' may hint towards the poetess travel to USA with her husband in 1959.

The poem 'Morning song' is the narration of childbirth by the mother and narrator of the poem. This poem was written in February 1961, the birth year of her daughter, Frieda. The only dominate pronoun is 'I'. The second person pronoun is used three times. The speaker addresses her addressee directly as in the following line.

I'm no more your mother (L, 7)

The speaker takes retirement from her duties as mother, admitting her estrangement from her maternal feelings. The poetess shows her gestation period by making reference; from July to April. First person pronoun in possessive case 'my' assures subjective nature of the poem.

Our travelled pawn (L 12)

The narration of personal experience can be traced here. The poetess had travelled to USA with her husband, Ted Hughes in 1959 and in April she gave birth to her first child Frieda. The reference to April confirms her personal life events.

'Ariel' is another selected poem published after her death. There are several interpretations and references to title. Ariel is the name of her horse she had while staying in Devon. This poem depicts a ride of the poetess to a world of mystery. This world of mystery later proves the world of death. The poetess describes her journey which later proves a journey to death. The expression like 'suicidal' asserts her journey towards death it also hints to her personal life.

God's lioness (L 4)

Referring to her horse as 'God's lioness' the speaker yearns for power. The poetess wanted same power and dominance in her real life. The use of first person plural form 'we' assures her identification with a source of power. The reference to 'Lady Godiva' expresses her desire of freedom from patriarchy forces, as Lady Godiva did in 11th century.

In the poem 'Daddy' the poetess presents her anguish, loss and her melancholic identity. The father in the poem is presented as Nazi whereas she presents herself as a Jew. The use of this unusual imagery to depict father-daughter relationship in fact portrays ongoing drama of war in the soul of poetess. The first person pronoun is 35 times used in all its forms. The second person pronoun is used 30 times. The poem opens with the repetition of second person pronoun 'you' which shows the assumed presence of addressee in the poem. This assumption of the presence of her father is further highlighted by the fact that the poetess uses 'you do not do' instead of using contracted form the poetess prefers to use formal language which suggests that she is probably speaking to someone elderly with deference. The daughter father relationship is best portrayed in the lines

Daddy i have had to kill you (L 5)
I never could talk to you (L 24)

The use of strong necessity modal 'had to' implies great hatred of the speaker for her father. L 24 depicts the terror of the personality of the father. In stanza 12 all three types of personal deictic expressions are used. She describes her age at the time of her father's death and her unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide at the age of twenty. Another hint to her personal life can be traced in the poem;

If I've killed one man _____
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, (L, 71...73)

The reference to seven-year cruelty of the vampire is actually the seven years of her married life. This metaphorical murder of her father and her husband give her psychological dominance over them.

'The bee meeting' is one of her bee poems. The poem is replete with interrogative statements. These statements highlight her insecurities as in this line;

'Does nobody love me' (L 6)

Shows lack of love in her real life, May it be from her father or from her husband. First person pronoun 'I' is used fourteen times and third person pronoun 'they' is used twelve times. 'They' is used to show the uniformity of the villagers and 'I' highlights her alienation. The inner insecurities and uncertainties about her identities are described through physical inabilities. 'Poppies in October' is another short poem. There is only single time occurrence of first person pronoun but the description of vivid landscape and imagery helps to portray her mental anguish. This poem shows her interest in death. She committed suicide soon after writing this poem. The choice of flower is significant as poppies are connected to drowsiness. The poetess establishes a strange relationship between nature and human sufferings.

'The arrival of the bee box' is one of those five poems she wrote after her separation from her husband. Her father was entomologist she had keen interest in bee. In her poetry they are used as extended metaphor, describing something beyond apparent meaning. In this poem the bee metaphorically describes the creative energies of the poetess. The poem begins with;

I order this, clean wood box (L1)

The use of first person pronoun in first line exhibits the personal vision and subjectivity of the poetess. Images like 'the coffin of a midget' and 'a square baby' are tricky representing death and life respectively. The use of 'would' highlights doubts and the mental state of the poetess. By employing first person pronoun 'I' eight times in just two stanzas she is trying to depict her dominance over the box. The metaphorical choice of 'furious Latin' and 'a box of maniacs' show her torment power. She is unable to make out of this noise.

Images like 'funeral veils' and 'moon suit' give hint to her suicidal tendency. The last stanza begins with;

They might ignore me immediately (L, 31)

Here third person pronoun 'they' refers to bees in the box. Such images relate ending of the poem to the opening, showing consistent presence of death in the mind of the speaker. The temporariness of the box highlights the idea that the end of her body will bring an end to her mental illness.

The analysis of the selected poems shows that first person pronoun is the most dominating type of deictic expression employing '86' times. The poetess oscillates between 'I and 'other' presence and absence, language and silence. Thus the poetess alternates her role between "I" and "not-I", once showing identification with the father and at some other time she alienates herself from the rest of the community as in 'The bee meeting'.

4.2 Spatial or Locative Deixis

Locative or spatial deictic expressions are used to indicate the place or location with respect to the speaker's location. The basic spatial deictic expressions are 'here' and 'there'. They can be interpreted as 'place near to speaker' and 'place away from speaker' respectively. The use of such expressions facilitates the poetess to differentiate her proposition about various locations which is a core part of her poetry. It is crucial to note that the subject, place or phenomenon the writer is writing about determines whether she employs proximal deictic expression 'here' or distal deictic expression 'there'. Such locations can be determined by the physical or imaginative location of the poetess. The usage of these expressions constrained pragmatic analysis in specific situation and context.

The poem 'Arrival of the bee box' opens with "I ordered this, clean wooden box" The use of proximal demonstrative 'this' shows closeness of the speaker to her described location and object. This deictic reference is significant in sense that it establishes a degree of intimacy between the poetess and the box. She owes whatsoever is in the box. The use of caesura after "this" gives a moment of reflection that the poetess is showing what she has ordered. The use of box metaphorically describes how confined the

poetess feels and the bees inside the box represent her thought patterns which are uncontrollable. At the end of the poem she wants an escape from her chaotic thoughts and describes the plant, laburnum. 'There is the laburnum' imagining herself transforming into a simpler form of life. Here the use of distal deictic expression 'there' can be interpreted as a desire which is not close to her.

In the poem 'Poppies in October' the poetess happens to have a visit to a field filled with blossomed poppies. She was overwhelmed by the beauty and redness of these flowers.

Even the sun-clouds this morning,

The use of proximal demonstrative 'this' shows closeness of the speaker to her described location. Use of such reference establishes spatial, temporal and subjective position of the poetess. This intimacy level shows that the poetess herself is critically observing the beauty of poppies. The unusual vocabulary and images establish the tone and on-going mental trauma of the poetess. The blooming of poppies flowers does not make sense to her. She is lamenting at the presence of such flowers and wants to replace their existence to a new setting. This new setting can be her shifting to the domain of death.

In the poem 'Lady Lazarus' spatial deictic expression 'this' is used;

This is Number three (L 22)

The poetess is showing her closeness to something 'number three'. Taking into account the personal life of the poetess it is described that she tried to commit suicide thrice. This was her third suicide attempt she is referring to. According to the poetess she is always working with the art of dying. Thoughts of death always haunted her she finds no purpose in her life except to die. Every time she tries to taste death, she ends up surviving. She is of the view that hard part of such unsuccessful suicide attempts was to face the crowd. This seems a theatrical process to the poetess. Using distal spatial deixis in the line;

That knocks me out.

There is a charge (L 56, 57)

The poetess is representing herself as a theatrical object. The use of distal expressions shows her detachment from her present situation. She is asserting that she is fed up with such representation. There is no actual theatre or actual circus or payment, but she feels that people want to have a gaze at her pain.

The uncertainty and insecurities of the poetess is expressed through various interrogative statements of the poem 'The Bee Meeting.

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? (L, 1)

In the first line of the poem the speaker expresses her subjectivity through the use of first person pronoun 'I'. Using the proximal deictic expression 'these' the speaker shows closeness to the uniform unit of villagers. Everyone in the crowd is secured from bees except the speaker but there is someone who is willing to provide his help, the secretary of the bees is willing to help her.

The uncertainty about the identity of the villagers is expressed through repeated use of distal deictic expression 'that' in the next stanza. It shows her detachment from the villagers.

Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?
Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat? (L 11, 12)

In the poem 'Daddy' the poetess does not present herself as an individual but as joint population, maltreated Jew community of the second world war, whose freedom and individuality have been crushed by male members of the society. Various metaphors have been used in the poem. "Black shoes" the first metaphor used for addressee. 'In which' is a prepositional phrase used as spatial deictic expression which represents the circumstances in which the speaker had to live for thirty years.

Thus, the use of locative deixis expressions is stylistic strategy of the poetess. She employed them to describe her thoughts, proposition and views about contrastive situation of her life. She has successfully employed spatial deictic expressions to show her closeness and remoteness from prescribed situation and objects.

4.3 Temporal Deixis

Temporal deixis describes time of an event relevant to the time of speech event. 'Now' is the only pure English temporal deictic expression. It describes a time period overlapping the time of speaking. The deictic expression 'Then' literally means not now. It designates time which may be in the future or in the past. In the poetry of Sylvia Plath the use of deictic expression 'Now' helps the poetess to relate an event within a specific time frame. This is very crucial strategy in relating the meaning of text if the poetess clearly delineates specific time boundaries. In the poetry of Sylvia Plath temporal deixis 'Now' highlights present time and closeness to some recent event. For clarity, reference to the poem Ariel is cited;

Then the substanceless blue (L2)
And now I (L22)

The poem 'Ariel' describes unity between horse and rider. The rider moves to a world of mystery. An analysis of the imagery in the poem reveals that poetess is talking about her real life psychological problems. The poem opens with "Statis in darkness" In first tercet of the poem; there is a brief description of a situation in which the speaker found herself. The speaker finds herself in a place of 'darkness' 'where nothing is supposed to happen. She is static in this situation. But this staticness is temporary. In the next line she jumps into some action.

Then the substanceless blue (L, 20)

The use of distal deictic expression 'then' describes that she jumps from staticness to something else. The undefined scenery and sky around the speaker is flying. It seems that the speaker is defying her role may it be like a mother or a wife in a male dominating society and moving to her journey of independence.

And now I
Foam to wheat, (L; 22, 23)

Here, the poetess is coming out of darkness. This darkness is her responsibilities as mother. Now she has shunned off those responsibilities as a woman and ready to revolt in male dominating society.

In the poem morning song again temporal deictic expression is noted:

And now you try (L15)

This line is from the last stanza of the poem. This is the only time when the poetess shows her closeness to her new born baby. This is not only physical closeness but also emotional attachment of the mother.

A thorough study of the selected poems exhibits that apart from pure temporal expressions the verbs are also used to make reference to time. The selected poems follow a singular pattern of tense system. The poems narrating depressing attitude of male members towards her are written in past tense whereas her transformational stage is described in present tense. This transformational time marked the revolt of the poetess. In its extreme sense, it becomes a 'time of death'. In this transformational period death becomes central myth of her work.

5. Conclusion

Death is the obvious theme in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. The analysis of deictic expressions in the selected poems of Sylvia Plath reveals that person, spatial and temporal expressions play significant role in unfolding this theme. Not only the speaker is individualized but also the scene is specified, and time is bound to the time of utterance. It is the text that describes the situation of the speaker.

The first person pronoun is the most repetitive deictic expression in these poems. It exhibits that poems are highly subjective. Everything in the poems has a stamp of personal life experience. The poetess oscillates between presence and absence, "I" and others. This confrontational language encoded her heterogeneity. This heterogeneity is a driving force for creativity and motility for Plath. She is the only confessional poetess who has the capacity to face death in a variety of ways. Plath's depression is a dominating feature of her poetry as she was a patient of bipolar mental disorder. A study carried out by Stirman and Pennebaker (qtd. In Turpin and Fuhrman, 488) discovered that an extensive use of personal reference is an indicator of suicidal tendency. Sylvia Plath's poetry is an excellent example to testify this finding.

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