

A Pragmatic Analysis of the Deictic Aspect in the Novel Wonder by R.J. Palacio 2012

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the pragmatic function and distribution of deixis in the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, specifically focusing on how deictic expressions contribute to conveying character viewpoints and structuring the narrative. A qualitative descriptive method under the lens of pragmatics was applied, using content analysis to examine deictic expressions extracted from the novel's text. The results confirmed that the novel utilizes all five categories of deixis (person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social). Person deixis emerged as the most frequent category, a dominance directly linked to the novel's multiple first-person narrative structure which relies heavily on pronouns like I, me, and my to anchor each perspective. Each deictic type fulfills a unique structural role: person deixis conveys emotional perspective, while temporal, spatial, discourse, and social deixis organize events, setting, narrative connections, and relational dynamics, respectively. The findings underscore that deixis functions as a powerful narrative strategy rather than merely a linguistic feature, effectively drawing the audience into the characters' experiences and profoundly shaping reader reception and emotional connection. This demonstrates the critical role of linguistic features in literary characterization and narrative flow. A primary limitation of the study is its restriction to a single novel, which excludes the analysis of paralinguistic features that often accompany deixis in real-life communication. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future researchers explore deixis in other literary genres or combine its analysis with other pragmatic concepts like speech acts and implicature, while educators should integrate deictic analysis to enhance students' interpretive skills, and computational linguistics researchers may use these insights to improve context-sensitive language models.

Keywords: *Deixis; Wonder; Pragmatics; Linguistic analysis; Person deixis.*

INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in human life. It is not only a tool for communication but also a system for expressing thoughts, emotions, intentions, and social relationships. Language allows individuals to interact, share experiences, and build meaning in both personal and collective contexts. In literary works, language becomes a medium through which authors convey character perspectives, emotional depth, and thematic elements that shape the reader's understanding (Yule, 2020).

One of the branches of linguistics that studies how meaning is constructed beyond the literal interpretation of words is pragmatics. Pragmatics focuses on how speakers use language in real contexts, taking into account factors such as speaker

intention, listener interpretation, and the influence of social and cultural norms (Levinson, 2024). It investigates how utterances depend on context to convey meaning, which is essential when analyzing discourse in both spoken and written forms. In narratives, pragmatic elements help readers uncover deeper meanings, implied references, and speaker attitudes.

Among the core topics in pragmatics is deixis, which refers to expressions that require contextual information to be understood. Deictic expressions point to people (I, you), places (here, there), times (now, then), discourse elements (this chapter, the former), and social relationships (Sir, Mrs.). Deixis is commonly categorized into five types: personal deixis, temporal deixis, spatial deixis, discourse deixis, and social deixis. These categories serve different functions in structuring narrative perspective, positioning speakers, and guiding the reader’s orientation within a text.

The novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio presents a compelling case for analyzing deixis pragmatically (Palacio, 2012). Told from multiple perspectives, the novel uses diverse deictic markers to reflect the experiences, emotions, and viewpoints of its narrators. Each character’s use of deixis—especially personal and spatial deixis—helps construct narrative identity and relational dynamics. Previous studies, such as (Rosanti et al., 2022), have identified that personal deixis is the most frequently used type in the film adaptation of *Wonder*, while Haryanti explores how language in *Wonder* relates to power and social interaction (Sri Haryanti et al., 2021). This study aims to conduct a pragmatic analysis of the deictic aspects in the novel *Wonder* to examine how deixis contributes to narrative structure and reader engagement.

In literary works, language functions as more than just a medium for telling stories—it is a key element in shaping narrative perspective, building social dynamics, and guiding the reader through shifts in time and space. One particularly context-sensitive linguistic feature that plays a crucial role in this process is deixis. Deictic expressions—such as pronouns, temporal and spatial adverbs, and honorifics—derive their meaning from the specific situation in which they are used. As Dong explains, deixis lies at the heart of pragmatic analysis because it reflects how speakers relate to their audience, to the discourse, and to the world around them (Dong et al., 2020).

In literary narratives, deixis does not merely serve a grammatical function but also acts as a narrative device that contributes to storytelling structure and emotional impact. It helps the reader understand who is speaking, when and where events are taking place, and how characters relate to one another. According to Arwemi deixis offers essential insights into character psychology and shifting perspectives in fiction, making it a valuable tool for interpreting literary texts

(Arwemi et al., 2022). Likewise, Wahyudiantari argue that deixis helps articulate social roles, temporal progressions, and narrative cohesion, all of which are fundamental to the thematic and structural integrity of a story (Wahyudiantari, 2023).

This study focuses on the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio (2012), a multi-voiced narrative that portrays the experiences of a boy named August Pullman and the people around him. Using a pragmatic framework, this research examines how various types of deixis—personal, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social—contribute to the development of narrative perspective, emotional tone, and reader engagement. Through close analysis of these deictic expressions, the study aims to show how language plays a central role in constructing meaning and enhancing literary interpretation.

METHODS

Research Design and Subject of Research

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method under the lens of pragmatics to examine the function of deixis in the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. The descriptive method is selected as it is suitable for the deep exploration of linguistic phenomena, focusing on how meaning emerges when dependent on the participants, time, and place of communication. The subject of the research consists of narrative statements drawn directly from the novel *Wonder* that contain deictic words or phrases. These expressions are categorized based on their type, including person pronouns (e.g., *I, you*), spatial terms (e.g., *here, there*), temporal references (e.g., *now, tomorrow*), discourse pointers (e.g., *this, that* referring to parts of the story), and social terms (e.g., *sir, mom*).

Instrument

The researcher serves as the main instrument for both collecting and analyzing data in this qualitative study. This instrument is essential for making contextual interpretations regarding who is speaking, the setting, and the direction of the reference. To effectively organize and structure the findings, a structured data sheet (or tabulation sheet) is utilized. This secondary tool is designed to systematically record the identified deictic expression, its occurrence location within the novel, its specific category, and a brief contextual interpretation. The theoretical framework for deixis classification is guided by established pragmatic concepts discussed by experts such as Levinson.

Data Collection and Analysis

The methodology for data collection involves a systematic process. The researcher performs a close reading of the novel (*Wonder*), highlighting sentences that include any deictic expressions. These expressions are then systematically extracted from

the text. The data analysis process begins with categorization, where the extracted deictic expressions are grouped based on the type of deixis (person, spatial, temporal, discourse, or social) as guided by pragmatic concepts. Following categorization, each type is counted to determine its frequency within the text. Finally, each deictic expression is interpreted in relation to the overall story's context to ensure a thorough and systematic examination of their use, consistent with established linguistic procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The analysis of the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio focused on identifying and classifying the types and frequency of deictic expressions used throughout the narrative. Deixis serves as a key pragmatic mechanism for anchoring the discourse to the immediate context of communication, encompassing the identity of participants, the time, and the spatial location, which is particularly vital for establishing the distinct narrative voices present in the novel. The following table presents the overall tabulation of deictic types, their corresponding forms, and illustrative examples extracted directly from the text.

Table 1. Classification and Frequency of Deictic Expressions in the Novel *Wonder*

| Type of Deixis | Number of Occurrences | Forms of Deixis | Examples from <i>Wonder</i> |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| Personal Deixis | 7152 | I, you, we, he, she, they, me, us, him, my, etc. | • I started noticing that people’s faces would change when they looked at me. • He was just being nice. • We made a deal. • You’re not ordinary. • They think I don’t know. • She touched my hand. • He gave me a thumbs-up. • It took me a while to figure out what she meant. • My mom said it would be okay. • My name is August, by the way. I won’t describe what I look like. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse. |
| Temporal Deixis | 36 | Now, then, today, tomorrow, yesterday, next week, last year, etc. | • I remember the first time I saw myself. • We’ll talk about that tomorrow. • Let’s do it now. • Yesterday I overheard them talking. • Back then, I didn’t get it. • Things feel different now. • At that moment, I felt happy. • We’ve been friends since last year. • Next week I start fifth grade. |
| Spatial Deixis | 23 | Here, there, above, below, this, that, down, up, over, etc. | • Can you sit here next to me? • I saw him standing over there. • Put your backpack on that hook. • Look at this! • There’s a seat open by Jack. • They pointed at that poster. • I followed him down the hallway. • She came up the stairs |

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|------------------|----|--|--|
| | | | quickly. • We drove over to Christopher’s house in Bridgeport. |
| Discourse Deixis | 33 | This, that, the above, the below, as mentioned earlier, etc. | • This is what I was afraid of. • I don’t want to do that again. • That made me cry. • As I said, school can be hard. • Let’s go back to that part. • That’s not what I meant. • This really means a lot to me. • Remember that story I told you? • Let’s talk about it later. |
| Social Deixis | 59 | Mr., Mrs., Sir, Mom, Dad, Miss, etc. | • Mom, can I go to school now? • Mr. Tushman, thank you for everything. • Mrs. Albans was very polite. • Hey Dad, look at this! • Sir, do you need help? • Miss Petosa is our homeroom teacher. • Mrs. G is always smiling. • Thanks, Mom, for letting me try • You can call me Mrs. G. That’s what everyone calls me. |

The quantitative results presented in Table 1 reveal a striking dominance of Personal Deixis (7,152 occurrences), which vastly outnumbers all other categories combined. This overwhelming frequency underscores the subjective and character-centric nature of the novel *Wonder*, where the narrative perspective frequently shifts and centers on the internal experiences, relationships, and identity of the participants (August, his family, and friends). In contrast, while Temporal Deixis (36 occurrences), Spatial Deixis (23 occurrences), and Discourse Deixis (33 occurrences) provide essential anchoring mechanisms, their lower numbers confirm that the primary pragmatic function of the language in the novel is not to locate the reader precisely in time or space, but rather to intensely focus on interpersonal dynamics and social positioning (Social Deixis, 59 occurrences). This distribution directly reflects the novel’s core themes, validating the choice of deixis as an appropriate pragmatic lens for analyzing its narrative structure and emotional depth.

Discussion

Examining deixis within a novel serves as a valuable approach to understanding how the language used in the text connects with its real-world context. This research specifically investigates the various forms of deixis found in *Wonder*, a novel written by R.J. Palacio in 2012. The findings indicate that multiple categories of deixis are present throughout the narrative.

Personal Deixis

Personal deixis refers to expressions that point to participants in the discourse such as the speaker (I, we), the addressee (you), and third parties (he, she, they). The high frequency of personal deixis in *Wonder* reflects the strong first-person narrative style used throughout the novel. August, as the protagonist, narrates much of the story from his own point of view, which naturally results in the dominance of

pronouns like I, me, my, etc. According to Yule (1996), personal deixis is central in discourse that emphasizes individual experience and emotional connection (Yule, 1996). This supports the novel’s function of building empathy and personal reflection.

“My name is August, by the way. I won’t describe what I look like. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse.” (Wonder, page 3)

In the example above, the speaker—August—uses the word “my” as a form of personal deixis. The word “my” refers to the speaker himself and reflects a first-person perspective. Personal deixis refers to pronouns or possessives that indicate the roles of participants in the communication (e.g., speaker, listener). In this case, “my” refers directly to August as the narrator, making it a first-person deictic reference.

Temporal Deixis

Temporal deixis includes words like now, then, today, and tomorrow, which locate events in time relative to the speaker’s point of reference. In *Wonder*, these are used more sparingly, suggesting the novel focuses more on psychological and emotional states rather than strict chronological progression. As Levinson (1983) states, temporal deixis situates events on a temporal axis, contributing to the coherence of narratives (Levinson, 1983). The low frequency here aligns with a narrative style that is reflective rather than time-structured.

“Next week I start fifth grade.” (Wonder, page 5)

In this sentence, the speaker—August—uses the expression “next week”, which is a clear example of temporal deixis. Temporal deixis refers to time expressions whose meaning depends on the moment of speaking. The phrase “next week” indicates a point in time relative to the utterance, and without knowing when this is said, the exact time referred to cannot be determined. Therefore, “next week” is a context-dependent temporal marker

Spatial Deixis

Spatial deixis refers to expressions like here, there, above, and below, which indicate physical locations. The limited number of spatial deictic expressions in *Wonder* suggests that while the novel does involve movement and setting, its primary focus is still on interpersonal dynamics rather than spatial relations. This echoes Fillmore’s (1997) theory that spatial deixis is often backgrounded in narratives where setting is static or secondary (Fillmore, 1997).

*“We drove **over** to Christopher’s house in Bridgeport.” (Wonder, page 7)*

In the data above, the word “over” is used by August to indicate movement from one place to another. This is an instance of spatial deixis, which involves words that describe physical location or direction. The term “over” expresses relative

distance or direction from the speaker’s current or implied location. Thus, it is used to establish spatial orientation in relation to the narrative setting.

Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis refers to expressions that point to parts of the discourse itself, such as this, that, these, and those. These help structure the text by referring to preceding or upcoming content. In *Wonder*, such markers appear in a moderate amount, supporting narrative flow and cohesion. Levinson (1983) describes discourse deixis as crucial in managing textual coherence and signaling narrative shifts (Levinson, 1983).

*“Let’s talk about **it** later.” (Wonder, page 8)*

In this example, the speaker—August’s mother—uses the word “it” to refer to something previously discussed or implied in the conversation. This is a case of discourse deixis, which refers to parts of a spoken or written text. The word “it” points back to the earlier topic of August potentially going to school. Since it refers to something that has already been mentioned in the discourse, it functions as anaphora, a type of backward-pointing reference

Social Deixis

Social deixis marks social relationships between participants using titles or honorifics like Mr., Mrs., Dr., etc. In *Wonder*, such expressions highlight the school setting and social structure involving teachers, students, and parents. As noted by Hanks (1990), social deixis serves to reinforce or reveal social hierarchy and formality levels in interaction (Hanks, 1990).

*“You can call me **Mrs. G**. That’s what everyone calls me.” (Wonder, page 12)*

In the data above, the speaker—Mrs. Garcia—uses the name “Mrs. G”, which is an example of social deixis. Social deixis refers to terms that convey social relationships between participants in an interaction, often showing respect, status, or familiarity. The use of the formal title “Mrs.” Reflects a polite and respectful tone, appropriate for a school setting. It establishes a social role distinction between the adult (teacher) and the student (August).

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the pragmatic function and distribution of deixis in the novel *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, with a focus on how deictic expressions contribute to conveying character viewpoints and structuring the narrative. The analysis confirmed that the novel utilizes all five categories of deixis (person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social). Person deixis emerged as the most frequent category, particularly through first-person pronouns (*I, me, my*), a dominance directly attributable to the novel’s multiple first-person narrative structure. Each deictic type fulfills a specific function: person deixis conveys emotional perspective;

temporal and spatial deixis organize event sequence and setting; discourse deixis connects narrative segments; and social deixis reveals hierarchy and relational dynamics. The findings highlight that deixis in *Wonder* is not merely a linguistic feature but a powerful narrative strategy that profoundly shapes reader reception. The strategic use of person deixis, especially during perspective shifts, effectively draws the audience into the characters’ experiences, enhancing relatability and emotional connection. Therefore, the study demonstrates that deixis functions as a critical element in literary characterization and narrative flow, offering a deeper understanding of how linguistic features guide the reader's interpretive journey and emotional experience of the text. The original analysis provided does not explicitly state any limitations of the study. A typical limitation for this analysis would be its restriction to a single novel or the exclusion of analyzing paralinguistic features (which are absent in a written text) that often accompany deixis in real-life communication. Based on the results and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are forwarded to various stakeholders. Future researchers are strongly encouraged to broaden the scope of this work by exploring the functionality of deixis in other literary genres such as poetry, drama, or even digital literature, facilitating comparative analysis across diverse narrative forms and platforms. Furthermore, to enrich linguistic and literary criticism, it is suggested that deixis analysis be combined with other pragmatic concepts, including implicature, speech acts, and politeness strategies, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is conveyed in literary texts. For educators and students, this study underscores the pedagogical importance of integrating pragmatic analysis, particularly the study of deixis, into language and literature learning to sharpen students’ interpretive and analytical skills. Finally, the insights derived from analyzing how deixis anchors perspective in the novel offer valuable input for researchers in computational linguistics and artificial intelligence, particularly in improving the development of context-sensitive language models designed to process complex narrative structures and human-like dialogue.

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