'Unspecific Deixis' in a Southern African English Context

by

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Abstract

'Africanisms' are commonly defined as characteristics of African Second Language English usage on a range of levels of linguistic analysis, that is, in terms of Phonetics and Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Lexis and Semantics, Pragmatics and Usage, and Register. So far, most studies have concentrated on the more structural aspects of this phenomenon (phonological, morphological, and syntactic features). However, what is much more far-reaching in terms of its communicative impact is the way people, places and events are referred to, or verbally pointed to (deixis). 'Deixis' refers to linguistic strategies that place utterances in space and time, in relation to the speaker. Deictic expressions include words like here and there, now and then, first and second person pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and tense.

This paper will focus on pragmatic and usage-related features of Southern African English communicative behaviour which differ from equivalent linguistic behaviour by speakers of other varieties of English. In this context, it will discuss and analyse the use of deictic expressions in actual face-to-face interactions as a feature of African English. In order to investigate this 'unspecific deixis', examples from actual conversations, formal meetings and television interviews will be analysed.

The Africanisation of English

As a former colonial language, English has, in the last four hundred-odd years, graduated to the status of an important *lingua franca* in large parts of Africa (and, indeed, in other parts of the world). This is evident from the fact that English is an official or semi-official language in many African countries where it plays a role in the language policies, education, media, legal systems, and literature. Whether we like it or not, English has become an African institution (Schmied 1991), and this has also changed its character: it has been adopted by African users of English and it has, subsequently, been adapted to their communicative needs.

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English usage on a range of levels of linguistic analysis, that is, in terms of Phonetics and Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Lexis and Semantics, Register and Usage, and Pragmatics. This paper will describe and analyse a particular way of using deictic expressions as a common feature of Southern African English face-to-face communication and attempt to determine the functions of, and possible reasons for, this usage. The paper will adopt the World Englishes approach (see Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008), thus characteristics of Southern African English will be described as features of this New English variety, rather than as fossilised errors.

However, in order to put the main topic of this paper into perspective, let us begin by briefly looking at some examples[i] on the various levels on which these characteristics occur.

Phonetics/Phonology:

Southern African – especially Black Southern African – English, is characterised by a syllable-timed rhythm rather than the (British) Standard English stress-timed rhythm,[ii] as in the following examples:

- o *,ex,tra'ordi,nary*   vs.   BrStdE *ex'traordinary*
- o *'se,cre,ta,ry*   vs.   BrStdE *'secretary*
- o *'Se,nate* ['si:,neɪt]   vs.   BrStdE *'Senate* ['senət]

In addition, the particular phonological 'flavour' of Southern African English is partly due to deviant word stress, as in

- o *co'mment*   vs.   BrStdE *'comment*
- o *'co,mmi,ttee*   vs.   BrStdE *co'mmittee*
- o *,cir'cum,stan,ces*   vs.   BrStdE *'circum,stances*

Morphology:

One often notes a lack of differentiation between singular and plural demonstrative pronouns, partly due to first language interference on the level of Phonology, that is, the lack of distinction between long and short vowels and between voiced and voiceless consonants, as in

- o *this* [ðɪs]   and   *these* [ði:z],
  and, by analogous extension, between

- o *that*   and   *those.*

Another characteristic feature is the use of multiple auxiliaries and the over-use of modal auxiliary verbs (see also Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008: 64f and 135) as in the following examples from Lesotho:

- *… you <u>cannot be able to</u> teach your children …*
- *I <u>can maybe be able to</u> read this text tonight.*
- *But if he <u>can</u> get an information that …*

Syntax:[iii]

At the level of syntax, resumptive pronoun use is common, especially in subjective position (see also Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008: 83, 91):

- *those people who are staying there, <u>they</u> assist these thieves when coming back …*
- *That man, you know, <u>he</u> is extremely lazy.*

Another common syntactic feature is the omission of forms of *to be*:

- *Peter [<u>is a</u>] teacher.*
- *Where [<u>are you coming</u>] from?*

Comparative constructions often leave out *more* and *less* (see also Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008: 85):

- *Children are [<u>more</u> or <u>less</u>] skilful than adults.*
- *This year's exams were [<u>more</u> or <u>less</u>] difficult than last year's.*

A very common feature is the extended use of *be* + VERB + *-ing* (see also Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008: 174), as in the following examples from Lesotho:

- *I <u>am asking</u> to wash the car.*
- *… those people who <u>are staying</u> there, they assist these thieves when coming back to Lesotho …*

Finally, one notes the frequent overuse of demonstrative pronouns, esp. *this*, instead of the definite (or sometimes even the indefinite) article:[iv]

Then, if <u>that</u> stock capturing happens at 8 am …

Lexis and Semantic Extension:

The following examples[v] of borrowings and semantic extensions are common in Southern African English (including "White" South African English):

globe   'light bulb'

robot	'traffic lights'
bakkie	'pick-up truck'
muti	'(traditional) medicine'
fundi	'an expert in a certain subject' (SASD)
brother	'male relative, sibling or countryman'
	(also as a form of address, mostly between young men and male friends)
sis, sister	'female relative, young woman, friend' (also as a form of address)
Mama	'Mrs, Madam' (as a respectful form of address, translated from L1)
be late	'have died'

(note that this phrase can be used attributively and predicatively)

Register:

With regard to register and style, one observes comparatively high levels of formality, for example in meetings and official memoranda, documents and announcements, with frequent use of terms like *humbly* and *kindly*, expressions of gratitude, the use of titles etc.

Usage and Pragmatics:

A common cause of misunderstandings are affirmative responses to negative *yes/no* questions (see also Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008: 86f), as in the following example from a Lesotho classroom:

You haven't read this book?

o StE: *No.* [that is: *No, I haven't*]
o AfrE: *Yes.* [that is: *Yes, you are right in assuming that I haven't*]

Another common feature is the non-apologetic use of *"Sorry!"* when somebody has hurt him/herself but the speaker is not responsible for the incident and has, therefore, no reason to apologise. This use shows politeness and sympathy.

As far as greetings are concerned, one observes the transfer of what might be termed first language 'negotiations of goodwill' into English quasi-equivalents, with deviant placement of expression of thanks at the end of the exchange, thus 'sealing' the friendship:

A: *Hello!*

B: *Hello!*

A: *How are you?*

B: *I'm fine. How are you?*

A: *I'm fine.*

B: *Thank you.*

Finally, a more far-reaching feature of Southern African English usage than phonological, structural and lexical differences is what I would like to term 'unspecific deixis'. This characteristic can have a considerable communicative impact. It affects the way people, places and events are referred to, or verbally pointed to (deixis), especially the use of deictic expressions in face-to-face interactions. In order to investigate this 'unspecific ("African") deixis', examples from actual conversations, formal meetings and television interviews will be analysed (see Section 4 below).

However, before examining some instances of this particular African English communicative behaviour,[vi] which seems different from equivalent linguistic behaviour by speakers of other varieties of English (for example, British and American English), let us place this study within the larger context of rhetoric and pragmatics, followed by a brief summary of the function of deictic expressions in discourse.

Rhetoric & Pragmatics: Utterances, Speech Acts and Reference

Leech (1983: 15) defines 'rhetoric' as "the effective use of language in its most general sense", especially in everyday conversation "in a goal-oriented speech situation", where the speaker "uses language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind" of the hearer. As such, it falls within Linguistic Pragmatics, that is, that sub-discipline of Linguistics which studies the meaning of utterances in the context of concrete situations. One of the fundamental assumptions of Pragmatics is that communication is a 'principle-governed' (Leech 1983: 21) activity. According to Leech (1983: 14),

utterances are the linguistic products of speech acts. Searle (1969: 16) observes that

> speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on; and more abstractly, acts such as referring and predicating; and, secondly, that these acts are in general made possible by and performed in accordance with certain rules for the use of linguistic elements.

In order for communication to be successful, speakers intuitively adhere to certain guidelines or principles, such as the 'cooperative principle' proposed by Grice (1975: 45f), which requires the speaker to provide the right amount of information (that is, neither too little nor too much), and to be truthful, relevant and clear, that is to avoid obscurity, ambiguity and confusion. This is, of course, the unremarkable default option; in real life, Grice's maxims are flouted all the time, and these implicatures carry additional meaning.

In other cases, the interlocutors may have different backgrounds. Providing an exactly adequate amount of information is not always easy, as we know – speakers are often reminded that they should be concise, brief and to the point, or they are asked to elaborate by, for instance, supporting their arguments with facts, by providing examples, or by identifying the referent unambiguously, to clarify their point. Searle (1969: 82) distinguishes between 'fully consummated reference' and 'successful reference':

> A fully consummated reference is one in which an object is identified unambiguously for the hearer, that is, where the identification is communicated to the hearer. But reference may be successful – in the sense that we could not accuse the speaker of having failed to refer – even if it does not identify the object unambiguously for the hearer, provided only that the speaker could do so on demand.

As we will see in the next sections, the understanding of what it means to provide clear and unambiguous reference, and, at the same time, making one's utterance relevant without over-specifying, is not only context-dependent but also culture-specific.

Speaking in Context: Deixis

As we have seen, reference is one type of speech act among others, and we

can refer to people, places, events and artefacts in many different ways, for example by naming them, by describing them, by physically pointing in their direction, or by using verbal pointers or 'deictic expressions'. 'Deixis' (from Greek 'pointing', 'showing') refers to "all those features of language which orientate or 'anchor' our utterances in the context of proximity of space … and of time … relative to the speaker's viewpoint" (Wales 1989: 112). Deictics include words like *here* and *there, now* and *then,* first and second person pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and tense. Secondary deixis is found in texts, for example, *the former, the latter*, and deixis can also be metaphorical in that it can indicate emotional closeness or distance of the speaker vis-à-vis the referent, for example:

> *This is so nice!*   – emotional closeness; as opposed to:
>
> *What is that supposed to mean?* – emotional distancing.

Obviously, deictics are context-dependent, that is, without some basic contextual information (minimally: the speaker and the hearer, as well as the time and the place of the utterance) they cannot be decoded successfully (see Brown & Yule, 1983: 27, 40f). Brown and Yule (1983: 50) define the 'deictic context' of an utterance as those "features which will permit interpretation for deictic expressions". The English demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that*, as well as the adverbials *here* and *there,* when used deictically in discourse, direct the addressee's attention to a certain feature of his/her environment in order to identify the referent. They are verbal 'pointers'.

> We can thus summarise with Levinson (1983: 54):
>
> Essentially, deixis concerns the ways in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the **context of utterance** or **speech event**, and thus also concerns ways in which the interpretation of utterances depends on the analysis of that context of utterance. Thus the pronoun *this* does not name or refer to any particular entity on all occasions of use; rather it is a variable or place-holder for some particular entity given by the context (for example by a gesture). The facts of deixis should act as a constant reminder … of the simple but immensely important fact that natural languages are primarily designed … for use in face-to-face interaction … [Emphasis in original]

However, it is questionable whether speakers and hearers always perceive contextual features in the same way, and, obviously, "[t]he further

away in time the message was situated, the less likely the speaker is to remember precisely the date and time" (Brown & Yule 1983: 51). As deixis relies on a shared visual context, that is, referents that can be pointed to, explicit reference needs to be made to referents which are outside the interlocutors' immediate visual context. This raises some important questions, as Brown & Yule (1983: 58) point out: Is it reasonable to assume, as we tend to do, that those features of context which are salient to the speaker are equally salient to the hearer? Ought we not rather to think in terms of partially intersecting views of context?

Furthermore, speakers might have differing perceptions about the kind and amount of information provided by the context and their interlocutors' amount of background information, and they might, therefore, not feel the same need to provide explicit information about certain features.[vii] This can lead to misunderstandings, or, at the very least, it will complicate the decoding process.

In the next section, we will have a look at precisely such examples, which, I will argue, might be resulting from differing discourse traditions: the African oral tradition, where there is always room for explanation and which takes place in concrete contexts of situation, as compared to the Western need for specificity and explicitness.

1. Removing the Context: 'Unspecific Deixis'

Deictic expressions which are 'dangling', so to speak, as they are not firmly anchored in the linguistic co-text or in the immediate context of situation of the interlocutors, I will call 'unspecific deixis'.[viii] This kind of linguistic behaviour is quite common in Southern African usage of English, possibly originating in oral usage, where the interlocutors are in a position to actually point to a referent in their immediate environment and in small rural communities, where everybody knows everybody else and community members are well-informed about what is happening around them and in their communities.

Being in a position to point to a referent in one's immediate context, either physically or verbally, can identify it unambiguously. However, transferring this usage to a situation that is removed in time and/or place from the referent (instead of naming the referent) can make the message ambiguous and may complicate the decoding process; it can even jeopardise the successful passing on of the message. Transferring this experience and resulting usage to a more anonymous environment, a university situation, for

example, presupposes that both speaker and listener share the same background, that is, that they are acquainted with the same people and places (for example, where colleagues' offices are located), and that they are equally well-informed about recent events. Thus, 'unspecific deixis' goes far beyond the mere incorrect use of demonstrative pronouns, as example (1) below shows: referring to *the Academic Office* as *that office up there* is more complicated, but, at the same time, implies a shared background knowledge and solidarity between the speaker and the listener.

The following examples are actual utterances, compiled by purposive sampling, and produced in personal communications (face-to-face interactions), recorded at the National University of Lesotho during the first three months of the Academic Year 2001/2002. In all three cases, additional decoding efforts are required and even then, only relatively well-informed hearers will be able to fully understand the utterances. As indicated above, this is not necessarily a problem in face-to-face interactions, as the hearer can always ask for clarification and additional information if necessary.

(1)   *If you need to change the registration of your courses, you need to go to <u>that office up there</u>.*

        [that is: *you need to go to <u>the Academic Office</u>* – lecturer to student; the utterance was not accompanied by any gestures such as pointing, and the office in question was not visible]

(2)   *You know, I just spoke to <u>that man</u>, about <u>that problem</u>, you know.*

        [that is: <u>*Mr. X*</u>, about <u>*the controversy we had at the Board Meeting last week*</u> – a lecturer to another lecturer, meeting in the corridor, without any introductory comment; note also the occurrence of *you know*, both at the beginning and at the end of the utterance]

(3)   *OK, I'll <u>do</u> it <u>the other side</u>.*

        [that is: *I'll <u>print</u> <u>my document</u> <u>in the secretary's office</u>* – a student arrives in her supervisor's office with a diskette in her hand; she is told that the printer has run out of ink; the Faculty Office she is referring to is located in a different building].

        Now, let us have a look at examples of 'unspecific deixis' recorded from two television documentaries[ix] about the Lesotho-South Africa

cross-border stock theft problem, in which several users of African English were interviewed.

An Eastern Cape stock theft officer (02 February 1999):

(4)   *All these places neighbouring Lesotho ... there are no telephone facilities. Then, if that stock capturing happens at 8 am, it would take almost eight hours to report that because they have to ride horses ...*

         No preceeding context; may have been edited out]

(5)   *Livestock is their finance ... without it ... you cannot be able to teach your children ...*

         [that is: *the black farmers' finance*; complete utterance]

A KwaZulu-Natal farmer (15 May 2001):

(6)   *... they are coming in, in there, to come and steal from us, because all the farmers are giving up.*

         [that is: *the thieves are going deeper into the mountains*]

A Lesotho stock theft officer (15 May 2001):

(7)   *There's a link. They have got some relatives in that country they use to go. So those people who are staying there, they assist these thieves when coming back to Lesotho, to cut open this fence, to take this animals from that country to this country.*

         [complete turn]

(8)   *… He has got cattle posts ... We used to visit them for checking. But if he can get an information that we are coming, he'll drive them away. We'll just find them grazing there, nobody will be responsible for them.*

         [that is: *... he'll drive the animals away…*]

Finally, as our last set of examples will show, this kind of pointing behaviour is also used in formal meetings (recorded at the National University of Lesotho during the first semester of the Academic Year 2001/2002):

(9)   *Isn't this case similar to that one, you know, the one which we had last academic year ...*

[Beginning of a turn at the beginning of a discussion about a student's case; the speaker was not trying to recall the particular incident which had happened the previous year]

(10)   *That man, you know, he is extremely lazy.*

[a complete utterance, that is, non-anaphoric]

(11)   *I really don't know whether this one is any better than that one, but let's have a look anyway and compare them.*

[that is: *the new proposal as compared to the previous one* – the beginning of the first contribution in a discussion of several proposals]

(12)   *I was struck by question number five there, where it says ...*

[that is: *I am referring to paper ...; I was struck by question number five, on page two, which says ...* – the beginning of a contribution in a discussion of a lengthy document]

None of the above examples are anaphoric. No matter whether they were uttered informally and in passing, in (semi-) formal television interviews or in the context of formal meetings, they all show quite clearly how 'unspecific deixis' works, and that it poses no communication problem whatsoever as long as the interlocutors know who or what is being referred to. Should this not be the case, the listener will ask for clarification, thus making it clear that s/he is less familiar with the context than the speaker and that, therefore, verbal pointing only provides insufficient identification of the referent.

Finally, 'unspecific deixis', as one example of regional variation of English usage, demonstrates once more that linguistic varieties do not only differ structurally but also pragmatically and on a whole range of levels of linguistic expression. Language use is intrinsically linked with context, 'culture' and tradition, and there is no single 'correct' way of using any language – least of all in the case of English, which has, for a long time already, been a 'shared software' or 'public domain' means of communication around the world.

2.   Conclusion: No 'Hard and Fast' Rules?

'Unspecific deixis' is a constant reminder that natural languages were originally meant for oral use (see Levinson above), and it obviously works

for speakers who are familiar with the usage, otherwise it would have been modified or replaced long ago. However, for speakers who grew up in different discourse traditions it can be confusing – for example, for speakers who are used to the Western tradition which emphasises specificity and tries to eliminate ambiguity as far as possible, thus leaving as little as possible to the imagination.[x]   This is not surprising, as for several decades now, discourse analysts and sociolinguists have been emphasising the fact that language and culture are inextricably linked, and that discourse can never be analysed satisfactorily unless we take note of both the extralinguistic context and the linguistic co-text of utterances. Just as different speech communities have different communicative conventions and traditions (for example, greetings, levels of formality, politeness, taboos, persuasive strategies and many more), so they also different deictic strategies. Non-initiates will have to overcome the embarrassing experience of unsuccessful decoding attempts, that is, the shock of not quite getting the message although all the words and structures were perfectly clear; then they will have to train and exercise their imaginative powers to a different degree; finally, they will have to ask for clarification whenever necessary (see Searle above).

On a more general level, the phenomenon of 'unspecific deixis' raises some interesting questions concerning discourse:

- o   What constitutes successful communication?
- o   What constitutes unambiguous reference, and in which context?
- o   How much contextual information do interlocutors require, and exactly which elements constitute 'shared' contextual backgrounds (see Brown & Yule above)?
- o   Do we need to postulate more flexible, context- and culture-specific 'felicity conditions' (Austin 1962) or 'cooperative principles' (Grice 1975) for discourse?
  These issues open some promising potential for future studies in cross-cultural discourse analysis and communication.

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[i] NB. All the examples used in this section and in the rest of the paper are 'real' examples, from SABC3 *Special Assignment*, or recorded at the National University of Lesotho.

[ii] See also Schmied (1991: 57ff) for further examples.

[iii] See also Schmied (1991: 64ff) for further examples.

[iv] This may be due to first language interference, where the L1 does not have articles and makes more extended use of demonstratives for the purpose of clarity.

According to Wales (1989: 113), the definite article in English has its roots in an earlier demonstrative pronoun, thus leading to a differentiation between a weaker (the definite article) and a stronger (the demonstrative) deictic tool:

The DEFINITE ARTICLE was once deictic in the 'stronger' sense …: it developed out of the demonstrative in Early Middle English (post-AD 1000), if not earlier. [Emphasis in original]

[v] For further examples, see Fandrych (1999); note that Lynn (1994: 40-43) observes that English in Lesotho shares numerous features and characteristics with other sub-Saharan varieties of English.

[vi] See also Fandrych (2003) for a discussion of socio-pragmatic and cultural influences on English second language usage at the National University of Lesotho. See Samson-akpan & Nzeku (2000) for further examples of first language interference in English.

[vii] See Lyons (1977: 655):

When the speaker refers to a specific individual, by whatever means, he tacitly accepts the convention that he will provide any information (not given in the context) that is necessary for the addressee to identify the individual in question. Uniqueness of reference, understood in this sense, is always context-dependent …

[viii] To my knowledge, the phenomenon of 'unspecific deixis' has not been discussed before, unlike other characteristics of African English usage.

[ix] SABC3, *Special Assignment,* "Mountains of Trouble" (02 February 1999) and "Taking Stock" (15 May 2001).

[x] See Chick (1995) for a discussion of intercultural and cross-cultural exchanges in South Africa.