Deictic Expressions in the Short Story "Thank You, Ma'am": A Pragmatic Study Based on Levinson`s Theory

Hajri Sofia Ulfa[1] Atik Muhimatun Asroriyah[2]

[1-2]Universitas Ma'arif Nahdlatul Ulama, Kebumen, Indonesia

hajrisofia52@gmail.com

Abstract

This research explores the use of deictic expressions in the short story "Thank You, Ma'am" by Langston Hughes. Deixis refers to words or phrases such as I, here, or tomorrow, which cannot be fully understood without knowing the context. These expressions play an important role in pragmatics, especially in analyzing how speakers and listeners interact. The main aim of this study is to identify and categorize the types of deixis used in the story and to explain their function in shaping meaning and relationships between the characters. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method and applies Stephen C. Levinson's (1983) theory of deixis, supported by George Yule's (1996) explanation of deixis in everyday language. The data were collected from the short story text and analyzed based on five types of deixis: person, place, time, discourse, and social. A total of 72 deixis expressions were identified, with person deixis being the most frequent, reflecting the close personal interaction between Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones and Roger. Social deixis, such as the use of "Ma'am," shows politeness and power relations. Time and place deixis help build the setting and mood, while discourse deixis connects parts of the conversation. The findings show that deixis in literary texts is more than just grammar, it reveals character roles, emotions, and the dynamics of communication. This study confirms that deixis is a useful tool in understanding how meaning is built in short stories.

Keywords: deixis; langston hughes; levinson; pragmatic study; short story

INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a tool for communication; it also enables people to express ideas, emotions, experiences, and social relationships. Through language, individuals interact with others and construct meaning in various situations. However, the meaning of an utterance is not always determined solely by its grammatical structure. In many cases, understanding what a speaker intends to convey requires knowledge of the context in which the utterance is produced. Therefore, the relationship between language and context has become an important area of linguistic inquiry and has received considerable attention in the field of pragmatics.

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted in particular communicative situations. Unlike semantics, which focuses on meaning encoded within linguistic forms, pragmatics investigates how speakers and listeners rely on contextual information to understand an utterance. One of the most important topics in pragmatics is deixis, a phenomenon in which the interpretation of certain words or expressions depends on contextual factors such as speaker, place, time, and social relationship. Expressions such as I, you, here, there, now, and tomorrow cannot be fully understood without reference to the situation in which they are used.

According to Levinson (1983), deixis can be classified into five categories: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis, discourse deixis, and social deixis. These categories help explain how language users locate themselves and others within a communicative event. Deictic expressions are not merely grammatical elements; they also contribute to the construction of meaning, the

representation of social relations, and the organization of discourse. Therefore, the study of deixis is important because it provides insight into how speakers convey meanings that are closely connected to contextual circumstances.

The investigation of deixis is not limited to everyday conversations. Literary works also offer rich examples of deictic usage because literary texts present interactions between characters within specific social and situational contexts. In literary studies, language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for character development, narrative construction, and thematic expression. Consequently, pragmatic analysis can contribute to a deeper understanding of literary texts by revealing how contextual meanings are embedded in dialogue and narration.

Among various literary genres, short stories provide a particularly suitable medium for pragmatic analysis. Their concise narrative structure often relies on carefully selected linguistic expressions to convey character relationships, settings, and events efficiently. One short story that demonstrates significant contextual interaction is Thank You, Ma'am by Langston Hughes. The story narrates an encounter between Roger, a young boy who attempts to steal a purse, and Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, a woman who responds to his action with unexpected kindness and guidance. Throughout the narrative, the characters engage in dialogues that contain numerous deictic expressions, making the story an interesting object for pragmatic investigation.

This research uses the theory of deixis by Stephen C. Levinson (1983) as the main reference. Levinson divides deixis into five types: person, place, time, discourse, and social deixis. To support the analysis, the study also refers to George Yule's (1996) explanation of deixis in everyday conversations. These theories help to analyze the expressions found in the story and understand their function in the interaction between the characters.

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the types of deixis used in "Thank You, Ma'am", and to explain how these expressions help build meaning in the story. Several previous studies have also explored deixis in short stories using Levinson's theory. For instance, Khairun Niswa (2021) analyzed deixis in "What the Old Man Does Is Always Right" by Hans Christian Andersen and found that person deixis was the most dominant type (77.95%). Similarly, Devansa Riski Indrasara (2021) studied deixis in "The Night Come Slowly" by Kate Chopin and reported that person deixis appeared most frequently (65.86%), with no instances of discourse deixis. These findings suggest that person deixis often plays a key role in short story narratives. However, research specifically on deixis in "Thank You, Ma'am" is still limited. Therefore, this study aims to identify and describe the types of deixis used in the story and to explain how these expressions help build meaning in the narrative.

METHOD

This research is using qualitative research and descriptive method in analyze the data because the data is in word form and analyze descriptively not in number form. The study focused on the analysis of deictic expressions appearing in the short story Thank You, Ma'am by Langston Hughes. Through this approach, the researcher examined the contextual meanings of deictic expressions and their functions within the narrative and character interactions.This research analyzed whole the text to find the types of deixis used based on Levinson's theory with support from Yule's theory.

The subject of this research is "Thank You Ma'am" does is always right. The story was written by Langston Hughes. The story published on 1958 was taken from the internet website of

https://shortstoryamerica.com/pdf_classics/hughes_thank_you_maam.pdf and served as the primary document for analysis. The object of the research is all of deixis or deictic expression in short story "Thank You Ma`am" by Langston Hughes. All the deixis or deictic expression indicates to person, time, place, discourse and social be the data in this research.

Data is the main point in the research to get the objective of this research. In qualitative research, the researcher served as the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing the data. The processes of identifying, classifying, and interpreting deictic expressions were conducted directly by the researcher. To facilitate the analysis, a data classification table was used as a supporting instrument to record and organize the identified expressions according to their categories. The table also assisted in managing the data systematically and identifying the frequency of occurrence of each type of deixis.

Researcher collected the data by following the steps. First, search from the internet the short story "Thank You Ma`am". Second, read carefully and do for many times to get understanding the story. Repeated reading was necessary to ensure the accurate identification of deictic expressions within both the narrative and the dialogues. Third, take one by one of deixis or deictic expression in short story "Thank You Ma`am". And the last is organizing all the deixis or deictic expression which got from the short story "Thank You Ma`am" into table.

After collecting the data from the short story "Thank You Ma`am", the researcher analyzed the data by followed the steps. First, researcher collects all the data that include to deixis or deictic expression in story "Thank You Ma`am". Second, researcher classified the deictic expression as a data based on their criteria. Third, researcher analyzed the data based on Levinson's theory on categorizing the types of deixis, namely: person deixis, place deixis, temporal or time deixis, social deixis and discourse deixis. Fourth, researcher interpreted the deictic expression refers to. Fifth, researcher calculated the dominant types of deixis used in story "Thank You Ma`am" Last, describe and explaining the result. Then, the researcher interpreted the meaning and function of each deixis based on its use in the context of the story. The analysis was guided by Levinson`s theory (1983) as the main framework, with support from Yule's (1996) explanation of deixis in everyday language.

The analysis is presented in a descriptive way. Some of the examples from the text are quoted directly to make the explanation clearer. The goal is to show how deixis helps in understanding meaning, character roles, and the relationship between the speaker and listener in the story.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the short story "Thank You, Ma'am" by Langston Hughes reveals the presence of all five types of deixis based on Levinson's (1983) theory: person deixis, place deixis, time deixis, discourse deixis, and social deixis. Each type is used by the characters to create meaning, show relationships, and reflect the context of the interaction. The following is the discussion for each type of deixis found in the story.

A. Person Deixis

Person deixis refers to expressions that indicate participants in the speech situation. In the story, examples of person deixis include pronouns like I, you, he, she, we, and my. These forms are used to show who is speaking and who is being addressed.

Example:
"You ought to be my son. I'd teach you right from wrong."

In this example, you refers to Roger, the boy, while I refers to Mrs. Jones. The use of personal pronouns helps build the relationship between characters.

B. Place Deixis

Place deixis indicates the location of the speaker or listener. It includes expressions like here, there, come, and go. In the story, place deixis is used to describe movement and setting.

Example:
"You come on and eat some lima beans and some ham."

The word come indicates movement toward the speaker's location — in this case, Mrs. Jones inviting Roger into her house.

C. Time Deixis

Time deixis refers to temporal expressions such as now, then, today, tonight, or tomorrow. These indicate when something happens relative to the time of speaking.

Example:
"Now, ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

The word now refers to the moment Mrs. Jones is confronting Roger. It emphasizes the immediacy and seriousness of the situation.

D. Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis refers to expressions that point to parts of the discourse itself — what has been said or will be said. Common forms include this, that, the following, etc.

Example:
"Well, you didn't have to snatch my pocketbook."

Here, that (implied in "Well") refers to the previous action Roger did. While this deixis appears less often, it still functions to structure the conversation.

E. Social Deixis
Social deixis marks social relationships or status. In this story, social deixis is shown in polite forms and terms of address such as Ma'am or the full name Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.

Example:
"Yes, Ma'am."

This term shows Roger's respect or submission to Mrs. Jones, highlighting their social dynamic.

Table 1 Deixis Types Found in "Thank You Ma'am"

Example	Number of Occurrances	Type of Deixis	Function
"I", "you", "my", "she", "he", "him", "me"	31	Person Deixis	Shows roles of speaker/listener
"come", "here", "there"	10	Place Deixis	Describes movement and location
"now", "tonight", "once"	9	Time Deixis	Shows when events happen
"that", "this"	6	Discourse Deixis	Refers to part of the conversation
"Ma'am", full name	16	Social Deixis	Shows politeness and social distance

The deixis used in Thank You, Ma'am is not only a linguistic tool but also a means of developing character and moral growth. Person deixis dominates the dialogue, indicating emotional shifts and strengthening the human connection between characters. This type of deixis appears most frequently in the short story, which aligns with the narrative's structure that centers around a direct and personal conversation between the two main characters—Roger and Mrs. Jones. The use of first and second-person pronouns helps establish an intimate and emotional tone in their interaction.

In addition, time and place deixis serve to frame the story's setting and symbolically represent moments of transition and transformation. These deictic markers help ground the events in a realistic context, allowing readers to experience the immediacy of the characters' interactions. Discourse deixis contributes to the coherence of the narrative structure, while social deixis reflects implicit social norms, politeness strategies, and the evolving social dynamics between the characters. For instance, Roger's use of respectful address terms such as "ma'am" signifies his shifting attitude and growing respect toward Mrs. Jones.

Overall, deixis in the story plays a significant role in delivering meaning, expressing relationships, and shaping the characters' voices. It enhances both the linguistic and thematic depth of the narrative by connecting language with context, identity, and social interaction.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the use of deictic expressions in the short story "Thank You, Ma'am" by Langston Hughes using Levinson's (1983) theory of deixis, supported by Yule (1996). The analysis found that all five types of deixis, person, place, time, discourse, and social, were present in the story. Among them, person deixis appeared most frequently, showing how the characters refer to themselves and to each other in personal interactions.

Place and time deixis helped to create a clear setting and context, while discourse deixis was used to refer to parts of the conversation. Social deixis showed politeness and respect, especially in the way Roger addressed Mrs. Jones. These expressions were not just grammatical elements, but

they also carried pragmatic meaning that revealed relationships, attitudes, and perspectives.

The study highlights how deixis in a literary text can be a powerful tool to analyze character interaction and narrative structure. By looking at deixis, readers can better understand how meaning is constructed in context. This shows the relevance of pragmatic theory in literary studies, especially in analyzing short conversations with deep meaning, like those found in "Thank You, Ma'am."

REFERENCES

Indrasara, D. R. (2021). Deixis analysis in *"The Night Come Slowly"* by Kate Chopin. *English Journal of Indragiri (EJI),* 5(1), 1–9. https://ejournal-fkip.unisi.ac.id/eji/article/view/1347

Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.

Niswa, K. (2021). Pragmatic analysis on deixis in *"What the Old Man Does Is Always Right"* by Hans Christian Andersen. *Journal of English Language Education*, 6(2), 154–160. https://jele.or.id/index.php/jele/article/view/111 Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Hughes, L. (n.d.). "*Thank You, Ma'am".* American Literature.

https://shortstoryamerica.com/pdf_classics/hughes_thank_you_maam.pdf