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Exploring the use of deictic expressions in police interrogations: A pragmatic perspective

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Abstract

People are in need to be provided with a number of approaches of understanding the nature and the relationship of the police interrogation between interrogators and suspects inside the interrogation room from a pragmatic point of view. Nevertheless, extracting the truth from the mouths of the suspects is not that easy task unless it is preceded by certain skills and strategies utilised by the detective to arrive at the confession and the judiciary evidences. The present paper deals with the concept of deixis of American police interrogations. What is more, the current study tries to answer the following questions: first, what are the types of deixis that are used in police interrogation? Second, what is the most frequent one that is used by both interlocutors. Third, what are the pragmatic functions of these uses? Moreover, the paper aims at investigating the deixis pragmatically and finding out to what extent their use could serve the process of interrogation and truth seeking and to survey the relevant pragmatic theory of deixis and certain account of the process of police interrogation. The methodology of this paper is based on Brown all the types of deixis. This paper concludes that: deictic expressions are heavily utilized between the interlocutors as a reference to the set of the events under discussion and they serve to locate every single detail of the events to be interrogated.

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Introduction

Deixis

Etymologically, the term 'deixis' is derived from the Greek meaning 'to show' or to point out. As a pragmatic term, deixis is the phenomena whereby features of a context of utterance or speech event are encoded by lexical and/or grammatical means in a language (Huang, 2007) ^[1]. Levinson (1983) ^[7] classifies deixis into

- 1. Person deixis:** This encodes the role of the participants of the speech event. The participants-role is encoded by the use of pronouns and their associated predicate agreements. Person deixis is the deictic reference to the participant role of a referent, such as a speaker, the addressee, referents which are neither speaker nor addressee. First and second person pronouns typically refer to the speaking and hearing speech participants, whereas third person pronouns designate the non- speech or narrated participant
- 2. Place deixis:** It encodes the spatial locations relative to the location of the participants in the speech event using demonstratives and deictic adverbs of place.
- 3. Time deixis:** This one stores the temporal spans and points related to the time an utterance was produced. Demonstratives and deictic adverbs of time are also used in temporal deixis in addition to tense.
- 4. Social deixis:** It signifies the social relationships between participants, the speaker and the addressee or the speaker and some referent in the speech event. The social relationships decide the use of honorifics, pronouns, summons forms or vocatives, and

titles of address in familiar languages. Social deixis 'Title of addressee' is used in condolence messages especially in the introductory stage.

5. Discourse deixis: It is concerned with the reference to parts of the discourse in which the utterance (that contains the text referring expression) is located.

Police Interrogation

Royal and Schutt (1976,) [9] define police interrogating as "the art and mechanics of questioning for the purpose of exploring or resolving issues".

Interrogation is a theory-driven social interaction guided by an authority person who has a strong a priori belief in the target and assesses success by his or her ability to elicit a confession (Kassin, 2005) [3].

According to Solan and Tiersma (2005) [10], police interrogation refers to the words or acts used by the police to elicit a reaction from the suspect in order to learn the truth about a certain criminal case.

Law enforcement authorities frequently obtain confessions from criminal suspects in order to incriminate people accused of committed a crime. According to Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) [4], between 42 and 55 percent of suspects confess during interrogation. Confessions are often interpreted as substantial, and often unequivocal, proof of guilt by legal professionals and jurors (Kassin & Sukel, 1997) [5].

For social scientists and legal experts, police interrogation is an essential and intrinsically fascinating topic. The current interrogation technique, the confessions it frequently produces, and the crimes it occasionally solves, and the clashing interests and ideologies it involves pose plenty of critical questions. The importance of police questioning and confession-taking to society is significant (Kassin & Sukel, 1997) [5].

Police interrogation is, of course, frequently required in the investigation and resolution of crime, particularly felony crime. Because there may be no other evidence of guilt, some crimes, such as conspiracy and extortion, or even rape and child abuse, can often be solved only by a confession. Leo (2008) [6] defines police interrogations as a "necessary and valuable police activity in a democratic society as it is conducted fairly and legally".

Mason (2016) [8] states that police interrogations frequently follow a four-stage process. The formative stage, which specifies how evidence can be collected, is the initial stage. The second stage is known as the preliminary stage, and it is during this stage that the questioner formulates the questions for the suspects, for example, depending on what the person accusing the suspect has told the police. The third stage is referred to as the argumentation stage, and consists of the suspect-interrogator's questions and answers. This step consists of the actual questioning which includes the exchanges between the police and the suspects. The fourth stage is referred to as the closing stage. The police officers had finished gathering the information they were looking for at this point, as the term implies.

It is critical to establish the facts of the incident and the suspects' involvement during police interrogations. When attempting to do this, prefaced questions can make a significant difference. These prefaced inquiries aid in the development of the facts of the addressed topic (Johnson, 2002) [2]. These kinds of inquiries are also used to evaluate and summarize the suspect's past responses, allowing the next

set of questions to focus on specific aspects that could be relevant. Moreover, these inquiries can test the suspect and lead him/her to reformulate a previous response, allowing the police officer to dig deeper into the case (Johnson 2002) [2].

The Deixis of the Interrogation

Based on the model of analysis of Brown and Levinson deictic expressions and the theoretical account of the definition of the police interrogations, the researcher has made a small account to compromise between the pragmatic notion of deixis and the police interrogation focusing mainly on their use and interchangeability in the process of the interrogation supported with examples to clarify more.

Deixis refers to words and phrases, such as "this," "that," "here," and "there," which require contextual information to convey meaning. In the context of police interrogations, deixis can play a crucial role in shaping the interpretation and clarity of statements. Here are some key points on deixis in police interrogations:

Temporal Deixis: Refers to the use of time-related expressions like "now," "then," "soon," or specific dates and times. In interrogations, this can help establish timelines of events. For instance, a suspect might say, "I was there at 8 PM," which ties their statement to a specific time.

Spatial Deixis: Involves words indicating location, such as "here," "there," "this place," or "that area." During an interrogation, spatial deixis can clarify where events took place. For example, a witness might say, "I saw him standing over there," pointing to a specific location in a photograph or map.

Personal Deixis: Includes pronouns and possessives like "I," "you," "we," "my," "your," and "their." These are critical in identifying participants in the conversation and their relationships. For instance, "He told me to stay quiet" clearly assigns actions and instructions to specific individuals.

Discourse Deixis: Relates to parts of the conversation itself, using terms like "this," "that," "the following," or "the aforementioned." In interrogations, discourse deixis can reference previous statements or questions, such as, "As I mentioned earlier, I didn't see anything unusual."

Social Deixis: Refers to terms that indicate social relationships or status, such as titles ("Officer," "Sir"), formalities, and levels of politeness. These can reveal power dynamics and respect within the interrogation room. For example, a suspect might say, "Yes, Officer, I understand," indicating recognition of authority.

Example Analysis in an Interrogation

Interrogator: "Can you tell me where you were at 8 PM on the night of the incident?"

Suspect: "I was at home, right here in my living room, watching TV."

Temporal Deixis: "at 8 PM" – This establishes the time frame.

Spatial Deixis: "right here in my living room" – Specifies the exact location.

Personal Deixis: "I," "my" – Identifies the speaker and their relationship to the place.

Discourse Deixis: "the night of the incident" – Refers back to the previously discussed event.

Understanding these aspects of deixis can help legal professionals analyze statements for clarity, consistency, and potential deception.

4. The Analysis (real excerpts of interrogations extracted from well-known criminals' interrogations and confessions)

Excerpt 1

Background: Chanel Lewis was arrested and interrogated for the murder of Karina Vetrano, a jogger who was attacked, sexually assaulted, and killed in Howard Beach, Queens, in August 2016. His confession played a crucial role in the case.

Interrogation Transcript Excerpts

Interrogator: "Chanel, can you describe what happened on the day Karina Vetrano was murdered?"

Chanel Lewis: "I was mad, I saw red. I grabbed her as she was running past me. She fought back, clawing at my face, so I punched her about five times until she lost consciousness. I strangled her, and she fell into a puddle and drowned."

Interrogator: "Why did you attack her?"

Chanel Lewis: "I lost it. A guy moved into my house and the neighborhood. I was angry."

1. Brown and Levinson's (1983) [7] Deixis

- **Time Deixis:** The interaction contains references to past events ("on the day Karina Vetrano was murdered"), situating the conversation within a specific historical context.
- **Place Deixis:** There are no explicit geographical references, but the context suggests an interrogation room and the location of the crime scene.
- **Social Deixis:** The social roles are clearly defined, with the interrogator questioning Lewis, establishing a formal context for gathering information.
- **Discoursal Deixis:** The shift from describing actions to explaining motivations reflects changes in the discourse focus.

Excerpt 2

Background: Thomas Chan was involved in a high-profile case in Peterborough, Ontario, where he fatally stabbed his father, Dr. Andrew Chan, and assaulted his father's partner, Lynn Witteveen. The incident occurred on December 28, 2015, after Chan consumed magic mushrooms, leading to a psychotic episode.

Interrogation Details: During the police interrogation, Chan initially appeared disoriented and affected by the residual effects of the magic mushrooms he had consumed. The interrogation provided insights into his state of mind and the events leading up to the attack.

Interrogation Transcript Excerpts

Interrogator: "Thomas, can you tell us what happened that night?"

Thomas Chan: "I took some mushrooms with friends. I started meditating to enhance the effects. Things got out of control. I began hallucinating and thought I was God."

Interrogator: "Why did you attack your father and Lynn Witteveen?"

Thomas Chan: "I don't know. I saw them as devils. It was a vicious, unprovoked attack. I regret everything. It was stupid, stupid, stupid."

Interrogator: "Were you aware of what you were doing?"

Thomas Chan: "I lost touch with reality. The mushrooms made me hallucinate. I thought everyone was against me." Throughout the interrogation, Chan expressed remorse and confusion about his actions. He repeatedly blamed the influence of the mushrooms for his behavior, emphasizing

that it was an unprovoked and senseless attack.

1. Brown and Levinson's (1983) [7] Deixis

- **Time Deixis:** The interaction contains references to past events ("that night"), situating the conversation within a specific historical context.
- **Place Deixis:** There are no explicit geographical references, but the context suggests an interrogation room and the locations of the incident.
- **Social Deixis:** The social roles are clearly defined, with the interrogator questioning Chan, establishing a formal context for gathering information.
- **Discoursal Deixis:** The shift from describing the drug use to explaining the hallucinations and actions reflects changes in the discourse focus.

Excerpt 3

Background: Kimberly Kessler, known as the "Hairdresser Killer," was convicted of the murder of her co-worker, Joleen Cummings. The two worked together at Tangles Hair Salon in Fernandina Beach, Florida. Cummings was reported missing on Mother's Day in 2018 after failing to pick up her children. Her body was never found, but significant evidence pointed to Kessler's involvement.

Interrogation Details: During the police interrogation, Kessler provided inconsistent statements and exhibited erratic behavior. She initially denied any involvement but was confronted with substantial evidence, including surveillance footage and DNA.

Interrogation Transcript Excerpts

Interrogator: "Kimberly, can you explain your whereabouts on the day Joleen Cummings went missing?"

Kimberly Kessler: "I don't know where she is. I didn't do anything to her."

Interrogator: "We have footage of you driving her car and parking it near a Home Depot. Can you explain that?"

Kimberly Kessler: "I... I might have borrowed her car, but I didn't harm her. She's just gone."

Confession Highlights

- **Denial and Evasion:** Kessler repeatedly denied having anything to do with Cummings' disappearance, despite evidence to the contrary.
- **Erratic Behavior:** Her behavior during the interrogation was inconsistent, often deflecting questions and making nonsensical statements.
- **Surveillance Evidence:** Footage showed Kessler parking Cummings' car and later taking a taxi, which was crucial in linking her to the crime.

1. Brown and Levinson's (1983) [7] Deixis

- **Time Deixis:** The interaction contains references to specific past events ("the day Joleen Cummings went missing"), situating the conversation within a historical context.
- **Place Deixis:** There are references to specific locations ("near a Home Depot"), providing geographical context for the events.
- **Social Deixis:** The social roles are clearly defined, with the interrogator questioning Kessler, establishing a formal context for gathering information.
- **Discoursal Deixis:** The shift from denying involvement to explaining specific actions reflects changes in the

discourse focus.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of the interrogations above shows that in each excerpt the existence of the deictic expressions is of a great importance to have things very clarified to the interrogators and to the suspects at the same time, furthermore, these deictic expressions serve the judiciary evidences of the case when they are submitted to the judge, attorney general, and jury member inside the court room after the process of interrogation to be sentenced, simply because the court highly depends on the information provided by the police station reports.

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