

Deixis and Contextual Meaning in Mahesh Dattani's Plays: A Tool for Global Interpretation of Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

Indian drama embodies rich cultural knowledge systems that require contextual interpretation for meaningful global engagement. This paper examines the role of deixis in selected plays of Mahesh Dattani to demonstrate how meaning is constructed through person, time, place, social, and discourse references. Deictic expressions encode cultural nuances, interpersonal relationships, and socio-cultural realities. The study argues that understanding these linguistic markers is essential for a global interpretation of Indian drama. Without a grasp of the contextual meaning in a culturally specific setting, the deeper thematic resonance—such as the burden of patriarchy or communal tension—is lost. Large language models often struggle with the "pragmatic gap"—the space between literal meaning and contextual intent. By mapping deictic patterns, this research provides a framework for more nuanced AI processing of non-Western texts. Deixis serves as the connective tissue between the spoken word and the lived reality of Indian tradition, making it an indispensable tool for both literary critics and computational linguists seeking to decode the complexities of Indian Knowledge Systems.

This study adopts qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze patterns of deictic usage and their role in characterization and thematic development. It also highlights the relevance of deixis in Indian Knowledge Systems and challenges in AI-based textual interpretation.

Key words: Deixis, Indian Knowledge System, Pragmatic gap, Mahesh Dattani, global engagement.

Introduction

Language is inherently contextual, and meaning depends on situational usage. In pragmatics, deixis is central to understanding how context shapes meaning. Mahesh Dattani's plays reflect Indian socio-cultural realities and rely heavily on dialogue. This study explores deixis as a tool for interpreting cultural meaning and connects it with Indian Knowledge Systems and global dissemination.

Indian Knowledge system is rich in tradition, culture and values. It is derived from 'Vedas'. 'Veda' means 'Knowledge' or to 'know'. IKS has been classified into two major categories 'Shruti Parampara' (Listening) and 'Smriti, Purana, Itihasa Parampara.' Itihasas are Ramayana and Mahabharata, Smriti is Dharma Shastras and Puranas are eighteen.

IKS consists of 14 Vidyas— 4 Vedas, 6 Vedangas, 6 Ved Darshanas— Nyaya, Mimansa, Yoga, Vaisheshika and Vedanta Puranas and Dharmashastras (Smritis). IKS has been further divided

into Para Vidya and Aparā Vidya. The first is related to Soul and Brahman which is metaphysical and the latter is related to worldly subjects like agriculture, science, technology, management, administration, governance, diplomacy, war and defiance, architecture, town planning, social sciences performing arts, humanities and language. Without the knowledge of Para Vidya, one cannot understand Aparā Vidya and is considered as incomplete or inadequate IKS. The major purpose of human life and birth is 'atmano mokshartham jagat hitaya cha' can be possible only through the combination of both Para and Aparā Vidyas only.

IKS decolonize Indian minds cultured by Macaulay's educational system. It is only British colonizers who gave us knowledge, culture, civilization and connective global language like English. This makes us to spread our rich culture, tradition and heritage to the entire universe. IKS presents the purpose of human life, the responsibilities of an ideal person, family culture and relationships, emotional intellect and values. To understand IKS and to disseminate the knowledge of IKS to the world it is essential to know the basic nuances of pragmatic deixis and contextual meaning of discourses.

Literature Review

Stephen Levinson and George Yule have extensively discussed deixis in pragmatics. Pragmatics is a branch of Linguistics. It is the study of language use in context. It is from the 'functional' point of view of a language. Most of the pragmatic concepts are derived from the philosophy of language. Pragmatics aids in identifying hints, implicit purposes, assumptions, social attitudes which are effectively conveyed by the use of language in discourses

According to Charles Morris syntax deals with 'the relation of signs to one another'; semantics deals with 'the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable'; and pragmatics deals with 'the signs to interpreters.'

"Pragmatic theories ... explicate the reasoning of speakers and hearers in working out the correlation in a context of a sentence token with a proposition. In this respect, a pragmatic theory is part of performance. (Katz, J 977: 19)

Pragmatics refers to "the study of language use in context" (Huang, 2017: 1). Yule (1996: 3) straightforwardly states that pragmatics is "the study of speaker meaning".

In other words, pragmatics attempts to explain how speakers convey their meaning, and how listeners understand the speaker's meaning. Pragmatics is the study of the relation between the speech and the interpreters.

Critical discourse analysis emphasises the relationship between dramatic language and ideological structures. Hence drama is, where dominant ideologies, perspectives, power dynamics, individual and social identities are presented through discourse. Critical discourse analysis conceptualizes dramatic dialogue as social practice to display socio-cultural norms, authority and hierarchy. In brief it focusses on gender, power and ideology.

The contribution of Dattani to English Literature is noteworthy. He wrote many plays and some of his plays are translated and performed in regional Indian languages in different places. His plays are produced in all major Indian cities as well as cities abroad, including London, Leicester, New York, Washington DC, Sydney, Colombo, and Dubai. Selected plays have also been translated and performed in Hindi, Gujarati, Kannada, Odiya, Assamese, and Nepali, and appear on the syllabi of numerous Indian and foreign universities, including UW-Madison.

Dattani's film "Mango Souffle" (writer and director, 2002) was screened at several international festivals, including the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, and received the best motion picture award at the Barcelona Film Festival in 2003. Another film, "Morning Raga" (writer and director, 2005) had its international premiere at the Cairo Film Festival in December that year, and won the award for best artistic contribution. The script for this film has been archived by the Academy of Motion Pictures, USA. Dattani's recent plays include Where Did I Leave My Purdah (2012, adapted into a TV film, 2020), Gauhar (2016), Snapshots of a Fervid Sunrise (2017), Untouchable (2020), and Dance like a Goddess (2024).

Dattani's dramas are known for- Characterization and psychoanalytical aspects of subconscious motives behind human actions, and human perspectives against different problems they encounter in day-to-day life.

Concept of Deixis

The term Deixis is borrowed from Greek and originally means "pointing" or 'indicating' and has a prototypical or focal exemplars the use of demonstratives, first and second person pronouns, tense, specific time and place adverbs like now and here and a variety of other grammatical features tied directly to the circumstances of utterance. The relationship between language and context is reflected in the structures of languages themselves, is through the phenomenon of Deixis.

"The function of grammatical as well as lexical means relating a piece of language to its context in terms of its users, the time and place of its occurrence, and the people and objects it refers to" (Jiang, 2000: 11)

Deixis, as a linguistic tool refers to words or expressions that rely on the context of a discourse in between the speaker and the listener, and plays a fundamental role in communication. In both theory and practice, deixis serves as a 'point zero' for understanding and interpreting acts of communication.

"The name given to those aspects of language whose interpretation is relative to the occasion of utterance." Fillmore (1966), Harman (1989).

Deixis refers to context-dependent expressions including person, time, place, social, and discourse deixis. These are crucial in drama where meaning is conveyed through interaction.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach combining qualitative textual analysis analysis of deixic expressions in selected plays. Descriptive, Qualitative and Analytical Methods will be employed to study focusing on a pragmatic and stylistic analysis of deictic expressions used by Mahesh Dattani in his plays.

Descriptive, Qualitative and Analytical Methods will be employed to study focusing on a pragmatic and stylistic analysis of deictic expressions used by Mahesh Dattani in his selected plays such as 'Dance like a Man'. 'Tara' and 'Where There is a Will' as primary resources. The dramatic dialogues and expressions of these plays are examined through the lens of deixis.

A Qualitative approach to this research is because deictic markers like 'this', 'he' and 'that' often change their meaning depending on the speaker's hidden intentions or motives.

Analysis and Discussion

Person deixis dominates and reflects interpersonal dynamics. Time deixis structures narrative shifts. Place deixis situates cultural context. Social deixis reflects hierarchy, while discourse deixis ensures coherence.

1. Spatial Deixis and Environmental Navigation

In Indian Knowledge System space is neutral; it is often sacred, hierarchical, or gendered. Dattani uses spatial markers to define these boundaries.

The Inside/Outside Binary: Dattani's characters use "here" (the home/tradition) versus "there" (the outside world/modernity) in his well-noted play Dance Like a Man.

Context-Dependent Understanding: IKS often relies on a profound, localized knowledge of the land. Deictic expressions (spatial/place deixis) are used to indicate locations relative to the speaker, such as "here" (*proximal*) or "there" (*distal*).

For example, In *Dance Like a Man*, Act I the conversation between Lata and Viswas reflect spatial deictic expressions-

LATA: Well, everything *here* is at least forty or fifty years old.

VISWAS: *Over here.* (Moves towards the doorway) But in the living room, ever thing is quite new.

LATA: That wasn't *there before*. This was the living room. There was a huge lawn *in front*.

Moreover, In *Dance Like a Man*, the practice room is a "here" that represents a sanctuary for art but a "there" of shame for the patriarchal grandfather.

According to Indian Knowledge System the concept of **Sthala** (place/site), where the sanctity of a location dictates the behaviour of the inhabitants. Lata explaining Viswas about her grandfather that he was a social reformer. And he used to hold secret meetings in this very room during the British Raj. In Lata's words, 'here' refers to her grandfather's house where some of the equipment is around forty or fifty years old. She also expressed her respect and admiration for her grandfather. She also revealed that her father has always had a deep respect for her grandfather. That was the reason her father Jairaj never interested in selling that house. As most of the furniture in that room belongs to her grandfather's and her father refused to part with any one of it. This discourse clearly states that how Indian families respect elders and their attachment to their ancestral properties. While staying in that old house Jairaj felt the presence of his late father.

Locational Precision: In many Indigenous languages, deictic systems can be more complex than in English, distinguishing, for instance, in-sight vs. out-of-sight or specific elevations (up-river, down-river), which are essential for navigating, hunting, and sharing environmental information within an IKS framework.

2. Time Deixis and Cultural Timing

Event-Based Time: While Western time is often linear and standardized, time deixis in IKS often relies on situational or seasonal events (temporal deixis), using expressions that indicate time based on shared cultural experiences rather than clock time (e.g., "when the snow melts" or "now," referring to the current hunting season)

In a traditional joint Hindu family, the most trivial relationship is in between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. In the play *Where There's a Will*, Dattani rightly portrays such a relationship. The most important aspect in a joint family is that who runs the house. Here, the Deadman, Hasmukh controls his family through his 'will' made in the name of his mistress. The pleasant

surprise in the play is that the widow of the dead Hasmukh and his mistress understand each other and decide to live together. This is an idealistic solution to the intricate family relationship. Dattani ends the play with a note of reconciliation between the members of the family and Kiran, the mistress.

In Act II, Scene ii when Sonal addressing Kiran and her daughter-in-law Preeti says-

SONAL: You two have become good friends all of a sudden.

KIRAN: Yes. We all have to remain friends for another *twenty-one years*.

SONAL: Not for *twenty-one years*. *Forever!*

3. Person Deixis and Social Structure

Social Deixis: A subset of deixis, known as social deixis, encodes social relationships, hierarchies, and status, including honorifics, which are central to many Indigenous cultures.

Social deixis involves the honorifics and pronouns that indicate the status between speakers. This is where IKS-based interpretation is most potent.

The "We" vs. "They": Examine how the family unit defines itself against "others" (marginalized genders, different classes, or the West).

In *Where There's a Will*, the shifting use of pronouns after Hasmukh's death. How do the survivors use "him" (distal) to distance themselves from his ghost, or "us" (proximal) to redefine the family power structure?

The IKS concept of **Adhikara** (authority/eligibility) has been changed after the death of Hasmukh and now who has the "deictic right" to speak for the family?

Speaker-Centric Worldview: Person deixis (I, you, he, she) serves as a key connecting point between the "deictic center" (often the speaker) and the social group.

Relation between Deixis and Indigenous Knowledge system

Preservation of Context: Because deictics require shared knowledge to convey meaning, they function as carriers of traditional knowledge. The use of specific terms often requires knowledge of that specific landscape or social context.

Dynamic Interaction: Deixis allows for the dynamic "pointing" to physical or cultural items during oral storytelling, education, or daily life, bridging the gap between spoken language and the physical environment.

IKS and Global Context

Deixis encodes cultural knowledge and supports interpretation of Indian texts globally. It also highlights challenges for AI systems in understanding context-dependent expressions.

Linguistic Layer: the specific deictic tokens (e.g., "this room," "that day," "you people") differentiate time periods, personal identities and different locations.

Psychological Layer: the deictic expressions reveal about the character's internal state (e.g., isolation, longing, or dominance) of mind and human nature which is an innate feature of IKS. These interpret and findings through an Indian lens. show how the spatial "here" in a Dattani play mirrors the **Grihastha** (householder) stage of life and its inherent duties (*Dharma*).

This study while addressing global audience reveal about the rich Indian culture, tradition and values. For instance, the struggle for "space" in *Tara* is a universal metaphor for the struggle for identity.

Conclusion

Deixis is essential for meaning-making in Dattani's plays and contributes to global understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems.

In summary, deixis is essential for interpreting the "situational context" of IKS. It enables the encoding of geographical knowledge, social roles, and cultural history within the very structure of the language, acting as a "directional arrow" that points not just to objects, but to the collective understanding of the community

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