

Teaching indirect speech: deixis points the way

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The purpose of this article is to suggest an alternative approach to the teaching of indirect, or reported, speech. I propose deixis¹ as a means of clarifying the anomalies which lurk beneath the deceptively calm surface of reported speech. I shall concern myself with the reporting of statements (as opposed to the reporting of questions or commands). While the latter aspects have received thorough coverage in standard pedagogical grammars, scant attention has been paid to the deictic element of direct and indirect speech. I shall assess the problem from a grammatical and a semantic point of view before outlining what I have called 'The Deictic Circle', leading to an approach to direct and indirect speech in the EFL classroom which has communicative potential.

The problem

I was feeling rather proud of myself. I had prepared an introduction to indirect speech for my pre-First Certificate class with a nicely 'communicative' flavour. What I intended to do was to start the lesson by asking my learners a series of questions. I would write their answers on the board (sandwiched between inverted commas), after which I would demonstrate the transformations which needed to be made when converting from direct to indirect speech. What is more, I would be able to explain the backshifting of verbs, changes in adverbials etc. through 'live' communicative dialogue. I boldly entered the classroom and began the routine. 'Carlos, where do you come from?' Carlos, slightly bemused, replied: 'I come from Spain.' I wrote on the board: 'I come from Spain.' 'Do you have any brothers or sisters?' I wrote the reply on the board: 'I have two brothers but no sisters.' . . . 'When did you arrive in England?' . . . 'I arrived here last week.' When I had enough material, I gave my stock explanation of how these written answers could be converted from direct to indirect speech: 'The first thing in reported speech is to move our tenses back one place—'here' becomes 'there', 'this' becomes 'that', 'now' becomes 'then', et cetera . . . Now, what did Carlos say?' Ariane, the bright Italian girl, put up her hand: 'Carlos said that he came from Spain.' I was feeling rather pleased with myself. I wrote up the sentence and explained the use of 'that'. During the reporting of the second sentence, however, I began to wonder if I fully understood indirect speech: 'What's wrong with: 'Carlos said he *comes* from Spain?'—the sentence doesn't follow my guidelines but it sounds OK to me. However, it was the third sentence which really threw me. Reassured by her initial success,

Ariane stated confidently: 'Carlos said that *he had arrived there the previous week.*'! Confused, I went back to the drawing board.

What went wrong? Clearly, reporting speech is not an easy nut to crack. The previous example illustrates the problems any EFL teacher might face when the three variables of time, place, and person do not change consistently between the original and reported utterance. When we convert direct speech into indirect speech, we are, in effect, changing what Lyons (1977) has called 'the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the act of utterance'. Since many components of direct speech are deictic (in the sense that the speaker is at the 'zero-point' of his immediate situation of utterance in which reference to time, place, and person is dependent on the 'here and now'), it makes sense to investigate the semantics of deixis to discover whether any light can be shed on this pedagogical problem.

What the grammars say

Let us identify the problem before consulting pedagogical grammars to find out what they have to say. The notion of converting from direct to indirect speech has, in traditional grammar, been concerned with 'shifting' or 'back-shifting'. First and second person pronouns shift to third person; 'here' shifts to 'there', 'this' and 'these' shift to 'that' and 'those'; adverbials of time such as 'today', 'tomorrow', and 'yesterday' shift to 'that day', 'the next/following day', and 'the previous day/the day before' and so on. Verbs in the reported utterance are back-shifted one tense when the reporting verb is in the past. However, as I had the misfortune to discover, problems arise when we overgeneralize the shifting and back-shifting rules. 'I have three children' could be reported in the present simple *or* past simple. 'We painted the house' could be reported in the past perfect *or* past simple. Similarly, pronouns, locatives, demonstratives, and adverbials do not *always* change.

Pedagogical grammars provide a range of explanations for indirect speech changes, many of them either over-simplified or over-elaborate. For example, *Meanings into Words Teacher's Book* (Doff, Jones, and Mitchell, 1984: 65)² states: 'Changes are made because what is being reported is set in the past; the reporting verb (said/told me) is in the past, so what follows must change "one tense back".' They suggest the teacher should present indirect speech by building up the following table on the board:

DIRECT SPEECH		REPORTED SPEECH
is going to/will	→	was going to/would
Present	→	Past
Present Perfect	} →	Past Perfect
Past		
Past Perfect		

They continue 'It is sometimes unnecessary to change the tense in reported speech (e.g. when reporting statements that are generally true or still valid)—but it is never wrong to make the tense change.' If we followed their advice, we might end up with a sentence like: 'He said he had decided to study English because it had been a useful language'!

A similar table telling us to convert from past tense to past perfect is presented by Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 342).³ However, they are less simplistic than the previous example: they note that back-shift has the effect of ‘distancing’:

Frequently, there is a change from this/these to that/those . . . The change to the more ‘distant’ meaning (e.g. to 3rd person pronouns) does not always take place, in that the use of forms appropriate to the reporting situation must take precedence over those appropriate to the reported speech situation. (my italics)

The prescriptive tone of certain grammars is replaced by an equally unhelpful laissez-faire attitude in others. In Sylvia Chalker’s *Current English Grammar* (1984: 258),⁴ we are told that: ‘Changes are not made according to “rigid rules” unique to indirect speech.’ Chalker divides tense changes into three types: essential, optional, and no changes. Although her treatment of indirect speech appears to cover all eventualities, it does little to clarify matters for the hard-pressed language teacher. Take, for example, her explanation for past simple changes in the ‘optional’ section: (ibid.: 260)

Past simple and past progressive sometimes change to past perfect simple or progressive if the need is felt to state clearly that the action was ‘perfected’ before the original speaker spoke. But whereas we are always aware that present time and past time are different, the distinction between past and some earlier past is usually far less important—they are both in the past! This helps to explain why present perfect must be reported as past perfect (there is ‘perfection’ and a change from present to past time) . . . but past simple often remains unchanged, in writing as in speech, though past perfect is possible.

Clearly, (or perhaps not so clearly!), there is a need to solve the problem of over-simplification on the one hand, and over-elaboration on the other.

How semantics can help

Any ‘communicative’ grammar needs to take account of the interdependence of form, meaning, and use. Nevertheless, it would appear that structural form is still the dominant paradigm. When grammatical descriptions fail to provide adequate descriptions of use (as in the indirect speech acts already referred to), there is clearly a need to step back to discover what is wrong. Semantics, as the pivotal member of the tripartite form–meaning–use relationship, can act as an intermediary. By superimposing a semantic account of deixis on a grammatical account of indirect speech, we might be able to tie up a few loose ends.

Deixis points the way

Deixis is defined by Fillmore (1966: 220) as ‘The name given to those aspects of language whose interpretation is relative to the occasion of utterance’. Any words or phrases whose referents depend on the immediate situation of utterance, in terms of participants (speaker/hearer), place, and time, are said to be deictic. The predominance of deixis in language is evidence of the primacy of spoken face-to-face interaction: it goes back to the very essence of language.

indeed an operation—deictic items are sensitive creatures: they need to be treated with great care!

At the heart of the situation-of-utterance is the egocentricity of the speaker. Other participants, temporal context, and spatial context are perceived in relation to himself. ‘I am here now’ is at the ‘zero-point’, from which deictic co-ordinates radiate. As the roles between speaker and hearer change, so, too, does the deictic system. The overriding criterion for measuring deixis is the proximity or remoteness of referents to the speaker. Fillmore (1966) states that English has two basic categories: proximal—near the speaker at the time of speaking, (i.e. ‘here’ and ‘this’) and distal—away from the speaker at the time of speaking, (i.e. ‘there’ and ‘that’). He describes a third category: medial, which exists in other languages such as Spanish and Japanese. This three-way distinction was originally made by Brugman (1904), who suggested the following links:

	Person deixis		Place deixis
<i>ich-deixis</i> :	Speaker	(1st person)	Proximal
<i>du-deixis</i> :	Hearer	(2nd person)	Medial
<i>jener-deixis</i> :	Non-participant	(3rd person)	Distal

In theory, Lyon’s use of a single criterion in his proximal/non-proximal distinction appears more realistic than Fillmore’s, because it reduces the temptation to dichotomize. Deixis is not an ‘either-or’, but a ‘more-or-less’ phenomenon: it makes sense to portray the deictic co-ordinates of person, place, and time as continua, showing their *degree* of proximity in relation to the speaker at the time of utterance. For this reason, it seems more appropriate—though less conventional—to follow Brugman’s *three-way* distinction of proximal, medial, and distal. By placing deictic items in one of three categories, we come closer to recognizing the relative nature of deixis, whilst, at the same time, providing opportunities for pedagogical applications. The relegation of ‘distal’ items (e.g. ‘this’ and ‘that’) to the ‘medial’ category allows the inclusion of what are normally considered to be non-deictic items (e.g. ‘the’, ‘it’, ‘them’) in the outer circle of Figure 1. However, it seems important to include these to demonstrate how they are related to deictic items, as points on a continuum. The deictic circle is primarily a practical device: as I shall explain in the remaining pages, it can be useful for teachers, in helping to clarify some of the problems outlined earlier, and for advanced learners, in

Table 1:
Person deixis
(see Figure 1)

	Proximal	Medial	Distal
<i>Personal pronouns:</i>	I Me Myself We Us Ourselves	You You Yourself	He Him Himself She Her Herself It It Itself They Them Themselves
<i>Possessives:</i>	My Mine Our Ours	Your Yours	His His Her Hers Its Its Their Theirs

helping them to conceptualize the role of deictic co-ordinates in direct and indirect speech.

First and second person pronouns are intimately connected with direct speech: as the role of speaker alternates with that of hearer, there is constant switching from 'I' to 'You' (see Table 1). The pronoun 'We' may include the speaker and hearer or to the speaker and other persons: in either case, it is a proximal deictic item. Since they normally refer to entities outside the situation of utterance, third person pronouns are distal and therefore more appropriate to indirect speech. Normally, of course, the person who reports the utterance is different from the original speaker, in which case third person pronouns will replace first or second person pronouns. However, it is important to recognize the possibility that speakers (or listeners) may remain the same. For example, if I said to Ahmed: 'You've passed your exam', Ahmed could report this to me later as: 'You told me I'd passed my exam', and to other students in the class as: 'He told me I'd passed my exam.'

Conventionally, textbooks and grammars state that, in reported speech, the demonstratives 'this' and 'these' are converted to 'that' and 'those', and the locative 'here' becomes 'there' (see Table 2). Because they are

Table 2:
Spatial deixis
(see Figure 1)

	Proximal	Medial	Distal
Demonstratives:	This These	That Those	The It Them
Locatives:	Here	There	At that place

still weakly deictic—in the sense that their interpretation often depends on the situation of utterance—our approach places 'that', 'those', and 'there' in a 'medial' category. A third 'distal' category would demonstrate how, by placing these items on the other end of the continuum, they can be 'neutralized.' This re-definition has dramatic implications for the teaching of indirect speech. Traditionally, the contrast between 'this' and 'that' in the utterance: 'This exercise is far more difficult than that' would be lost if we reported both demonstratives as 'that'! An alternative approach would distinguish between 'medial' categories (entities within the situation of utterance even when distant from the speaker), and 'distal' categories which would refer to outside entities. This would explain why this/that/these/those, when used as pronouns, often change to 'it' or 'them'; or, when used as adjectives, to 'the'. For example, 'I can't stand this any longer' would be converted to: 'He said he couldn't stand *it* (not 'that') any longer.' 'I bought this camera in Japan' would become: 'He said that he had bought *the* (not 'that') camera in Japan.' I have always experienced great difficulty in explaining why these changes took place. By making the essential link between demonstratives and the definite article, the deictic circle can help us to put things into perspective.

The conversion of time adverbials and tenses to indirect speech is potentially the biggest headache for the EFL learner and teacher (see Table 3). Changes in adverbials are well-documented and I do not intend to go into details here (see, for example, Thomson and Martinet, 1960: 181). The

Table 3:
Temporal deixis
(see Figure 1)

	Proximal	Medial	Distal
<i>Time</i>	Now	Then	At that time
<i>adverbials:</i>	Today	Yesterday	The day before
	This week	Last week	The previous week
<i>Tense:</i>	Present	Past	Past perfect

correspondence between adverbials such as ‘this week’/‘that week’ etc. holds true only when there is a wide separation in time between direct and reported speech (e.g. ‘Tomorrow’ will become ‘today’ if it is reported the following day). It is worth noting that the deictic circle places ‘then’ in a medial category, permitting it to be back-shifted to ‘at that time’ (e.g. ‘I was in Rome then’ would become ‘He said he was in Rome at that time’).

The pair ‘now/then’ differentiate between the time of utterance and a time remote from the time of utterance, (‘then’ can refer to a past *or* future time!) The English tense system makes a similar distinction, and is therefore deictic. Lyons (1977: 677) states: ‘Traditional discussions of the grammatical category of tense do not give sufficient emphasis to the fact that it is a deictic category.’ The most basic distinction in the tense system is the distinction between past and non-past. Futurity is not a temporal concept: it involves potential, rather than actual happenings and is thus realized by choices within the system of modality. Whilst tense is deictic, modality and aspect are not; when converting from direct to indirect speech, changes will be limited to *tenses* (e.g. ‘will’ to ‘would’ is primarily a change from non-past to past, not a change in modality).

The past-perfect is traditionally labelled as ‘aspect’ rather than ‘tense’, and, as a result, is not seen as deictic. Why, therefore, do pedagogical grammars state that simple past (tense) in direct speech should convert to past perfect (aspect) in indirect speech?

The semantic analysis of tense appears to resolve this contradiction by proposing secondary tense-distinctions which derive from deictic primary tense-distinctions. The recognition of a blurred division between secondary tense and aspect helps to explain the role of the past-perfect in indirect speech, and to justify its position in the ‘distal’ section of the deictic circle. A three-way distinction between present (or non-past), past, and past perfect *tenses* (viewed as proximal, medial, and distal points on a deictic continuum), helps to clarify certain ambiguities which I referred to earlier. Take the following examples:

1 ‘I have painted the house.’

2 ‘I painted the house.’

Traditionally, our grammar book would instruct us to report both sentences simply as: ‘He said he had painted the house.’

A three-way view of tense

A three-way view of tense, however, would permit several choices, and would be explanatory:

1a. *Proximal:* present tense has been retained.

‘He said he has painted the house.’

= Proximate in time: '... and he's just finished.'

= Proximate in truth value: '... and I believe him.'

1b. Medial: present tense 'have' has been converted to past tense 'had'.

'He said he had painted the house.'

= Moderately distant in time: '... last month.'

= Moderate truth value: '... and he made quite a good job of it.'

1c. Distal: interpreted as past perfect: 'had finished.'

'He said he had painted the house.'

= Distant in time '... 'ten years ago.'

= Distant in truth value: '... but he forgot to do the back wall.'

In sentence 2, we could choose to retain the past tense:

2b. Medial: 'He said he painted the house.'

= (1b) interpretation.

Or we could convert to the past perfect:

2c. Distal: 'He said he had painted the house.'

= (1c) interpretation.

It may appear strange to suggest that 1b is equivalent in interpretation to 2b when, on the face of it, we are dealing with two different tenses: 'had painted'/'painted'. However, from a semantic perspective, we could view the original utterance 'has painted' in terms of the present tense if we focus on the auxiliary 'has'. Its conversion to 'had painted' is therefore interpreted as a shift to the medial, simple past category 'had', in line with 'painted' in sentence 2b.

Applications of the deictic circle

How can the deictic circle be applied? It could certainly unravel some of those knots and give comfort to the poor, confused EFL teacher we saw at the beginning! For the EFL student, it can graphically depict (unlike those wordy grammars) the three major variables of time, person, and place to show the relationship between deictic items as they move away from the centre. When teaching direct–indirect speech, learners could be provided with the deictic circle to draw their attention to how changes in one, two, or three variables result in subtle variations when converting from direct to indirect speech.

As an explanatory device, the deictic circle offers a communicative approach to indirect speech. The proximal, medial, and distal categories illustrate the 'distancing' choices available to the 'reporter' of direct speech, in terms of both physical and psychological reality. For example, the choice between proximal and medial tense categories in 'He said he has three children' and 'He said he had three children' is largely a question of psychological distancing. Learners could be sensitized to the fact that indirect speech involves the subjective interpretation by the 'reporter', in which choices of meaning are at his disposal. In Austin's terms, we are dealing with 'perlocutionary acts', since the reporting of utterances includes what is 'effected' by virtue of implied meaning. As we have seen, even when neutral reporting verbs such as 'said' and 'told' are used, the 'reporter' often places his own interpretation on their physical or psychological reality.

Conclusion In this article, I have suggested that the deictic circle is both theoretically valid and pedagogically practical. Whilst there is insufficient space to enter into a discussion of its full potential, I can only briefly indicate further avenues which could be explored. Students could be encouraged to convert a single direct utterance into a range of indirect utterances, depending on who is doing the reporting, where and when it is being reported. It might be possible to construct exercises where (advanced) students were asked to interpret the differences in meaning between various indirect sentences, using the deictic circle as a 'measure'. Finally, tenses—the most complex area of indirect speech—could be opened up for communicative interpretation if they are analysed from a semantic, rather than a grammatical point of view. A semantic perspective of tense (viewing present, past, and past perfect as points on a deictic continuum), offers a refreshing and imaginative alternative to the teaching of indirect speech in the EFL classroom.

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Notes

- 1 'Deixis' is the term given to expressions which take some or all of their referential meaning from the immediate situation of utterance in which they are used.
- 2 The extract from *Meanings into Words Teacher's Book* (A. Doff, C. Jones, and K. Mitchell) is reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.
- 3 The extract from *A University Grammar of English* (R. Quirk and S. Greenbaum) is reprinted with permission from Longman Group UK and the authors.
- 4 The extract from *Current English Grammar* (S. Chalker) is reprinted with permission from Macmillan.

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