

## The Meaning of Deixis in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: A Pragmatic Study

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### Abstract:

Sometimes, we face difficulty in understanding what the speaker says, about whom, when, and where. Here, context is important to understand the speaker's meaning. Deixis is a technical term for one of the most basic things we do with utterances. Deixis is a form of referring that is tied to the speaker's context. This study involves two parts: a theoretical background and a practical part. The theoretical background consists of a number of sections illustrating the concept of deixis and the Theatre of the Absurd. The practical part involves the analysis of the meaning of deictic expressions found in an absurdist work which is Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and a discussion of the data analysis.

**Keywords: Key words:** Deixis, Theatre of the Absurd, Harold Pinter.

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**معنى الإشارات السياقية في المسرحية هارولد بنتر "حفلة عيد الميلاد"**  
**دراسة تداولية\***

**الباحث علي صكبان سعدون**

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**الملخص:-**

تتقصى هذه الدراسة أهمية الإشارات السياقية في استكمال معنى الكلام في المسرح العبثي وتطبيق نموذج ستيفن ليفنسون للإشارات السياقية. تقع الدراسة في جزئين: جزء نظري وجزء عملي. يبين الجزء النظري مفهوم الإشارات السياقية ومسرح العبث. يتضمن الجزء العملي تحليل معنى الإشارات السياقية في مسرح العبث والموجودة في مسرحية هارولد بنتر "حفلة عيد الميلاد" ومناقشة بيانات الدراسة متبوعة بأهم الاستنتاجات التي توصلت لها الدراسة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الإشارات السياقية، مسرح العبث، هارولد بنتر.

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### Theoretical Background

This part consists of an introduction to pragmatics and deixis. It also presents the adopted model of analysis. Next, it reviews the significance of deixis in drama. Finally, this part also tracks the definition and history of The Theatre of the Absurd (henceforth AT).

#### Defining Pragmatics

Pragmatics is one of the fields of linguistics that examines how language is used in interaction. The Pragmatic turn is said to be dated back to the 1970s which can be described as a shift to fill the vacuum created by the paradigms of syntax and semantics to the paradigm of language user (Mey, 2001: 4).

Yule (1996: 3) defines pragmatics as *“the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader).”* In Huang’s words (2007: 3), pragmatics is the systematic study of meaning depending on the use of language. Leech (1983: 1) believes that pragmatics is *“how language is used in communication.”* For Lyons (1981: 171), pragmatics is *“the study of actual utterances; the study of use rather than meaning; the study of that part of meaning which is not purely truth-conditional.”*

#### The Concept of Deixis

The term **deixis** is derived from the classical Greek word *‘deiktikos’* (deictic). It has been called by several scholars and linguists by different names, all of which share the same meaning, such as *to show* or *to point out* (Allott, 2010: 54); *‘pointing’* (Yule, 2020: 152); *‘indicating’* (Levinson, 1983: 54).

Levinson (1983: 54) points out that *“the single most obvious way in which the relationship between language and context is reflected in the structures of languages themselves, is through the phenomenon of **deixis**.”* Yule (1996: 9) defines deixis as a technical term for one of the most fundamental things we do with utterances. According to Fillmore (1982) as cited in Senft (2014: 43), deixis involves certain items and categories of lexicon and grammar that are controlled by certain details of the interactional situation in which the utterances are uttered. According to Cummings (2010: 101), **deixis** is a direct linguistic direction. It concerns the use of particular linguistic forms or expressions to locate entities in spatial, temporal, social and discourse context.

Yule (1996: 9) states that **deictic expressions**, also called **indexicals**, are among the first forms to be uttered by very young

children and can be used to indicate people, location and time of an utterance. Behrens and Parker (2010: 144) mentions that deixis requires real-world information. Words such as *here* and *there*, *this* or *that*, *now* or *then*, *yesterday*, *today* or *tomorrow*, as well as pronouns such as *me*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *him*. A sentence like (1) is impossible to interpret without knowing, first, who uttered it, at which time, and in which place.

(1) *I have to deliver it by **tomorrow** and then waiting for **her here**.*

There are two usages of deictic expressions: **gestural** and **symbolic**. Levinson (1983: 65) and Huang (2007: 134) state that **gestural** use of deixis can be appropriately interpreted only by a direct, moment by moment monitoring of some physical aspects – pointing, making eye contact, etc. – of the speech situation. The **symbolic** use of deixis can be interpreted by knowing the major spatio-temporal parameter of the speech situation.

### **Levinson's (1983) Model of Deixis**

This section is dedicated to explaining the phenomenon of deixis in terms of Stephen C. Levinson's (1983) Model. In his book *Pragmatics*, he proposes five types of deixis, namely: **person deixis**, **time deixis**, **place deixis**, **discourse deixis** and **social deixis**.

#### **1. Person Deixis**

**Person deixis** is reflected directly in the grammatical categories of person. The basic grammatical distinctions are the categories of first, second and third person. The first and second person refer to interlocutors of the speech event of the speaker and addressee. It is important to note that the third person is completely unlike the first or second person, in that it does not correspond to any particular participant-role in the speech event. So, the personal deictic expressions are most obviously manifested by using the pronominal systems, resulting the three-way distinction (Levinson, 1983: 68-69).

Verschueren (1999: 17-20) mentions that first-person pronouns like (*I*, *mine*, *my...*), second-person pronouns such as (*you*, *your*, *yours*), and third person pronouns like (*he*, *she*, *it...*) are all regarded as **personal deixis**. For example:

(2) *I might have some turnips.*

(3) *you are a great man.*

(4) *I'm going to call **him**.*

(The Birthday Party, Act I)

According to Huang (2007: 143), **person deixis** is marked by **vocatives**. **Vocatives** are NPs that are not syntactically or semantically incorporated as the arguments of a predicate. Rather, they are prosodically separated from the body of a sentence that may accompany them. **Vocatives** can be expressed by proper names, kinship terms and titles. **Vocatives**, in general, are divided into two types: **calls** or **summonses**, as in (5); and **addresses**, as in (6):

(5) *Hey you, you just scratched my car with your frisbee.*  
(Levinson, 1983: 71)

(6) *Is that you, Petey?* (The Birthday Party, Act I)

## 2. Time Deixis

Levinson (1983: 73) points out that **time deixis** makes ultimate reference to participant-role. Therefore, adverbs of time like *now*, for example, can be glossed to describe the moment at which the speaker is producing the utterance containing *now*. It is important to make a distinction between the **coding time (CT)** as the moment of production and **receiving time (RT)** as the moment of reception. **Time deictic expressions** seem to be the natural and prominent cycles of day and night, months, seasons and years, including temporal adverbs like (*now, then, today, tomorrow, yesterday...*).

Grenoble (1998: 52) and Verschueren (1999: 18) suggest that **time deixis** is relative to the time of speech event. They can be expressed via using time adverbials such as (*now, soon, then, recently ...*) and complex time adverbials like (*next day, last Wednesday, this night...*). For example:

(7) *Pull the trigger now!* (Levinson, 1983: 74)

(8) *I was in London then.*

(9) *Tomorrow is a new day.*

According to Levinson (1983: 75), time can be traced through **tenses** that are relevant to the timings of an utterance. **Past tense** is used to indicate preceding events, **present tense** to indicate events in the current point of time, and **future** to indicate events subsequent to the time of the utterance. For example

(10) *He went to the cinema yesterday.*

(11) *He is playing very well on the piano.*

(12) *I'll visit you next week.*

Finally, Levinson (1983:79) states that **temporal deixis** is relevant to other deictic elements. **Greetings**, for example, are usually time-restricted. For example:

(13) *Good morning.*

### 3. Place Deixis

Levinson (1983: 79) and LoCastro (2012: 25) confirm that **place deixis** concerns the specification of locations relative to anchorage points in a speech event. This type of deixis is expressed notably by the use of adverbs of place (*here, there, anywhere*), motion verbs (*come, go*) and demonstratives (*this, that, these* and *those*). For example:

(14) *So you're down here on holiday?* (The Birthday Party, Act II)

(15) *This is where I used to live.*

(16) *He neither comes nor goes.*

Meyer (2009: 186) concludes that the adverbs *here* and *there* and the demonstratives *this* and *that* are often thought of as simple contrasts. While *here* and *this* mean **proximal** to the speaker's location, *there* and *that* mean **distal** from the speaker's location as in the following example:

(17) *Bring that here and take this there.*

### 4. Discourse Deixis

According to Decker (2001: 55-56), **discourse deixis** concerns the use of expressions within some utterance to designate some portion of the discourse that involves that utterance (including the utterance itself). Verschueren (1999: 21) mentions that **discourse deixis** is concerned with the use of linguistic expressions within some utterance to refer to current, earlier or following discourse in the same spoken or written discourse. Expressions like (*in conclusion, to the contrary, first, finally, then ...*).

(18) *In this chapter, we will discuss the theory of politeness.*

(19) *First, we will go through the woods.*

Huang (2007: 173) indicates that some lexical terms that are claimed to trigger a conventional implicature such as (*anyway, but, even, however, moreover, so, well...*) can also take a discourse deictic function when they occur initially in an utterance as in the following examples:

(20) *After all, it is always morning somewhere in the earth.*

(21) *But this is awful.*

Levinson (1983: 85) stresses that since discourse unfolds in time, it seems natural that **temporal-deictic** expressions such as (*last week,*

*next Thursday...*) can be used to denote portions of the discourse. Similar to that, we also have **spatial-deictic** words that can be used as discourse deixis such as (*this* and *that*). While the former is used to express a forthcoming portion as in (22), the latter is used to refer to a preceding portion as in (23):

(22) *I bet you haven't read **this** story.*

(23) ***That** was the funniest story I've ever heard.*

### 5. Social Deixis

Levinson (1983: 89) restricts **social deixis** to those aspects of language structure that encode the social identities of participants or the social relation between those participants, or between one of them and other persons or entities referred to.

Following Huang (2007: 169-170), **social deixis** can be expressed by different types of names such as first name (*James*), last name (*Bond*), and a combination of both such as (*James Bond*). They can also be described by the use of kinship terms (*uncle, cousin*), titles borrowed from names of occupations (*doctor*), ranks in specific social/professional groups (*colonel, lieutenant*), and other sources (*Sir, Mr., Mrs., miss, madam*). In addition, it can be expressed by the use of address forms which include a title and the last name such as (*Mr. Lakoff, Dr. Cram, Lady Huxley*). Below are some examples of **social deixis**:

(24) *Are you **Mr. John**, **sir**?*

(25) *Is everything alright, **doctor**?*

Moreover, according to Green (1992: 25), **social deixis** can be seen through the use of certain old English terms with archaic second person pronouns such as (*thee, thy, thou...*) as in the following example:

(26) ***Thy** voice was at sweet tremble in my ear. (John Keats, The Eve of St Agnes, Part 35, Line 308)*

### The Theatre of the Absurd

This section explicates the role of deixis in drama. Furthermore, it presents the definition and history of **AT**.

### Deixis and Drama

There are some aspects of language that their role in communication must be acknowledged. Typically, the study of **deixis** is definitely one of these aspects. According to Lyons (1995: 275), "**deixis** is introduced to handle the orientational features of language which are relative to the time and place of utterance," i.e. "it occurs in a certain spatio-temporal situation." Communication can be delivered through

literary works such as drama, novel, poetry and/or short story in which the author/writer/poet communicates with his readers through the use of language. Typically, drama is the manifestation of an active attitude of the author to address matters of human. Thus, summarising Lyons, an expression can be regarded as **deixis** if its reference is indicating someone or entities, moving or changing, depending on the ‘**I, here, now**’ axis, i.e. the speaker, the place and the time of the utterance.

Elam (1980: 85) mentions that **deixis** allows the dialogue to create an interpersonal dialectic within the time and location of discourse. We have references by the speakers to themselves as speakers, to their interlocutors as listener-addressees, and to the spatio-temporal coordinates of the utterance itself by means of certain **deictic expressions** such as demonstrative pronouns and adverbials of time and place.

Elam (1980: 87) reports that **dramatic discourse** is invariably designated by a performability, and above all by a potential gesturality, which the language of narrative does not generally possess since its context is described rather than pragmatically pointed to. He quotes Francesco Antinucci in that **deixis** “*creates the possibility of exchanging information operating to the sensori-motor rather than the symbolic level.*” What this means is that it contains the speaker’s body directly in the speech event. Thus, the language of drama calls for the intervention of the actor’s body in the completion of its meaning, or as J. L. Styan (1971) puts it, the words as spoken are definitely tied to the movements of the actors who speak them. For example, the following extract between **Meg** and **Stanley** about the anniversary of his birthday shows that body movement of the actor/actress is significant through the use of deictic expressions that help the audience understand the meaning clearly:

**Meg:** *It's your birthday, Stan. I was going to keep it a secret until tonight.*

**Stanley:** *No.*

**Meg:** *It is. I've brought you a present. (She goes to the sideboard, picks up the parcel, and places it on the table in front of him.) Here. Go on. Open it.*

**Stanley:** *What is this?*

**Meg:** *It is your present. (P. 25)*



Meg's movement towards that sideboard gives more detail to the audience to conceptualise the meaning of (*here*) appropriately through the context and via the involvement of the body movement of the actor.

### **Definition and Origin of the Theatre of the Absurd**

Esslin (1961: xix) states that '**Absurd**' is a term that was originally used to portray the violation of the rules of logic. He describes **AT** as: "*Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.*"

The term '**Absurd**' is somehow a strange word to many people even today. The question as to what is absurd is as significant and fascinating as the question who Godot with reference to Samuel Beckett's play of that name is (Tallur, 2005: 20). According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, as cited in Tallur (2005: 20), the word **absurd** means: (1) wildly unreasonable or illogical idea, suggestion, etc., (2) a person who is ridiculous in manner, and (3) a thing that is incongruous or ludicrous. In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Baldick (2001: 1) writes that the term '**Absurd**' is "*often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value.*"

Baldick (2001: 1) affirms that the terms '**The Theatre of the Absurd**' was first introduced by the critic Martin Esslin in 1961 to refer to a group of dramatists of the 1950s (led by Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco) whose works arouse the absurd by neglecting logical form, character, and dialogue together with realistic illusion. Marinaro (2015) mentions that critics believe that **AT** flourished as a movement from the doubts and fears surrounding WWII and what many people saw as the degeneration of traditional moral and political values.

Brooks (1966: 8) lists a number of the artistic features of **AT**. **First**, the public is confronted with contradictions in both speech and actions which oppose any logical development. **Second**, language is destroyed as a means of communication. Words cannot convey the essence of human existence. **Third**, time and place of actions are ever clearly expressed. **Four**, the characters lack individuality and personality and are demonstrated as absolutes or types making identification with them impossible. **Five**, **AT** is assertive in which no crime or sin is shielded from view. **Finally**, the audience is alienated, not filled with pity and fear, and a multiple meaning is the desired effect.

### The Practical Part

This part presents an introduction to Pinter's *The Birthday Party*. It also shows the analysis and discussion of the result of the study. Finally, this part lists the final concluding remarks.

#### A Brief Summary of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*

Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* is regarded as one of the most significant plays ever written in the entire history of AT. The play depicts the existential philosophy that is combined with particular dramatic elements to create a style that could not be logically explained.

According to Tallur, (2005: 121) and Bennet (2011: 53), Harold Pinter's *The Birthday party* was written in 1957. The play was first produced at Art Theatre, Cambridge in 1964. It was then produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre and was directed by Pinter himself. The play depicts a tragedy arising out of insecurity. It takes place in perhaps Pinter's favourite setting, "*the living-room of a house in a seaside town.*"

#### Data Analysis

Following Levinson's (1983) model of deixis, this section displays the frequency, percentage, and analysis of deictic expressions for each type of deixis found in the play.

##### 1. Person Deixis

There are (2403, 48.27%) person deictic expressions in the play. This category mainly operates through the use of first, second and third person pronouns as well as vocatives. The category of first-person pronouns appears (841, 34.99%), the category of second-person pronouns appears (756, 31.46%) and the category of third person pronouns appears (722, 30.04%). The category of vocatives appears (84, 3.49%) in the play. Next are some prominent examples taken from the text:

(27) **Stanley:** *I'm afraid you and your friend will have to find other accommodation.* (Act II, p. 32)

(28) **Meg:** *You shouldn't say that word to a married woman.* (Act I, p. 9)

(29) **Meg:** *I have got *it* made inside.* (Act I, p. 7)

The subject pronoun *I* in (27) has been used deictically which refers to the speaker Stanley. After having met Goldberg and McCann, he acts as if he is the manager of the boardinghouse and tells the two men that they should leave the house and look for another one to spend their

staying. In (28), Stanley insults Meg for being a bad wife. He addresses the housewife as succulent. She insists that he should not tell a word like that to a married woman. The subject pronoun *you* in (28) refers to Stanley. In sentence (29), Petey has finished his breakfast, and now he wants to go off for his work. Meg tells him that he has not drunk his tea. Meg says that the tea is ready inside the kitchen. Thus, the object pronoun *it* pertains the tea.

## 2. Time Deixis

Time deixis has been used considerably in the play. There are (1703, 34.21%) time deictic expressions. This type of deixis operates by using tense and adverbs of time. Tense category appears (1587, 93.18%). The category of time adverbials appears (166, 6.81%). A number of prominent examples are mentioned below:

(30) **Meg:** *It wasn't there yesterday.* (Act III, p. 55)

(31) **Goldberg:** *If we hadn't come today, we'd have come tomorrow.* (TBP, Act I, p. 21)

(32) **Meg:** *I'm expecting visitors.* (Act I, p. 3)

(33) **Stanley:** *Why did you choose this house?* (Act II, p. 29)

(34) **Goldberg:** *We'll give him a party.* (Act I, p. 21)

*Yesterday* in (30), *today* and *tomorrow* in (31) pre-empted the calendrical or absolute ways of referring to the relevant days. *Yesterday* indicates the diurnal span preceding today. *Today* glosses as the diurnal span including the coding time and *Tomorrow* refers to the diurnal span following day. Sentence (32) indicates present tense. In contrast, sentence (33) marks past tense. Sentence (34) refers to future time which can be noticed easily by the use of the auxiliary verb *will* and the adverb of time *tomorrow*.

## 3. Place Deixis

Place deixis has occurred (355, 7.13%) in the text. This type of deixis operates by using motion verbs, adverbs of place, demonstratives and particles. The category of motion verbs appears (162, 45.63%), the category of adverbs of place appears (107, 30.14%), the category of demonstratives appears (72, 20.28%) and the category of particles appears (14, 3.94%). Some prominent examples are given below:

(34) **McCann:** *Let's get it over and go.* (Act III, p. 61)

(35) **Petey:** *I've only just come in.* (Act I, p. 2)

(36) **Meg:** *You won't get a better breakfast there than here.* (Act I, p. 7)

(37) **Meg:** *This house is on the list.* (Act I, p. 8)

(38) **Stanley:** *who gave you the right to take away my tea?*  
(Act I, p: 11)

The verb *go* in (34) and *come* in (35) signify a location that is near and away (**proximal** and **distal**) from the speaker or addressee. *Go* indicates McCann's urgent need to get their assigned mission completed and leave this chaotic boardinghouse. *Come* marks Petey's arrival as he steps inside the house. The adverb of place *here* in (36) refers to a close location from the speaker or addressee whereas *there* refers to a location that is far from the speaker or addressee. After Stanley's speech about getting a new place in the near hotels, Meg tells him that he will not find a better service in those hotels than the service he gets here in this boardinghouse. *This* in (37) refers to a referent that is proximal to the speaker or addressee. *This* pertains the boardinghouse as it is claimed by Meg to be one of the finest in the area. The particle *away* in (38) marks the distal meaning as Stanley insults Meg for taking his cup of tea from the table to the kitchen.

#### 4. Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis has appeared (235, 4.72%). Discourse deixis shows the relationship between one speech event and a portion of discourse. According to Verschueren (1999: 21), discourse deixis refers to earlier, simultaneous or following discourse. Prominent examples are:

(39) **Stanley:** *Anyway, this house is not your cup of tea.* (Act II, p. 34)

(40) **Lulu:** *So you're not coming out for a walk?* (Act I, p. 17)

(41) **Goldberg:** *Besides, I was a very busy man.* (Act I, p. 18)

The discourse marker *anyway* functions as a continuation marker to mark a result from the preceding speech, making boundaries to force Goldberg and McCann leave the house "*without any more fuss.*" The discourse marker *so* introduces a result or decision which looks back to the preceding discourse, Stanley's rejection to go out. *Besides* in (96) is used to introduce information that supports what has been mentioned before, to give advice in this sentence. McCann feels this is not the right house. Settling in an armchair, Goldberg gives him advice to relieve his nerve.

#### 5. Social Deixis

Social deixis has appeared (282, 5.66%). According to Huang (2007: 163), social deixis is concerned with the codification of the social

status of the speaker, the hearer and/or a third person. This type of deixis refers to the level of relationship between people rather than to information. Some significant examples are:

(42) **Goldberg:** *Not on the lady, on the gentleman.* (Act I, p. 42)

(43) **Meg:** *And I'll invite Lulu this afternoon.* (TBP, Act I, p. 22)

(44) **Goldberg:** *You just missed the toast, my dear.* (Act II, p. 42)

### Discussion of the Results

It has been found that there are (4978) deictic expressions in the text. Person deixis is the most frequent type in the play. It recurs (2403) times. This is due to the utterances produced by the characters. They use a lot of pronouns and address many utterances to their conversation partners.

Time deixis appears (1703) times. It mainly operates by the use of tense category and adverbs of time. Finding this great number is because of the length of *TBP* which consists of three acts and the short fragmentary conversations uttered.

There are (355) spatial deictic expressions. Place deixis is noticed to operate by using verbs of motion, place adverbials, demonstratives and particles. This increase in number is because of characters' speech as they are seen to talk about the places they went to and sometimes the doings that they did there.

Concerning social deixis, it appears (282) times in the play. The characters address each other by using honorifics and titles as well as terms of endearment.

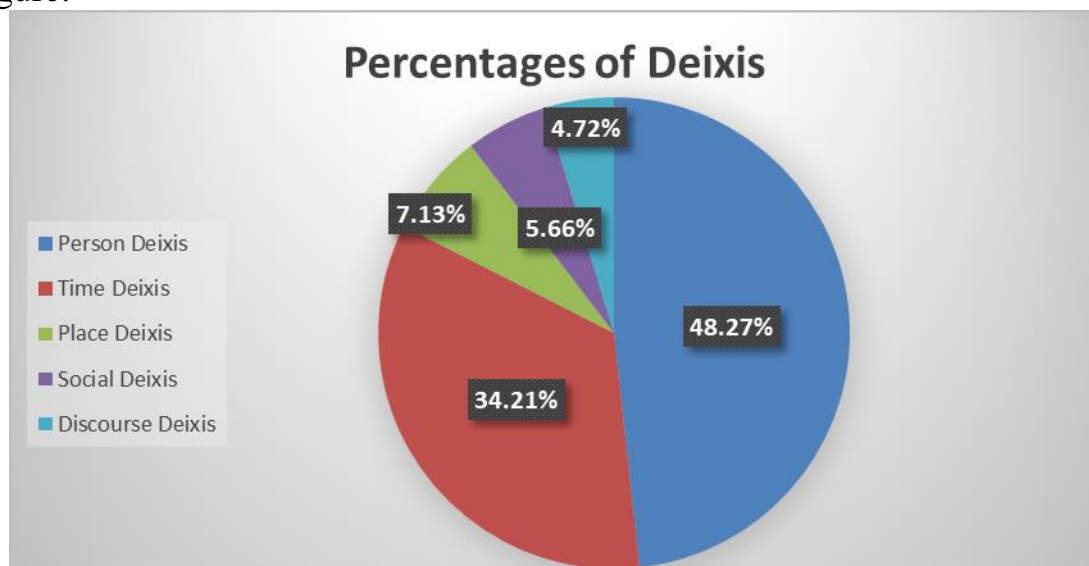
The least type of deixis is discourse deixis. It appears (235) times. The characters, most of the time, refer to previous, simultaneous and next speeches by the use of the demonstratives *this* and *that*. Moreover, they often contradict themselves by interrupting their own utterances as well as the utterances their partners produce through the use of certain linguistic tools such as *but* and certain discourse markers to show results of previous utterances like *then*.

To conclude, it has been noticed that deixis plays a vital role in the language of drama by allowing dramatic context to be manifested as an actual and dynamic world. The use of deixis in *The Birthday Party* is fundamentally meant to convey the meaninglessness of language, collapse of common, and the absurdity of life as Pinter wants to convey. The occurrences of the five types of deixis are illustrated in the table (1) below:

**Table (1): Occurrences of Deixis in *The Birthday Party***

S /N	Types of Deixis	Act	Act	Act	Total
		I	II	III	
1	Person Deixis	895	882	626	2403
2	Time Deixis	599	656	448	1703
3	Place Deixis	165	110	80	355
4	Social Deixis	88	111	83	282
5	Discourse Deixis	114	69	52	235
<b>Total</b>		<b>186</b>	<b>1828</b>	<b>1289</b>	<b>4978</b>

The percentages of the five types of deixis are shown in the next figure:

**Figure (1): Percentages of the Types of Deixis in *The Birthday Party***

### Conclusions

The results of the analysis of the play lead to certain conclusions. These are mentioned next:

1. Deixis can be viewed as a literary paradigm in the analysis of literary works.
2. Levinson's model (1983) of deixis is applicable to analyse literary texts and non-literary texts such as religious texts, scientific texts, pedagogical texts, etc.

3. The use of deixis in *The Birthday Party* is considered as one of the most prominent features of the play according to the findings of this study.
4. In **AT**, deictic expressions are utilised to create a world that is featured as being illogical. Indeed, it is to portray the notion of human loss of life that people experienced following WWI and WWII.
5. Absurd drama makes use of deictic expressions not only to refer to spatial and temporal references as traditional drama does, but also to confirm the theme of human loss, fragmentation and evasiveness.
6. Pinter's *The Birthday Party* contains all of the five types of deixis: person, time, place, discourse and social deixis. These are found to be heavily bound to their situational context and are contextually and pragmatically communicated.

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