



A Pragmatic Analysis of Place Deixis in Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Spatial Deixis; Pragmatics; Place Deixis; Literary Discourse; Hills Like White Elephants	This paper discusses the practical roles of spatial deixis in the story, Hills Like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway. Despite the fact that the story has been widely examined in terms of symbolism and dialogue, little attention has been paid to the role of spatial deictic expressions in meaning construction in a particular narrative context. The research aims at answering the following question: How does place deixis work outside physical reference to inform interpersonal relations and the thematic structure of the text? It is going to determine the types of spatial deixis and examine their uses in the story pragmatically. The paper is based on the qualitative descriptive method with little frequency analysis, which relies on the proposals of deixis put forward by Yule et al. and Levinson et al., the results indicate that spatial deictic expressions are not only applied to denote location but also to create psychological distance, interactional positioning and symbolic opposition. Distal forms are used more often in conflictual dialogue, which is an expression of the emotional disengagement of the characters. The analysis proves that the concept of spatial deixis is a discourse-organizing tool, which adds ambiguity and tension to a minimalist narrative style.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics is the study of meaning construction and interpretation in context. In contrast to semantics, which concentrates on meaning in isolation from the context, pragmatics describes the encoding of meaning by speakers and the decoding of meaning by the audience in actual communication scenarios [1]

One of its central concepts is deixis, which refers to expressions whose interpretation depends on contextual factors such as speaker, time, and place [2]. It refers to the notion of place in relation to a deictic center. The English language tends to distinguish between proximal and distal forms like here and this vs. there and that, with respect to the speaker [1]

According to recent cognitive and pragmatic research, however, spatial deixis does not always occupy physical place but can also be used to express more abstract meaning [3, 4]. Therefore, a referential and interpretive tool, spatial deixis, plays a vital role. The application of spatial deixis as referential and interpretive structures has received attention in literature studies. Ambiguous interpretations of even simple pieces of linguistic elements in the literary discourse, especially fiction, can have a great value in interpretation. This can be seen particularly in the modernist literature that is defined by the economy in linguistics and indirectness. A good illustration of this style is the Hills Like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway (1927).

The story is presented as a conversation between a man and women who are waiting at a Spanish railway station. The location is vividly contrasted; one side of it is dry and barren, and the other side is green and fertile. This opposition is presented at the beginning of the story, and it constitutes a central contrast in the narrative. Even though the contrast in the landscape has been extensively addressed in terms of the symbolic, little has been done on the linguistic elements that shape this contrast. Aspects like this side, the other side and other demonstrative indications of location are used

more than once in the dialogue, and therefore this suggests that there is some spatial deixis in the story. Most works are inclined to consider person, temporal, and spatial deixis as a complex, and this could result in a lack of attention to any of them. Hence, the work segregates spatial deixis to discuss its particular impact on the story.

1.1 Research Problem

Although the spatial contrast in **Hills Like White Elephants** has been widely discussed in terms of symbolism, limited attention has been given to the linguistic mechanisms through which this contrast is constructed. Previous studies have identified the opposition between barren and fertile landscapes; however, they have not examined how this contrast is realized through specific spatial expressions in the dialogue.

In addition, most studies of deixis in literary discourse examine person, temporal, and spatial deixis collectively, without isolating spatial deixis as an independent analytical category. This general approach limits the depth of analysis and overlooks the specific contribution of place deixis to meaning construction.

The present study addresses this gap by focusing on the micro-level analysis of spatial deixis in the narrative. It remains unclear whether expressions such as “this side,” “here,” and “there” function only as indicators of physical location, or whether they are systematically used to construct emotional distance, interpersonal tension, and thematic contrast.

Accordingly, this study investigates the pragmatic role of place deixis in the story and examines whether spatial expressions function as discourse-organizing elements rather than merely descriptive features of the setting.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What are the forms of spatial deixis employed in the story?
2. What practical uses are made of these expressions?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Find out the forms of spatial deixis in the story.
2. Discuss their practical uses in the story.
3. Discuss how they contribute to the development of interpersonal and thematic meaning.

1.4 Importance of the Study

The study contributes to pragmatics by providing a focused analysis of spatial deixis as a functional element in literary discourse.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design in this paper is a qualitative descriptive design. It is analyzed through a close reading of the chosen text with the help of the frequency analysis of the spatial deictic expressions.

2.1 Literary Dialogue as Structured Interaction

Literary dialogue is no longer considered as an informal replica of speech, which is a part of the modern stylistics, but a linguistically patterned variant, the micro-structures of which define the meaning. Fictional conversation is being studied progressively based on models that have been created to study spoken interaction, especially models that focus on incremental building of meaning and interactional organization. The discussion of the *Hills Like White Elephants*, written by [5], reveals that the dialogue of Hemingway may be seen as a sort of natural communication, comprising segmented grammatical structure and based on turn-taking composition. Stone bases his argument on the Linear Unit Grammar that Sinclair provides, which suggests dialogue relies on consecutive units of meaning instead of complete syntactic sentences [6]. This division also emphasizes how apparent small grammatical details do have a greater rhetorical impact. Sinclair continues to state that verbal communication transpires in units that can be managed by real-time processing limitations [7]

In literary discourse, this model unveils how meaning is usually created because of adjacency, repetition, and incremental expansions, but not because of individual clauses. These are critical insights that will be used to analyze deixis because deictic meaning is tied to interactional anchoring. Short also highlights the fact that the analysis of the speech acts and patterns of turn-taking in literary dialogue helps the readers determine the implicit relations between the contexts

This is especially so when the narratives are based on dialogue, whereby there is minimal explicit exposition and therefore linguistic characteristics become the main basis of interpretation.

2.2 Grammatical Patterning and Recurrent Structures

Patterns, not words, take precedence in discourse analysis. Grammatical patterns play a role in meaning-making [8]. Patterns of lexical bundles are also important to interaction and stance [9,10]. Repetition and binarity are used in literary dialogue to structure emotional tension. Binary structures such as we can / we cannot may have rhetorical functions other than negation. These phenomena are often linked with spatial deixis, which is often binary in structure (this side / the other side; here / there). Reduplication of such forms can add to their meaning, from denotation to symbolic and interactional meaning. Stylistic regularities, while not always apparent, can be found in linguistic patterning [11].

2.3 Ellipsis, Omission and Minimalism in Style

Ellipsis is a key stylistic feature of literary discourse, especially in modernist literature. It is the deletion of recoverable elements that are recoverable from the context [12]. Ellipsis can be nominal, verbal or clausal [13]. Hemingway's writing style features controlled ellipsis according to the Iceberg Principle, in which meaning is implied [14]. This compression contributes to the interpretative function of the linguistic elements. Ellipsis and deixis share the same contextual space, as both depend on contextual knowledge. In minimalist dialogue, deictic expressions become more prominent as there is less lexical material.

2.4 Interaction, Ambiguity and Interpretive Space

Both to the extent of introducing ambiguity, both Stone and Abdullatief emphasize the aspect of dialogic minimalism. The main problem of *Hills Like White Elephants* is not mentioned directly, and the readers must draw conclusions based on the indirect information presented in the form of language. According to Carter, this mode of speech can be described as textually discontinuous and interpersonally coherent [15]. Topical switching, interrupted sentences and broken constructions add to the tension and yet sustain the interaction. The linguistic positioning takes a central part in such situations. The semantic content is minimized, which can transform spatial forms into structuring forms. To illustrate, the juxtapositions of the barren and fertile landscapes interplay with deictic expressions to make them thematically polar. That is why place deixis cannot be a neutral description in stylistically compressed texts. Rather, it is a system of patterned discourse which facilitates interpersonal negotiation and thematic contrast.

2.5 Previous Studies and Positioning

A few studies have analyzed *Hills Like White Elephants* in a variety of ways. Symbolism, especially the opposition between fertility and sterility, and its connection to the main conflict of the story, is the subject of many literary analyses [16] other analyses have focused on the text using discourse and stylistic analysis, focusing on the structure of dialogue, ellipsis and patterns of interaction [7,9].

Past studies in the discipline of pragmatics have tended to view deixis as a broad phenomenon, and have commonly conflated person, temporal and spatial deixis in larger analytical categories [1,2]. Nevertheless, these methods fail to present an individual analysis of the spatial deixis as a functional category in each piece of literature.

In contrast to earlier studies, the current study isolates spatial deixis and looks at it in a systematic manner in a particular narrative setting. It is a mix of qualitative analysis of texts with sparse quantitative evidence to show how spatial expressions are both a locational marker and a means of developing psychological distance, positioning of interaction, and symbolic opposition.

2.6 Theoretical Gap and Positioning of the Current Research

The symbolic interpretation, gender relations, and implicit dialogue structure have been the main concerns of existing studies on the topic of *Hills Like White Elephants*, which are reflected in stylistic and discourse-based analysis [15,16], Segmentation of dialogue, ellipsis and grammatical patterning have been studied using other linguistic methods [7,9,8] and the focus on the way meaning is produced through interactional structures. Nevertheless, these studies are more likely to consider deixis as part of a larger linguistic paradigm rather than defining the concept of spatial deixis as a separate category of study. Whereas person and temporal deixis have been more thoroughly investigated in the literature on pragmatics, little has been done to determine the specific role of spatial deixis in developing interpersonal distance and thematic opposition within the framework of a single narrative. Thus, the current work has fulfilled this gap by offering a narrow pragmatic study of spatial deixis in *Hills Like White Elephants* by

exploring how locational expressions serve more than the physical reference to organize psychological distance, interactional positioning, and symbolic contrast.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

In this paper, the qualitative descriptive research design has been adopted. The contextual meaning may be researched with the assistance of qualitative research when individuals refer to the words in the naturally existing works [17]. The fact that deixis is contextual requires it to be treated in such a manner that it is not solely grounded on counting numbers. The research is more of a qualitative analysis, although some frequency analysis has been used to strengthen descriptive utterances and make the analysis a little more analytical.

3.2 Data source

This study presents data on spatial deictic expressions from Ernest Hemingway's short story, *Hills Like White Elephants* (1927). Both narrative description and dialogue data were analyzed; however, a primary focus was on the discourse of dialogue, where deictic expressions are used to position speakers. The data were gathered through systematic analysis of the text, starting with a close examination of the text to discern patterns of spatial reference. All expressions used as spatial deixis were identified, such as demonstrative pronouns ("this" and "that"), adverbs ("here" and "there"), and spatial phrases ("this side", "the other side"). Cases of discourse deixis and purely anaphoric references were excluded unless there was evidence that the reference was spatially anchored. Next, these expressions were categorized as either proximal or distal according to the definition given by Yule [1], in which proximal refers to expressions that are close to the speaker, and distal refers to those at a distance.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis adopts a pragmatic approach to examine the function of spatial deixis. Each instance is analyzed according to four dimensions: the deictic center, literal spatial reference, psychological distance, and narrative-symbolic function.

Deictic Center

Speaker position and contextual anchoring estimation [2]

Literal Spatial Reference

Estimation of the physical address referred to in the expression.

Psychological Distance or Interactional Distance.

Defining the fact that the spatial marking presupposes emotional distancing, position, or evasion [3,4], Narrative-Symbolic Function

Spatial deixis in the formation of thematic contrast and narrative tension, in particular, the fragmented landscape of the story. This systematic procedure will contribute to the interpretation process, preventing an ex-post facto generalization and redirecting linguistic identification to a contextual and symbolic one.

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative model proposed by Miles and Huberman [18] forms the basis of the data analysis and includes:

- Data Reduction: This is screening and classifying spatial deictic expressions as proximal and distal.
- Data presentation: Table illustration of frequency numbers and contextual illustrations.
- Conclusion drawing: To ascertain patterns of correlation between spatial deixis and psychological distancing and the theme opposite.

3.5 Scope and Delimitation

This study focuses only on spatial (place) deixis in a single short story, *Hills Like White Elephants*, and uses only English textual evidence. Person and time deixis are set aside to keep the analysis concise.

3.6 Interrater Reliability

An interrater procedure was done to increase the credibility of the qualitative analysis. A second independent coder, who is a linguistic student, was invited to code a portion of the data, which is 25 percent of the spatial deictic expressions identified. The coding was carried out by categorizing the expressions into proximal and distal classes and determining the main pragmatic roles they play. The percentage agreement was used to determine the level of agreement between the two coders. The findings revealed that the level of consistency was high, and the rate of agreement was more than 85. Slight differences were debated and overcome by reviewing each other, which resulted in clarification of the coding criteria. This process enhances the validity of the analysis and the validity of the results.

4. RESULTS

The presence of sixteen (16) instances of spatial deixis was identified in **Hills Like White Elephants** by Ernest Hemingway. Only expressions functioning as locational reference markers were included, while discourse uses of demonstratives were excluded unless they were clearly anchored in spatial context. The identified expressions were classified into proximal and distal categories following Yule [1].

4.1 Descriptive Statistical Analysis

A. Proximal vs. Distal Distribution

Table 1. Distribution of Proximal and Distal Spatial Deixis

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Proximal	7	43.75%
Distal	9	56.25%
Total	16	100%

Distal spatial forms are slightly more frequent than proximal ones.

B. Distribution by Lexical Item

Table 2 (Lexical Items)

Expression	Type	Frequency	Percentage
here	Proximal	3	18.75%
this	Proximal	2	12.5%
this side	Proximal	2	12.5%
there	Distal	4	25%
that (spatial)	Distal	3	18.75%
the other side	Distal	2	12.5%

“There” is the most frequent individual form (25%), followed by “here” and other spatial expressions.

4.2 Functional Statistical Coding

Each spatial deictic occasion was characterized with respect to the primary pragmatic end. It had four functional categories.

Table 3. Functional Distribution of Spatial Deixis

Function	Frequency	Percentage
Literal locational reference	6	37.5%
Psychological distancing	5	31.25%
Symbolic opposition	4	25%
Interactional avoidance	1	6.25%
Total	16	100%

It is also necessary to mention that 62.5% of the instances of spatial deixis transcend the literal physical reference, which implies that the majority of them have pragmatic and symbolic functions.

4.3 Distribution by Narrative Segments.

Spatial deixis was also cross-tabulated with the context of the narrative (descriptive narration vs. conflict dialogue, to enhance reliability).

Table 4. Distribution of Spatial Deixis by Narrative Context

Context Type	Proximal	Distal
Descriptive narration	4	2
Conflict dialogue	3	7

This distribution shows that distal forms are more frequent than twice in a conflict-based dialogue as compared to a description narrative. This statistical clustering supports the meaning that distal deixis is linked to emotional or relational distancing.

4.4 Interpretation of Ratios and Patterns.

A. Proximal-Distal Ratio

Proximal : Distal = 7 : 9

Although the numerical difference between proximal and distal forms is not large, distal forms are more frequent in conflict-oriented dialogue. This pattern suggests a relationship between spatial distance and psychological distancing.

B. Functional Concentration

Sixteen cases of spatial deixis in the text were determined during the analysis. These expressions were categorized into proximal and distal as per Yule [1]. The expressions consisted of only the spatially relevant forms. Descriptive results suggest that there is a slightly more frequent occurrence of the distal forms as compared to the proximal forms. The distal expressions are more prevalent in conflict-based dialogue, which implies that spatial and psychological distance are connected. Functional analysis reveals that most of the cases go beyond literal spatial reference. Most of the expressions have pragmatic roles, including emotional distancing, symbolic opposition, and interactional positioning. The patterns of expression distribution within narrative situations show clustering in dialogic tension, and the meaning of the patterns supports the interpretation of the role of spatial deixis in interpersonal processes rather than the description of neutrality.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the current study demonstrate that the notion of spatial deixis in *Hills Like White Elephants* serves more than just a simple purpose of showing a physical location. Whereas expressions like *here* and *there* still have their literal referential role, there are many examples of extended pragmatic roles that relate to interpersonal location and thematic construction.

Among the most interesting tendencies is the distribution of distal forms in conflict-oriented dialogue. The fact that expressions like *there*, *that* and *the other side* are more frequently used in tense conversational units can be interpreted to expect a systematic relationship between spatial distance and psychological distancing. In that regard, distal deixis seems to be the manifestation of emotional distance and avoidance, especially in the efforts of the male speaker to downplay the severity of the underlying problem. This is in line with the opinion that deictic expressions can encode an interactional stance as opposed to simply physical orientation.

Conversely, the proximal forms like *here* and *this side* are normally used in a relatively aligned moment or an act of common focus. These words show temporal overlap between the speakers, even in an unsteady interactional environment. The alternation between proximal and distal forms, then, is an expression of changing relations and not fixed spatial reference.

One of the most notable discoveries has to do with the repetitive opposition between *this side* and *the other*. These expressions occur with a limited frequency, but since they are placed in important moments in the narrative, they carry significant interpretive significance. Instead of serving as the locational markers as neutral ones, they create a binary opposition that reflects the main conflict of the story. These deictic selections support linguistically the spatial separation of the landscape into barren and fertile zones, as well as participation in the creation of symbolic opposition. The findings also indicate that over fifty percent of the cases of spatial deixis identified go beyond literal spatial reference. This implies that spatial deixis in the narrative is pragmatically loaded and systematically used. These

elements of language are essential in steering interpretation in a story which has little explicit explanation. Lack of explicit mention of the main problem enhances the use of indirect information, such as the use of space.

In addition, the fact that distal forms cluster during a conflictual dialogue helps to interpret that spatial deixis is involved in interactional negotiation. Deictic words are employed to soften, dislocate or indirectly frame sensitive issues. In this way, a spatial distance is a language tool for dealing with interpersonal tension.

On a larger scale, the results verify that spatial deixis is a discourse-organizing mechanism in minimalist narrative. Instead of being a passive descriptive characteristic, it is actively involved in the organization of meaning. The play of locational reference, emotional distance, and symbolic contrast shows that even the smallest linguistic structures can have a great interpretive meaning.

Although the dataset is small, the uniformity of the patterns of distributions reinforces the credibility of the analysis. The combination of qualitative interpretation and descriptive statistical evidence will permit a more substantiated idea of how spatial deixis is employed in the narrative.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the role of spatial deixis in “Hills Like White Elephants” using a qualitative descriptive approach supported by frequency analysis. The findings show that spatial deixis functions at multiple levels beyond physical reference.

Proximal and distal expressions not only indicate location but also contribute to psychological distancing, interactional positioning, and symbolic opposition. The concentration of distal forms in conflictual dialogue supports the link between spatial and emotional distance.

The binary contrast between “this side” and “the other side” plays a central role in structuring the narrative tension. Spatial deixis emerges as a key stylistic device in minimalist discourse, where meaning is constructed through subtle linguistic cues.

Although the dataset is limited, consistent patterns support the analytical validity of the findings. The study demonstrates that spatial deixis is not merely referential but structurally significant in shaping interpretation in modernist narrative discourse.

Abbreviation

The author has gone through the final version of the manuscript and is willing to submit it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author states that he has no conflict of interest in the publication of the given study.

Consent for publications

The author has gone through the final version of the manuscript and is willing to submit it for publication.

Availability of data and material

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included within the manuscript.

Authors' contributions

Ruaa Harbi Abdul Jalil designed the research idea, conducted the data collection and analysis, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no specific funding from any public, commercial, or non-profit organization.

Acknowledgement:

The author would like to express appreciation to the Department of Office Management Technique, Administrative Polytechnic College, Baghdad, for their academic support in conducting this study.

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الإشارة المكانية وتحليلها التداولي في قصة «تلال كالفيلة البيضاء» لإرنست همنغواي

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الكلمات المفتاحية	الملخص
الإشارة المكانية؛ التداولية؛ الخطاب الأدبي؛ تلال كالفيلة البيضاء؛ المسافة النفسية	يتناول هذا البحث الأدوار العملية للإشارة المكانية في قصة "تلال كالفيلة البيضاء" لإرنست همنغواي، على الرغم من أن القصة حظيت بدراسة مستفيضة من حيث الرمزية والحوار، إلا أن دور التعبيرات الإشارية المكانية في بناء المعنى، ضمن سياق سردي محدد، لم يحظَ بالاهتمام الكافي. يهدف البحث إلى الإجابة عن السؤال التالي: كيف تعمل الإشارة المكانية خارج نطاق المرجع المادي لإثراء العلاقات الشخصية والبنية الموضوعية للنص؟ ويسعى البحث إلى تحديد أنواع الإشارة المكانية ودراسة استخداماتها في القصة من منظور عملي، يعتمد البحث على المنهج الوصفي النوعي مع تحليل محدود للتكرار، مستندة إلى مقترحات الإشارة التي طرحها كل من يول (1996) وليفينسون (1983). تشير النتائج إلى أن التعبيرات الإشارية المكانية لا تُستخدم فقط للدلالة على الموقع، بل تُستخدم أيضاً لخلق مسافة نفسية، وتحديد المواقع التفاعلية، والتناقض الرمزي. تُستخدم الصيغ البعيدة بكثرة في الحوارات الصراعية، التي تُعبّر عن الانفصال العاطفي للشخصيات. أثبت التحليل أن مفهوم الإشارة المكانية أداة لتنظيم الخطاب، تُضفي الغموض والتوتر على أسلوب السرد البسيط.

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