

ROLES OF SOCIAL DEIXIS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION DURING THE QUARANTINE PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the paper is to explore possible roles of social deixis, its practices and functioning in teacher-student interactions in the context of digital teaching, which became everyday routine during the quarantine situation that emerged in spring 2020.

Social deixis, i.e. the use of T/V, address forms, greetings and operations for presenting persons in discourse play a key part in the organization of social relations. In digital interactions lacking personal presence, impression-making and face-creation have a more strongly linguistic basis, with the result that acts of social deixis play an even more prominent role than in direct, personal communication. In the paper, the social deictic elements of online lessons are presented on the basis of structured observation, while the practices of teacher-student written digital interaction are described by a systematic analysis of a database comprising the material and message exchanges of Google classrooms.

KEYWORDS

distance learning, online lessons, written practices, social deixis, address forms, greetings

INTRODUCTION

Educational measures imposed in March 2020 in reaction to the coronavirus epidemic, and in particular the need for switching to distance education resulted in sweeping changes in the digital spheres of education. The goal of this paper is to explore the roles of social deixis at the time when digital education was becoming everyday practice, with a view to what practices and behaviours characterized interactions between teachers and students.

Operations of social deixis, i.e. the use of T and V², address forms, greetings and person representations play a key role in the organization of social relations. In computer-mediated interactions, which rely more heavily on linguistic means of impression-making and face-creation, these operations are foregrounded to an even higher degree.

After a brief overview of the communicative situation characterizing distance education, the paper presents the phenomenon of social deixis, followed by remarks on the methods of data collection and analysis. Subsequently, by an analysis of (what may be considered as) prototypical examples, it discusses the roles of social deixis in university lessons demanding online presence and taking the form of video conversations. Finally, on the basis of empirical results, the study of online classrooms and email exchanges, the paper highlights some basic features of written communication.

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² Following BROWN and GILMAN's dichotomous view of address introduced in their classic paper, T stands for informal, while V for formal, official, more distanced address [1].

Communicative features of digital education during the quarantine period

In Hungary, the government decided on a transition to digital distance education in the sphere of public education on 13 March 2020. This change meant that from one day to the next, teaching situations based on personal, direct communication were transferred into a digital environment for teaching, education management and communication. In the community of students in public education, this marked a huge transformation, calling for the application of new devices and software and also demanding new methods and practices for communication. In this situation, requiring quick adaptation over the course of one weekend, the first decisive task that teaching staff had to address was to develop a communicative strategy, to select the tools to be employed, and these processes already required intense digital communication, cf. [2], [3].

In most communities, a communicative practice emerged whereby the sending out of written and multimedia materials as well as learning instructions was performed both via various platforms for exchanging messages (email, Messenger) and by the setting up of digital classrooms and groups (Google Classroom, Facebook groups), and these tools were supplemented by online lessons taking the form of video conversations (e.g. on Discord, Zoom and Microsoft Teams). Through this often perplexing plethora of tools, the main communicative methods for education management comprised spoken discourse at online lessons on the one hand and written exchanges in private or in micro-communities on the other.

Thus, a key communicative feature of educational practices during the quarantine period was that both dyadic relations and community-level communication were organized by the regular use of various tools, via spoken and written channels alike.

Despite the lack of personal presence, discourse participants have the same communicative and social needs in internet-based communication as well. As a function of the situation, the elaboration and maintenance of the interpersonal and personal dimensions are primarily carried out through language use and style [4]. Accordingly, phatic elements, the operations of social deixis gain special significance for the construal of identities and relationships [5].

The phenomenon under study: operations of social deixis

The research investigates the phenomenon of social deixis in the linguistic practices of digital education. It starts off with the hypothesis that due to a number of factors, the situation of digital education assigns a prominent role to the linguistic organization of social relations. In internet-mediated communication, the lack of face-to-face interaction inherently enhances the role of phatic linguistic elements; moreover, the quarantine situation further increases the need for personality in the wake of an abrupt elimination of opportunities for personal contact. At the same time, operations of education management demand the continuous and unambiguous identification of roles and relationships.

Deixis is a linguistic operation that involves the physical and social worlds of participants into the interpretation of a discourse, i.e. contextual knowledge that derives from processing the spatial, temporal and interpersonal relations of the speech situation [6]. In digital communication and in the online space, the construal of both physical, spatial relations [7] and interpersonal relations display certain peculiarities.

In a broad sense, social deixis can be interpreted as encompassing all operations pointing to the social context, basically including all aspects of social indexicality. Under these assumptions, devices with a social deictic function include forms for person marking; devices that distinguish between "levels of speech", for example levels of formality in languages of the Far East; utterance types sensitive to various features characteristic of the speech act participants; variants of names, titles and kinship terms; and utterances evaluated as social actions such as greetings, thanksgiving, the expression of gratitude, and offences [8].

The deictic function of elements marking discourse participants is twofold. Besides marking participant roles, they may also indicate the nature of the relationship between participants, i.e. their function may conflate personal and social deixis. Precisely for the sake of separating these two functions, Verschueren's categorization distinguishes between the notions of personal deixis and attitudinal deixis within the broader concept of social deixis [9].

In my research, I take into account all linguistic opportunities for shaping social relations, including not only basic operations of person marking and address but also routinized speech acts such as variants of greeting, thanksgiving and good wishes.

Research methods

Based on unstructured participant observation carried out continuously during the quarantine period, the paper gives an overview of possible functions of social deictic operations in digital exchanges between teachers and students in the context of online lessons and through messaging platforms. In addition, through a systematic analysis of digital classrooms and teacher-student email correspondence, it also presents the roles played by various person-marking and relationship-marking devices in digital education.

The research can be regarded as a pilot study which is geared primarily toward mapping the types and basic strategies of language use. Data collection had a relatively limited scope, thus the research does not offer a comprehensive picture; however, the results are capable of showing up some major trends and may prepare the way for further investigations.

In the research, I did not analyse recorded lessons; the identification of basic functions is based on the observation of lessons at primary and secondary schools. Besides monitoring lessons throughout the quarantine period, I prepared systematic notes of the material of two 3rd-form and two 7th-form lessons. The analysis of recorded material would be better-suited to the exploration of how social relations are linguistically construed (cf. [10]); however, the fundamental roles of social deictic devices can be identified even on the basis of this more limited sample.

The study of written communication contributing to digital education management was informed by the message boards of 12 Google Classrooms and a database comprising 220 message exchanges (deemed characteristic or interesting), submitted on a voluntary basis by informants. Of the Google Classrooms under study, 5 classes were from the lower and 3 from the higher forms of primary education, with secondary schools represented by 4 classes. Geographically, 6 classes were from Budapest and 6 from county towns. The message exchanges thus cover the entire country and all levels of public education. Message exchanges include emails, chat logs and private messages shared via learning management platforms alike. The assignment of messages into genres or text types is sometimes less than fully clear-cut, as the informants themselves occasionally put them into different categories. Some informants classified private messages shared via the Google Classroom platform as letters, while others classified them as chats. These factors clearly indicate the fact that types of written exchange are related as nodes of a network.

In the database, I marked operations of social deixis. Within the category of personal deixis, I primarily noted conscious operations whereby speakers had aimed to identify themselves or others. In terms of attitudinal deixis, I paid attention to ways of expressing T and V, address form variants, greetings and farewells, i.e. all elements that are anchored to the phatic function of language activities. In the course of data processing, I identified the various types and functions. While processing the material of Google Classrooms, I also coded each utterance in terms of whether its role was transactional or interactional [11]; in other words, whether they fulfilled an intersubjective or interpersonal meta-function [6].

Aspects of the functioning of social deixis in digital education

Social deixis in online lessons

In online education, lessons taking the form of video conversations came to represent one of the most prominent scenes of communication. Based on simultaneous personal presence and putting a premium on spoken utterances (while being accompanied by written exchanges), these conversations heavily rely on social deictic elements for their discursive organization.

The observation of online lessons has produced the finding that social deictic elements have a crucial function in the organization of rituals during the lesson. At the opening of lessons, the teacher has a fundamental role; each of the four lessons under study begins with the teacher's greeting and the students' (partly simultaneous) corresponding replies.

My personal experience suggests that operations of social deixis assume an especially important role in the organization of online lessons as a way of compensating for the lack of personal participation and continuous bodily experience, allowing for the identifiability of participants and thus creating a sense of presence. Some self-representations and utterances directed at the speech partners serve specifically to establish the communicative channel and ensure that the necessary visual and/or auditive conditions are in place.

(1) *Gyerekek, hallatszík valami???*

'Children, can you hear something?'

Limited visibility or audibility gives rise to the use of several social deictic elements, address forms, especially addresses by given name that serve to identify participants. In terms of turn allocation, the teacher's designation of the next speaker is mostly carried out by given-name addresses, which display approximately the same frequency as in face-to-face classroom communication [12].

(2) *Sorban kérdezek mindenkit, ahogy a képernyőn látom. Péter?*

'I'm asking everybody one by one as I see you on the screen. Peter?'

In many cases, problems with identifying current speakers lead to awkward situations, and may even become a source of humour.

(3) A: *Ez nagyon jó megfigyelés, Zsófi!*

'This is a very good observation, Sophie!'

B: *De hát én Vivi vagyok!*

'But I'm Vivien!'

A: *Úúú, én már itt tényleg azt se tudom, ki kicsoda!*

'Oh no, I really don't know any more who is who here!'

Observations suggest that in the online space, new practices and rituals of self-identification and prompting are emerging, which may inspire novel research on the organization of online classroom conversations.

(4) A: *Azt kérném mindenkitől, hogy aki tudja választ, az úgy jelezze, hogy bekapcsolja a mikrofonját, és hangosan mondja a saját nevét! Rendben?*

(nincs válasz)

A: *Jó, akkor akár ki is próbálhatnánk! Szeretnék neveket hallani!*

(6-7 egyidejű válasz)

'A: I would like to ask everyone that when somebody knows the answer, they should signal this by switching on their microphones, and saying their names out loud! Is it OK?

(no answer)

A: Good, then we might as well try this! I'd like to hear names!

(6-7 simultaneous answers)

A key aspect of the organization of online lessons is that written and spoken utterances are intertwined, and shifts between discourse types are typically accompanied by utterances containing social deictic elements, as illustrated by the following chat excerpt:

(5) *Tanárnő, bevenne a meetingbe?*

'Ms Teacher, will you let me join the meeting?'

Observations made at online lessons suggest that person marking devices are highly frequent, and the most prominent role of social deictic elements is not attitude marking or the representation of emotional relations but rather lesson management, also with a view to making conversations smoother and more flexible.

Social deixis in written practices of digital education

As regards the practices of written discourse in digital education, I discuss here several types of message exchange between teachers and students as well as messages shared via Google Classroom together.

Proportions of social deictic elements, or those with a primarily interactional function, were studied in detail on the basis of message boards in Google Classrooms, as excerpts from private message exchanges had been submitted by informants voluntarily, with the consequence that a clearly higher number of interactional elements made it into that database.

On the message boards of the 12 classrooms under study, I counted a total of 873 utterances, of which 525 were subsequently coded as having an interactional function. This high proportion of interactional elements can be accounted for by the fact that these spaces serve specifically to help participants get in touch and manage their relations; moreover, many of the dialogues under study were produced right after the creation of these classrooms.

The excerpt in (6) below shows all of the linguistic steps in the organization of a digital classroom in a 3rd-form class, highlighting the fundamental role of greetings, address forms and self-identifications. At the teacher's initiative, most of the students join in the conversation by way of initial greetings, which significantly prolongs the ritual of opening the classroom. When turning to their teacher, the students use T and V greetings alike; beyond greeting the teacher, only a few students' utterances include greetings for others, and hardly any dialogues emerge that go beyond the function of greetings (e.g. *Közületek valaki Skypaol?*³ 'Does any of you use Skype?').

(6)

Tanár Szervusztok gyerekek! Köszöntelek benneteket a 3.b környezet ismeretis "tantermében"! Terveim szerint a jövő hétre szánt feladatokat már ezen a felületen fogom tudni küldeni az email címetekre. Persze ehhez az kell, hogy mindenki felcsatlakozzon! Remélem anyu és apu segítségével sikerülni fog. Aztán már, ha nagyon ügyesek vagytok önállóan is tudni fogjátok! Üdvözlettel: [Keresztnév] néni

3 In the interest of authentically representing the practices of digital literacy, messages are reproduced with their original spelling, by leaving typos and non-standard forms unchanged.

Teacher 'Hello children, I'm greeting you in the "classroom" about environmental knowledge for the 3b class. My plan is that tasks for next week will already be sent to you on this platform to your email addresses. Of course for this it is necessary that everybody should join in! I hope with the help of mum and dad this will be done successfully. Later on, when you get very skillful, you will be able to do this by yourselves! With kind regards: Auntie [given name]'

Diák1 *Szia [Keresztnév] néni. [Keresztnév]*
Student1 'Hello Auntie [given name] [student's given name]'

Diák2 *Jó napot [Keresztnév] néni! [Keresztnév]*
Student2 'Good morning Auntie [given name] [student's given name]'

Tanár *Kedves [Keresztnév] és [Keresztnév]! Győztetek! Ti vagytok az első fecskék a környezet ismeretis kurzusban. Nagyon ügyesek vagytok. (És persze anyu, apu is!), hogy ilyen hamar be tudtatok kapcsolódni. Egy nagy zöld pont nektek informatikából. Ez a felület nekem is teljesen új, de sebjaj, majd együtt ügyesen felfedezzük!! Puszikállak benneteket!*

Teacher 'Dear [given name] and [given name]! You have won! You are the first swallows in the environmental class. You are very smart. (And of course mum and dad too!) that you were able to join in so fast. You deserve a big green spot for IT skills. This surface is completely new for me too, but no worries, we will discover it smartly together! I'm kissing you!'

Diák2 *Éjen!*
Student2 'Hurray!'

Diák3 *Szia [Keresztnév]néni, már itt vagyok! 😊😊*
Student3 'Hello Auntie [given name], I'm already here!'

Diák4 *Sziasztok, én is itt vagyok. [Becézett keresztnév] ☐*
Student4 'Hello everybody, I'm also here. [nick version of given name]'

Diák5 *Szia [Keresztnév] néni!*
Student5 'Hello Auntie [given name]!'

Diák6 *Szia [Keresztnév] néni! Megjöttem az órára!!!! 🎒❤️☐*
Student6 'Hello Auntie [given name]! I've arrived at the class!!!!'

Diák6 *Sziasztok 3.b-sek!!!!*
Student6 'Hello everyone in 3b!!!!'

Diák7 *Sziasztok*
Student7 'Hello everyone'

Diák8 *Szia [Keresztnév] néni! Nekem is sikerült csatlakozni! 😊 Mindenkit szeretettel üdvözlök! [Becézett keresztnév]*

Student8 'Hello Auntie [given name]! I've also managed to join in! I'm greeting everybody with love! [nick version of given name]

Diák2 *Á már ti is itt vagytok*

Student2 'Oh so you are already here too'

Diák2 *Közületek valaki Skypaol?*

Student2 'Does any of you use Skype?'

Diák9 *én igen [Becézett keresztnév]*

Student9 'I do [nick version of given name]'

Diák9 *sziasztok [Becézett keresztnév]*

Student9 'hello everybody [nick version of given name]'

Diák10 *Sziasztok én is meg jöttem.*

Student10 'Hello everybody I've arrived too.'

Diák11 *Hello megérkeztem!*

Student11 'Hello I have arrived!'

Diák 12 *Én is!*⁴

Student12 'Me too!'

Tanár *Jó reggelt, jó reggelt! Fantasztikusak vagytok! Büszke vagyok rátok! Egyre többen idetalálnak az osztályból! Jó étvágyat a reggelihez mindenkinek! [Keresztnév] néni*

Teacher 'Good morning, good morning! You are fantastic! I'm proud of you! More and more people from the class manage to find their way here! Enjoy your breakfast everyone! Auntie [given name]

Diák13 *sziasztok megjöttem!*

Student13 *hello everyone I have arrived!*

Diák14 *Szia [Keresztnév] néni és többiek, Én is itt vagyok.*

Student14 'Hello Auntie [given name] and others, I'm also here.'

Diák15 *Sziasztok!*

Student15 'Hello everyone!'

Diák16 *Sziasztok! [Becézett keresztnév] jelen*

Student16 'Hello everyone! [Given name] is present'

Diák17 *Szia [Keresztnév] néni és többiek. [Keresztnév]*

Student17 'Hello Auntie [given name] and others. [student's given name]'

Diák18 *Sziasztok én is beléptem!*

⁴ In line with data protection requirements, digital dialogues are reproduced anonymously.

[Keresztnév] néni

'Oh, you Dearest [given name]!

Thank you so much, I watched it five times in a row, it is so kind and nice.

I thank you very-very much.

Auntie [given name]'

b. *Gratulálok, Tündérvirág!*

'Congratulations, Fairy-flower!'

c. Diák: *Kesz*

Mar ahogy tudtam megcsináltam ☺tanarno

Tanár: Nem ez kellett te lány! ☺

Student 'It's done. I did it the way I could. :) Ms Teacher '

Teacher 'This was not the task, you girl! :)'

Message exchanges between teachers and students, suddenly becoming intense to the point of being an everyday routine, are characterized by a merging between the conventions of traditional correspondence and everyday conversations:

(9) *Jó napot kedves Tanárnő! Az lenne a kérdésem, hogy mikor fogunk majd jegyet kapni? Illetve lesz még lehetőségem kijavítani a matek karómat? Előre is köszönöm a választ! Legyen csodás napja! ☺*

'Good morning dear Ms Teacher! My question is, when are we going to get marks? And will I have a chance to correct my F grade in mathematics? Thank you for your answer in advance! Have a wonderful day! :)'

The utterance in (9), which also includes a slang element (*karó* 'F grade'), begins with a greeting formula typical of spoken discourses; however, it ends with a closing formula and good wishes characteristic of written messages.

Short messages accompanying the submission of home assignments also include a high number of phatic elements. The address form may get repeated, flanking an informative utterance (with an intersubjective meta-function) that may consist of no more than one or two sentences.

(10)

Kedves Viki néni!

Küldöm a házi feladatot!

Még mindig nem kezd elegend lenni a ppt-ékből, pedig még rajzból is kaptunk.

Viszontlátásra Viki néni!

'Dear Auntie Viki!

I'm sending my homework!

I'm still not fed up with ppt's, even though we also got a task like this in the drawing class.

Good bye, Auntie Viki!'

Tanár: *Mindörökké. semmi gond, ha ilyen probléma adódik, nyugodtan jelezd, és adok haladékat, és akkor a tiédet később ellenőrzöm.*

De most már tessék pihenni is kis bagolytársam, mert késő van 😊

Teacher: 'Forever. no problem, when something like this happens don't hesitate to tell me and I'm giving you more time, and then I'll check yours later.

But now please have a rest my little fellow owl because it's late :) '

Diák: *Köszönöm Szépen! Önnek is kéne pihenni 😊*

Student: 'Thank you very much! You should have a rest too :) '

b. *Áldást, tanárnő, azt szeretném mondani hogy a mostani feladat mennyiség amit kaptunk körülbelül a háromszorosa annak mi szokott lenni, és a kérdés/kérés lenne, hogy tudnánk-e csinálni valamit ezzel a helyzettel 😊*

'Blessing, Ms Teacher, I'd like to say that that the homework we've got is around three times the usual amount, and the question/request is if we can do something about this situation :) '

As can be seen, church greetings also make their way into the repertoire of linguistic devices used in chats, adding an extra tone to the dialogues, which are full of personal, emotional address forms and emojis.

Practices of written communication in digital public education during the quarantine period suggest that what we are witnessing is not simply the transformation of traditional correspondence. Rather, the lack of personal meetings and continuous online availability result in much more intense digital communication that fulfills a more varied than usual range of functions. In messages aimed at the management and maintenance of education, written and spoken politeness patterns are intertwined and are often jointly manifested.

SUMMARY

In the study of operations of social deixis in the educational situation of the quarantine period in spring 2020, it is important to take into account restrictions on personal contact and the exclusiveness of digital practices. Thus, the observed phenomena reflect not only peculiarities of digital distance education but also the consequences of this special situation. Specifically, the generally observed prominent role of phatic elements in computer-mediated communication is even more pronounced in the lessons and messages under study.

In online spoken lessons, social deixis plays a crucial role in the identification of discourse participants and in the turn-taking operations of holding or relinquishing the floor. Spoken and written spaces for digital education are fused and the emerging text types enter into chain-like relations, with connections typically requiring the operations of social deixis. In written operations of education management, the dominant role of attitude-marking elements is to express emotions and to reduce distance. The directness and immediacy with which contact can be established causes the linguistic practices of online education to drift towards informal, personal linguistic devices, even in the exchange of written messages.

The operations of social deixis have a profound impact on digital communication serving to organize and maintain distance education. "Verbal touches" [13] are used to make up for the lack of personal presence and the real touches that depend on spatial closeness as an embodied experience.

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