



A Deixis Analysis in The Song Lyrics of “Night Changes” By One Direction

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Abstract

This study investigates the types and pragmatic functions of deixis in One Direction’s song “Night changes.” Using a qualitative analysis content method, the research applies Levinson’s (1983) typology of person, time, place, discourse, and social deixis. The data were collected from the official lyrics and analyzed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. A total of 39 deictic expressions were identified, consisting of person deixis (22 instances), time deixis (8), place deixis (4), discourse deixis (3), and social deixis (2). The findings show that person deixis is the most frequent, highlighting the narrative perspective and interpersonal involvement between the singer and the listener, while social deixis is the least frequent, reflecting the informal tone of the lyrics. This study demonstrates how deixis constructs narrative flow and emotional engagement in pop lyrics, with practical use in EFL classrooms and translation studies.

Keywords: *Deixis; Pragmatics; Song Lyrics; Discourse; One Direction.*

Introduction

Song lyrics are a unique form of discourse that combine artistic expression with communicative function. They often employ everyday language that is highly context-dependent, which makes them a rich source for pragmatic analysis. In particular, deixis plays a vital role in positioning listeners within a narrative, guiding them through shifts in time, space, and perspective, and creating a sense of emotional involvement. As Satyadewi et al., (2023), contemporary song lyrics frequently utilize all five types of deixis person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social, thus providing opportunities to explore how contextual meaning is embedded within musical discourse.

The term deixis is derived from the Greek word for "pointing" and refers to linguistic expressions whose interpretation depends on contextual information. Fillmore (1997) emphasizes the centrality of the origo, or deictic center, as the point of reference that anchors deixis to the speaker's perspective. Levinson (1983) emphasizes that deixis is central to communication, as it enables speakers and hearers to establish shared reference by identifying who, when, and where an utterance relates to. Yule (1996) similarly describes deixis as one of the most basic yet essential aspects of language use because it ties utterances to the circumstances in which they occur. Mey (2001) also stresses that deixis should not be understood only as a technical referential device, but as a pragmatic resource that reflects the social and interactive dimensions of communication. The five major categories person, time, place, discourse, and social deixis collectively contribute to textual coherence and participant relationships, making them indispensable in both spoken and literary communication.

Several studies have analyzed deixis in song lyrics, but their findings vary depending on the song and its narrative structure. Fadilah & Resmini (2021) analyzed Taylor Swift's "Lover" and found 51 deixis items, with personal deixis dominating the text and functioning to highlight intimacy between singer and listener. Indriani & Widianingsih (2023) examined Shania Yan's "Nothing's Gonna Change My Love for You" and reported 133 deictic expressions, showing that personal deixis (60%) was most dominant, followed by discourse, temporal, and spatial deixis. Meanwhile, Kusumadewi & Anggraeni (2020) investigated Pamungkas' "One Only" and identified four deixis types, with personal deixis again overwhelmingly dominant (92.6%), reflecting the song's confessional tone. These studies collectively demonstrate that person deixis often takes precedence in song lyrics, but they also indicate variation in the presence of discourse and social deixis depending on lyrical style and cultural context.

Despite these contributions, research on deixis in English popular songs remains relatively limited, particularly regarding its pragmatic functions. Previous studies often stop at identifying deixis categories without explaining their role in narrative development, emotional resonance, or cultural interpretation. Moreover, most analyses focus on a single type of deixis (usually person deixis) and underexplore others such as discourse and social deixis. This creates a gap for further research that not only categorizes deictic expressions but also examines their communicative and pedagogical implications.

This study seeks to address that gap by analyzing deixis in One Direction's "Night Changes," a globally popular pop ballad with a narrative structure that depicts themes of time, memory, and change. The song was chosen not only for its popularity among international audiences but also for its rich use of pronouns, temporal markers, and contextual cues that lend themselves to deixis analysis. Unlike previous studies, this research adopts a comprehensive approach by examining all five categories of deixis and interpreting their pragmatic functions in shaping narrative flow and listener engagement.

Accordingly, the study aims to answer two research questions: (1) What types of deixis are found in the lyrics of “Night Changes”? and (2) How do these deictic expressions function to establish meaning, narrative cohesion, and emotional impact? By situating the analysis within Levinson’s typology and engaging with more recent research on song discourse, the study not only contributes to the growing body of pragmatics scholarship on popular culture texts but also provides practical insights into how authentic song lyrics may be used in English language teaching and discourse studies.

Method

This study employed a qualitative content analysis method to analyze the use of deixis in the lyrics of One Direction’s “Night Changes.” The qualitative approach was chosen because the aim of the research is not to measure frequency in a statistical sense alone, but rather to describe and interpret the contextual meanings of language in its natural setting. As Creswell (2014) points out, qualitative research allows for the exploration of meanings individuals ascribe to linguistic and social phenomena, making it highly suitable for pragmatic and discourse analysis.

The data source was the official lyrics of “Night Changes” retrieved from the verified platform Genius.com. This particular song was purposively selected not for generalization, but as a single case study to provide illustrative depth. Its popularity, narrative richness, and expressive use of pronouns and temporal expressions offered ample material for deixis analysis. Furthermore, the song’s theme of transformation and fleeting time resonates with deixis categories such as person, temporal, and spatial reference, making it an appropriate case study for examining contextual meaning in song discourse.

Data collection was carried out through documentation. The researcher transcribed the lyrics and carefully examined each line to identify deictic expressions. These expressions were then categorized into five types of deixis: person, time, place, discourse, and social based on Levinson’s (1983) framework. Specific criteria were applied: pronouns such as I, you, we were coded as person deixis; adverbs such as tonight, ever as time deixis; locatives such as here, downstairs as place deixis; textual markers such as this, that as discourse deixis; and relational markers such as informal you as social deixis. Ambiguous cases, such as words with both temporal and discourse functions, were discussed and resolved through peer review to ensure consistency.

The coding process followed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) model, consisting of three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting only lines containing deixis; data display was carried out by organizing findings into tables showing frequency and examples; and conclusion drawing involved interpreting the pragmatic functions of each deixis category. Inter-rater reliability was ensured by involving two linguistics lecturers who independently reviewed the categorizations. The agreement rate between

reviewers reached over 85%, and disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. This process increased the trustworthiness of the findings.

To address the issue of researcher bias, methodological limitations are acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses on a single song, which limits generalizability to other pop songs or genres. Second, interpretation of deixis is context-sensitive, which means that subjective bias cannot be entirely eliminated despite peer validation. Third, multimodal elements such as melody and music video, which may influence deixis interpretation, were not considered in this study. These limitations provide opportunities for future research to expand scope and methodology.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study adhered to academic standards by citing sources transparently and analyzing only publicly available lyrics. Since no human participants were involved, there were no requirements for informed consent or clearance from an ethics board. The lyrics were used under the principle of fair use for educational and scholarly purposes, with full attribution to the original artists and platform.

Results

The analysis of One Direction's *"Night Changes"* identified a total of 39 deictic expressions, distributed across five categories. The quantitative breakdown is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of Deixis in "Night Changes"

Type of Deixis	Frequency	Examples	Function in Lyrics
Person Deixis	22	<i>I, you, we, she, he</i>	Establishes narrative perspective, intimacy
Time Deixis	8	<i>tonight, when, ever, wake up</i>	Creates temporal framing, highlights transience
Place Deixis	4	<i>downstairs, driving, her mother's</i>	Provides spatial setting and imagery
Discourse Deixis	3	<i>this, that, repetition of phrases</i>	Ensures cohesion, emphasizes thematic elements
Social Deixis	2	Informal <i>you</i>	Signals relational closeness and informality
Total	39		

Person Deixis

Person deixis was the most frequent (22 instances). Pronouns such as *I, you, we, she, and he* were used extensively to involve the listener directly in the song's narrative. For example, the lyric *"Does it ever drive you crazy?"* employs the second-person pronoun *you* to create intimacy and invite the listener into a shared

emotional experience. Similarly, *we're only getting older, baby* uses *we* to emphasize inclusion and collective perspective.

Time Deixis

Temporal deixis appeared eight times, mostly through expressions like *tonight*, *when*, and *ever*. These markers anchor the narrative within a specific temporal framework while simultaneously evoking themes of change and impermanence. For instance, *"going out tonight"* situates the action in the present moment, while *"everything that you've ever dreamed of"* blends past and future temporalities, reflecting nostalgia and anticipation.

Place Deixis

Four instances of place deixis were identified, including *downstairs*, *driving*, and *her mother's*. These references ground the narrative in physical spaces, even though the song is primarily focused on emotional and temporal change. The phrase *"driving too fast"* highlights both literal motion and metaphorical intensity, while *"her mother's dress"* situates the listener in a domestic or celebratory context.

Discourse Deixis

Three instances of discourse deixis were noted, often through repetition and textual reference. The recurring line *"going out tonight"* functions as a discourse anchor, reinforcing thematic unity and directing attention back to the central motif of temporal change. This supports Levinson's (1983) claim that discourse deixis guides interpretation by pointing back to elements of the text itself.

Social Deixis

The least frequent category was social deixis (2 instances). It was primarily realized through the informal use of *you*, which conveys peer-level familiarity and intimacy. The lyric *"you'll never change if you don't try"* illustrates how relational proximity is encoded not through formal markers, but through tone and pronoun choice in English pop lyrics.

Discussion

The findings indicate that deixis in *Night Changes* functions not only as a referential device but also as a means of creating narrative coherence and emotional engagement. The predominance of person deixis (22 instances) shows how the song positions the listener as a direct participant in the story. This supports Levinson's (1983) view that deixis is central to establishing and sustaining social relationships in discourse.

A comparison with previous studies highlights both variation in frequency and similarity in patterns. Fadilah and Resmini (2021) reported 51 deixis items in Taylor Swift's *Lover*, while Indriani and Widianingsih (2023) identified 133 in Shania Yan's *Nothing's Gonna Change My Love for You*. Kusumadewi and Anggraeni (2020) found that 92.6% of deixis in Pamungkas' *One Only* were personal. In contrast, *Night Changes* contains 39 deictic expressions, fewer than in the other studies. Nevertheless, the results are consistent in showing that person deixis is the dominant type. This suggests that while the number of deixis items may differ across songs, person deixis regularly serves as the main driver of narrative meaning in pop lyrics.

Social deixis appears only twice in the lyrics. This limited use can be explained by the informal and intimate style of English pop songs, which do not employ honorific or hierarchical pronoun systems as in languages such as Japanese or Korean. As a result, closeness between singer and listener is expressed through personal pronouns such as *you* rather than through formal markers.

Another important aspect is multimodality. Although this study focused on the lyrics, deixis also operates in the music video. The frequent use of *you* becomes more prominent when combined with direct camera address, giving the impression that the singers are speaking to the audience personally. This interaction between words and visual cues strengthens the sense of intimacy and shows how deixis can take on additional meaning across different modes of communication.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study examined only the lyrics and did not investigate how listeners interpret or respond emotionally to deixis. Unlike research based on self-report methods such as interviews or questionnaires, this analysis cannot capture audience reception. In addition, multimodal elements such as melody, rhythm, and performance were not analyzed in depth, even though they may influence deixis interpretation. These limitations point to the need for future research that combines textual, multimodal, and audience-based approaches.

Overall, although *Night Changes* contains fewer deictic expressions than some other songs, it reflects the broader tendency of person deixis to dominate in pop lyrics. At the same time, the scarcity of social deixis and the influence of multimodal features highlight the role of deixis in shaping intimacy, narrative flow, and listener engagement in popular music.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the use of deixis in One Direction's "Night Changes" using Levinson's typology. A total of 39 deictic expressions were identified, consisting of person deixis (22 instances), time deixis (8), place deixis (4), discourse deixis (3), and social deixis (2). The findings reveal that person deixis is the most dominant, reflecting the song's emphasis on intimacy, shared experience, and personal narrative, while social deixis occurs least frequently, which reflects the informal

style typical of English pop songs. The analysis shows that deixis in song lyrics not only performs referential functions but also constructs narrative flow, emotional resonance, and audience engagement.

Theoretically, this research contributes to discourse pragmatics by demonstrating how deixis in popular music extends beyond its traditional referential role to become a tool of storytelling and affective connection. It also highlights the interaction among different deixis categories, such as person and time deixis, in reinforcing the thematic concerns of the lyrics. Compared with previous studies on deixis in songs by Taylor Swift, Shania Yan, and Pamungkas, this study strengthens the general pattern that personal deixis tends to dominate in pop ballads, yet it also shows that discourse and social deixis, though less frequent, are crucial for cohesion and relational nuance.

Practically, the findings offer several implications. In EFL contexts, teachers can incorporate popular song lyrics as authentic materials to introduce pragmatic concepts like deixis, enabling students to see how language operates in real cultural products. In translation studies, the results underscore the challenge of rendering context-dependent expressions without losing meaning, suggesting that translators must pay close attention to deictic markers in lyrics. In discourse analysis, the study affirms that popular culture texts such as songs are valid data sources for examining how language reflects social interaction, memory, and identity.

Future research should broaden the scope by including multiple songs across genres, artists, and languages to determine whether deixis distribution follows consistent patterns. Comparative and cross-cultural studies could also shed light on how deixis operates differently in languages with distinct honorific or social deixis systems. Furthermore, multimodal approaches that incorporate music videos and performance aspects would enrich the analysis of deixis in popular music. Audience reception studies could also provide insight into how listeners interpret and emotionally respond to deictic expressions.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that deixis is central to the communicative and aesthetic force of song lyrics. By bridging linguistic theory and popular culture, it highlights the potential of music to serve both as a meaningful subject of academic inquiry and as a practical tool for language education. Deixis in pop lyrics like 'Night Changes' is more than reference; it is a pragmatic tool for narrative intimacy and cultural connection.

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