1 Language and Context

1.1 DEIXIS AND THE NOTION OF LANGUAGE AS AN AUTONOMOUS SYSTEM

In contrast to formal languages such as the language of the predicate calculus, natural languages contain deictic expressions, that is, expressions of the following kind: 'I, you, this, that, here, there, now, yesterday.'

This feature of natural language becomes problematic for a certain conception of language which underlies the current discussion in semantics and pragmatics. This conception is that language is some sort of a system that can be conceptually isolated from the contexts of its use. The problem posed by deictic expressions is that their meanings seem to be closely related to features of the context of use, as observed by Stephen Levinson:

... aspects of linguistic structure sometimes directly encode (or otherwise interact with) features of the context. It then becomes impossible to draw a neat boundary between context-independent grammar (competence) and context-dependent interpretation (performance). (Levinson 1983: 8)

Levinson's remark might be viewed as a possible threat to the idea of language as an autonomous system. But consider John Lyons's observation about deixis:

There is much in the structure of languages that can only be explained on the assumption that they have developed for communication in face-to-face interaction. This is clearly so as far as deixis is concerned. (Lyons 1977: 637–638)

Here, Lyons expresses himself as though the facts of deixis not only can, but should be reconciled with the idea that language is
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a structure which is conceptually separate from the contexts of its use. As a matter of fact, Levinson describes deixis in a similar manner:

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. (Levinson 1983: 54)

In the latter two quotations we see how the underlying picture of language as an autonomous system incorporates the facts of deixis, despite the opposite suggestion of Levinson’s first statement above. Language is conceived of as an autonomous, linguistic structure. When people use bits of this structure – when they produce sentences – certain structural elements are designed for the purpose of relating the utterance to aspects of the immediate surroundings of the interlocutors: ‘Natural language utterances are thus “anchored” directly to aspects of the context’ (Levinson 1983: 55). When Levinson says:

The facts of deixis should act as a constant reminder to theoretical linguists of the simple but immensely important fact that natural languages are primarily designed, so to speak, for use in face-to-face interaction, and thus there are limits to the extent to which they can be analysed without taking this into account. (Levinson 1983: 54)

he is not therefore questioning the concept of an autonomous linguistic structure. He is only saying that since this structure is designed for a specific purpose of use, many of its features can be understood only by considering their uses. However, these features still belong to an autonomous linguistic structure. If he did not think so, it would not make sense to talk about reminding theoretical linguists about the use of language. The separation of language from contexts of use is an important feature of the established notion of language in linguistics.

What pragmatics has found regarding the indexicals of natural language, then, seems to be this: indexicals are irreducible parts of language structure, designed for the function of anchoring utterances to aspects of the context. Consequently, linguists have to investigate the indexicals as they are given in natural language