Syntactic and Semantic Functions of Deictic Expressions in EFL Saudi Students' Writing

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Abstract—The main purpose of the study was to investigate the ability of EFL Saudi students of Department of English Language and Literature at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University to use deictic expressions in their writing from a semantic perspective. To achieve this aim, the sample of the study was all level five male students majoring in English and studying the semantics course 363 at the English Department of Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in summer 2014. The sample consisted of 18 B.A students. All of them belonged to the same homogeneous group since they all belonged to the same level (level 5). To collect the data, the students were assigned a writing test for this study at the very last session of the course. The students were asked to write a topic of 150 words about a place they know, and a person who attends this place. They were inquired to use as much as they can of deictic expressions they have studied in their semantics course. Data were analyzed by using mean scores, standard deviation, t-test and covariance. The findings data analysis revealed that EFL Saudi students were capable to use the target deictic expressions more in syntactic functions than in semantic functions. The results also indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the subjects' representation of the deictic expressions in the syntactic functions and the semantic functions.

Index Terms—semantics, syntax, deictic expressions and writing

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study was to investigate the ability of EFL Saudi students of Department of English Language and Literature at Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University to use deictic expressions in their writing from a semantic perspective. Use of Deictic expressions of EFL Saudi Students in English writing classes is rarely investigated. The study aims at finding whether this group of students is able to use these semantic terms effectively in their writing.

The phenomenon of deixis "pointing to a real object" is one of the most obvious ways of connecting language to a non -linguistic physical object that exists our real world. The use of this phenomenon can be described in terms of the ability of using gestural deictic terms with reference to a visual, physical entity expressed in a linguistic context. Deictic expressions can belong to one of the following categories: personal pronouns (I, we, you), demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those), verbs of psychological shifting (come, go), adverbs of time (today, yesterday, tomorrow), tenses (present, past, progressive, future, perfect), adverbs of place (here, there), and reported speech.

Diewald (1991), portraits the efficient representation of deictic expressions in an author text in a specific universe of discourse. "The writer can reconstruct the addressees' knowledge through using deictic expression by focusing their attention on a referent already presented in their knowledge of their physical exiting world' (pp. 110-111). The notion of Knowledge reconstruction of the addressees through using deictic expressions presented by Diewald was supported by others scholars (Bluhdorn, 1995; Ehlich, 1983; and Lyons, 1977).

Bosch and Umbach (200) indicated that the use of deictic expressions is not a syntactic process rather it is a semantic discourse function where the addressee can determine his choice of a referral deictic expression based on the language discourse within a linguistic topic and context.

Hanks (2005) indicated that deictic expressions in English like (this, that, here and there) have a special occurrence in a linguistic context that determines their meaning through a referential entity that exists in the real world of the hearer. Redder (2008: 141), Rehbein and Kameyama (2006) stressed the significant use of deictic expressions in daily discourse of written texts as they contribute to reconstruct the hearer knowledge of the surrounding objects of physical referents.

In a contrastive analysis study, Lewandowski (2007), confirmed that the verbs of psychological shifting (come and go) are deictic on pragmatic grounds among three European languages (Polish, German and Spanish). The two verbs appear in context of movement towards the speaker and addressee, but their referent is always different in each situation depending on who the speaker is and who the addressee is. According to him, the phenomenon of the deictic expressions of the psychological shifting verbs has been the spot of research done by a multiple of linguists such as (Fillmore (1971, 1975, 1982, Lyons 1977; Rauh, 1983; Levinson, 1983, 2004; Sennholz, 985; and Lenz, 2003). All the studies of such scholars emphasized the notion that the two verbs (come and go) are coded grammatically, but their meaning is semantically interpreted according to the context of the linguistic expression of the speaker and the addressee.

Becher (2010) indicated that other personal deictic namely (he, she, it) cannot be treated as other personal deictic such as" I. we and you" as they have their syntactical function rather their referential semantic representation. His perspective is based on the notion of expressions whose function is a semantic deictic reference, not a syntactic reference.

The current study focuses on Saudi EFL students' ability of using deictic expression in their writing from a semantic perspective, not from a syntactic function as Becher (2010) confirmed in his study.

A. Research Problem

The researcher has noticed that his EFL Saudi students in a semantic course he was teaching in different semesters were confused about the semantic functions of the deictic expressions presented in their semantics course book. For instance, if students were asked to use the personal pronouns semantically in a deictic manner, they would use them syntactically as each pronoun was expected to have a grammatical and lexical antecedent. The student may have a legitimate reason for using deictic expressions as they study several courses of grammar, while they study one semantic course during the whole B.A program of English. In addition, if the students were asked to do a drill and practice exercise where they were asked to use the set of deictic expressions they studied in their semantics course, they failed to use them semantically, rather they commonly used them syntactically. Therefore, they study came to address this problem aiming at raising the students' awareness of the semantic use of deictic expressions and enhance their semantic knowledge of these expressions to be used pragmatically and contextually, where students can reach a distinctive point of realization that deictic expressions are semantically different from their syntactic use.

B. Research Questions

The study begins with the hypothesis that when EEL Saudi students were given a writing task, they tended to use deictic expressions in grammatical and syntactic functions more than they used them in semantic functions. Thus, the study attempted to answer the following three questions:

1- To what extent can EFL Saudi students use deictic expressions semantically when given a writing task?

2- What deictic expressions are more semantically used in EFL Saudi students?

3- Are there any significant differences between using deictic expressions syntactically and semantically?

C. Significance of the Study

The study is significant for the following reasons: First, at a theoretical level, the results will contribute to a cumulative body of research based on the theory of the differences in relationships between the syntactic and semantic use of deictic expressions in students' writing. The results will contribute to raise the awareness of students who may become more capable to distinguish between the syntactic and semantic functions of deictic expressions. Second, the study results may contribute to some significant teaching implications for the writing teachers of English to prompt his writers to focus more on the semantic functions of deictic expressions in their writing classes. Finally, the study may open new venues of research in the Kingdom that focus on semantics and writing. The researcher has noticed that there was a minimum of research done so far in the field of semantics and writing in educational institutions of Saudi Arabia.

II. METHOD

A. Participants

The population was all level five male students majoring in English and studying the semantics course 363 at the English Department of Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in summer 2014. The sample consisted of 18 B.A students. All of them belonged to the same homogeneous group since they all belonged to the same level (level 5), and all of them have passed all the perquisite courses that qualify them to register in this course.

The class was chosen on availability rather than random selection since it was the only one section offered by the English Department for the semantics course 363 in summer 2014.

The age of participants' age was controlled as a confounding factor; their age was ranging between 19-20 years old, and that ensured age would not affect their writing efficiency level. The participant's gender is also controlled as a confounding factor since all of the subjects of the study were boys in the male branch of the university.

B. Material

Semantics -A Course book, second edition by Hurford et al, (2007) was used to teach them the deictic expressions and in particular unit seven. The first six units of the course book were mainly about referring expressions and reference/referent. Unit seven comes as a practical application of referring expressions where the students were prompted to identify the referent of each deictic expressions.

After, the completion of summer course, the students were assigned a writing test for this study (Appendix 1) at the very last session of the course. The students were asked to write a topic of 150 words about a place they know, and a person who attends this place. They were inquired to use as much as they can of deictic expressions they have studied in their semantics course. The deictic expressions they were expected to demonstrate in this writing task were seven categories as follow: personal pronouns (I, we, you), demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these, those), verbs of

psychological shifting (come, go), adverbs of time (today, yesterday, tomorrow), tenses (present, past, progressive, future, perfect), adverbs of place (here, there), and reported speech.

The researcher prompted the students to present deictic expressions as much as they can in their writing task from a semantic perspective. It was explained to them that the main purpose of this test was to serve the goal of this study, and their final product would not affect their grade in the course. Therefore, they were encouraged to accomplish the writing task with full ease and with a minimum level of stress. The time assigned to this test was one hour.

The students were also asked to sign a consent form if they were willing to participate in the study, and to have their papers examined by the researcher for the purposes of the study.

C. Data Collection

The researcher himself conducted the test toward the end of 2014 summer semester. The students who originally signed in the semantics course for summer course were 32, but 25 students participated in the study. The other seven students either dropped the course, or they were absent on the day of the exam session. Out of 25 papers, seven exam sheets were excluded from data collection because five students intentionally or unintentionally did not sign the consent form, while two students decided to withdraw in the middle of the exam session. Therefore, the writing sheets were incomplete and cannot be considered for analysis.

At the end of the writing task, students were asked to list all the deictic expressions in a table, and along with their categories used correctly in semantics functions of the writing topic.

Students' representation of deictic expressions syntactically or semantically in their writing was collected, sorted out and tabulated as shown in table 1 (Appendix 2).

The table demonstrated the process of data collection. The researcher categorized the deictic expressions used by the subjects of the study as shown in the table; they were seven categories. Each student's sheet was attached to a separate table, the researcher started filling the table for each student's sheet according to the type of the deictic expression, and according to its functional occurrence; whether it was syntactic or semantic.

The main goal of such tabulation was to help the researcher identify which type of deictic expression was used more in syntactic representations, or semantic representations. This categorization was congruent with the researcher's assumption demonstrated in the study questions that there might be significant differences in students' representation of deictic expressions in syntactic and semantic functions.

D. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the following statistical techniques were used:

- The mean scores and percentages of frequencies were employed to answer the first two questions. These statistical procedures were conducted to measure the representation of the target deictic expressions of the writing task in the semantic and syntactic functions:

1- To what extent can EFL Saudi students use deictic expressions semantically when given a writing task?

2- What deictic expressions are more semantically used in EFL Saudi students?

- Covariance analysis, T-test and standard deviations were used to answer the third question, and in order to find where there were significant statistical differences between the syntactic and semantic representations in the writing task:

3- Are there any significant differences between using deictic expressions syntactically and semantically?

III. RESULTS

The first two questions attempted to find out to what extent EFL Saudi students can use deictic expressions semantically when given a writing task and what deictic expressions EFL Saudi students can use more semantically.

Table (2) showed that the study subjects were able to use the deictic expressions syntactically and semantically. However, the personal pronouns received the highest percentage (77.78), followed by demonstrative pronouns and adverbs of time (66.67), verbs of psychological shifting and tenses (55.56), and finally adverbs of place (44.44). Obviously, the reported speech received the lowest percentage (11.11).

On the other hand, table (2) indicated that the study subjects were less capable of using the target deictic expressions in semantic functions than syntactic functions. In other words, the EFL Saudi students were more efficient in using these deictic expressions in syntactic functions than in semantic functions. The mean score percentage for the syntactic function was (68.71), while it was (31.29) for the semantic functions.

TABLE 2.
MEAN SCORES AND PERCENTAGES OF THE SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC USE OF DEICTIC EXPRESSIONS

Deictic Expression Category	N=18	Actual use of Deictic Expression	Percentages	Frequency of Semantic Occurrences	Percentages	Frequency of Syntactic Occurrences	Percentages
Personal pronouns	18	14	77.78	5	35.71	9	64.29
Demonstrative pronouns	18	12	66.67	4	33.33	8	66.67
Psychological shifting verbs	18	10	55.56	2	20.00	8	80.00
Adverbs of time	18	12	66.67	3	25.00	9	75.00
Tenses	18	10	55.56	3	30.00	7	70.00
Adverbs of Place	18	8	44.44	6	75.00	2	25.00
Reported speech	18	2	11.11	0	0.00	2	100.00
Mean Score	18.00	9.71	53.97	3.29	31.29	6.43	68.71

The third question attempted to find out if there were any significant differences between using deictic expressions syntactically and semantically.

Table (3) showed that the mean score for the syntactic function was (68.71) with a Standard Deviation (4.63). Whereas, the mean score for the semantic function was (31.29) with a Standard Deviation (4.63). Descriptive statistics in this table indicated the study subjects were more efficient in using deictic expressions syntactically than using them semantically. The statistical (T- value was (-9.75) at the level of probability (0.010), which is significant at the level (0.05), this indicated that there were statistically significant differences in students' performances on the syntactical and semantic functions of the deictic terms.

TABLE 3.
MEAN STANDARD DEVIATION AND CO-VARIANCE OF THE SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS

P	Deictic categories		Chi-Square	F-Value	T	DF	Source of variance
	Standard Deviation	Mean Score					Function
0.010	4.63	68.71	286.36	0.00	-9.75	1	Syntactic
	1.14	31.29	59.55			1	Semantic
						17	Error
						19	Total

IV. DISCUSSION

As for the first two questions, data analysis revealed that EFL Saudi students were capable to use the target deictic expressions more in syntactic functions than in semantic functions. Other researchers have supported this result. Jonson and Lepore (2002) argued that semantics is undetermined by syntax. Therefore, they suggested there should be conceptually tight connections between syntax and semantics. An interpretation for this finding was that English classroom teachers at university level make a complete segregation between syntax and semantics. The researcher, thus, recommends English teachers to teach syntax and semantics in an interdisciplinary approach and in a manner that makes students understand the two fields are conceptually related and tightly connected. The rationale behind this recommendation is that students may be able to produce syntactic structures, but they may fail to comprehend the meanings underlining these structures on a semantic basis. The data presented in the subjects' responses of the study showed that the students were more able to identify the grammatical reference or antecedent than identifying the semantic referent of a deictic expression.

Another possible reason for such a low performance of the study subjects on the semantic use of the deictic expressions is that English Departments offer more courses for syntax and grammar than they do offer for semantics courses. The researcher recommends that there should be a balance between syntax and semantics courses offered to students majoring in English.

Consequently, the finding of the third question was congruent with argument presented above. The results revealed that there were statistically significant differences between the subjects' representation of the deictic expressions in the syntactic functions and the semantic functions. The finding of question 3 may be attributed to the effect of L1 on L2 syntactic and semantic functions. Al-Sabagh etal (2013), in a study about Using the Semantic-Syntactic Interface for Reliable Arabic Modality Annotation, found that Arabic syntactic and semantic functions have more regular sub categorization patters than these functions have in English. Such regularities in Arabic may constitute a compounding factor that hinders EFL Saudi students to understand the connection between the syntactic and semantic functions.

The researcher has concluded that some of the problems that the EFL students face can be related to the curriculum design of the English departments in the Arab world. Therefore, one of the educational implications based on the findings of the study is that the syntax courses and semantics courses should be taught in an interdisciplinary manner. Besides, Semantics courses should be offered in balance with grammar and syntax courses. A final educational

implementation is that the writing teacher should reflect on the strong tights between syntax and semantics when teaching writing. The writing teachers should be syntactically and semantically oriented when they teach writing classes for EFL students.

APPENDIX 1. THE WRITING TASK

Deictic Expressions in Saudi TEFL Students' Writing; A semantics perspective
Summer 2014
Date: July 1, 2014
Dearest student,

This piece of writing is for a research study conducted on deictic expressions. Your participation in this study is appreciated and the results of the study will be confidential, will not be shared with third party, and will not affect your evaluation in this course. If you are willing to participate, please write your name and sign in the space provided.

Sincerely,
Researcher, Dr. Mohammad Hamdan

Consent signatory form
Student's Name ------------------------. Level (--). Signature ---------------------------

1- Write a topic of 150 words about a place you know and a person who attends this place. Use as much as you can of deictic expressions you have studied in your semantics course. The place can be a university and the person is a student, an office and worker, a hospital and a nurse or a doctor, etc.

2- After finishing your writing task, In the table below, please list all the deictic expressions along with their categories you think you used correctly in semantics functions of the writing topic. Please follow the example in the first row in the table.

Deictic expression	Category
Example (this, that)	Demonstrative pronouns

APPENDIX 2. TABLE 1. SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC REPRESENTATION OF DEICTIC REPRESENTATION IN STUDENTS'
WRITING

Deictic Expression Category	Frequency of Semantic Occurrences	Frequency of Syntactic Occurrences	Percentages
Personal pronouns			
Demonstrative pronouns			
Psychological shifting verbs			
Adverbs of time			
Tenses			
Adverbs of Place			
Reported Speech			

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