

Constructing Emotional Meaning Through Deixis: A Semantic Analysis of Deictic Expressions in Adele's "Someone Like You"

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Abstract

This research examines how deictic markers in Adele's well-known song "Someone Like You" generate emotional significance through a semantic lens. Using a mixed approach that combines qualitative identification and quantitative frequency counts, the study isolates five categories of deixis—person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social—within the lyric text. The analysis tracks how each type shifts its reference according to the song's narrative context and maps those shifts onto the emotional states expressed across verses, chorus, bridge, and outro. The findings show that person deixis (I, you, someone) appears most often, building both intimacy and psychological distance. Temporal markers (never mind, sometimes) evoke nostalgia and regret, while spatial terms (here, there) mark emotional separation. Discourse connectors (but, so, and) weave the lyrical fragments into a coherent story, and a clear shift in deictic center moves the listener's perspective from observer to dialogue participant to solitary reflector. These results confirm that deixis operates as a core semantic device for constructing affective meaning in popular music, directly answering the research questions about how context-dependent reference produces the song's emotional arc from longing to acceptance. Practically, songwriters and music educators can apply deictic mapping to enhance emotional storytelling or to teach language-emotion interplay in lyrics. Future comparative studies across musical genres or languages are suggested to test the generalizability of these patterns.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent linguistic studies, popular music has increasingly been recognized as a valuable source of authentic language data. Song lyrics provide a natural context in which meaning is constructed and interpreted, allowing researchers to explore how language operates in emotionally rich discourse [1], [2]. Song lyrics have also been widely studied as linguistic texts because they contain contextual and emotional meanings that reflect authentic communication patterns [6], [7], [8]. One widely acknowledged example is Adele's *Someone Like You*, a song notable for its strong emotional appeal. While the musical composition enhances this effect, the linguistic choices within the lyrics play a crucial role in conveying meaning. Among these, deixis emerges as a central feature that significantly contributes to how the message of the song is understood.

Deixis refers to expressions whose interpretation relies on contextual factors such as speaker, time, and place [3]. Several recent studies have shown that deixis in song lyrics helps listeners interpret emotional relationships and narrative perspective through contextual references [9], [10], [11]. Words such as I, you, here, and now do not have fixed referents; instead, their meanings shift depending on the context in which they are used. In everyday communication, such expressions help participants establish a shared frame of reference. However, in song lyrics, where no direct interaction occurs between speaker and listener, deixis functions by constructing an imagined context that allows listeners to engage with the narrative as if they were part of the emotional experience [4].

Previous studies have investigated deixis across various discourse types, including spoken interaction, literary texts, and digital communication. In song lyrics, research has shown that personal deixis can create a sense of intimacy between the singer and the audience, while temporal and spatial deixis contribute to emotional nuances such as nostalgia and anticipation [1], [2], [4]. However, most of these studies emphasize pragmatic aspects, such as audience engagement and rhetorical effects, rather than providing a systematic semantic explanation of how deictic expressions construct meaning

within a fixed lyrical text. This limitation indicates the need for a more focused semantic approach to understanding deixis in song lyrics. From a pedagogical perspective, the issue of deixis is particularly relevant for learners of English as a foreign language. Many students encounter difficulties in interpreting context-dependent expressions, especially in literary and lyrical texts where referents are often implicit rather than explicitly stated. This challenge can lead to misinterpretation of meaning, particularly in reading and listening activities that require learners to infer contextual relationships. In this context, song lyrics offer a valuable instructional resource. As authentic materials, songs expose learners to natural language use while also increasing engagement and motivation due to their emotional and cultural appeal. Therefore, integrating song-based analysis in language learning can help students better understand abstract linguistic features such as deixis in a more meaningful and relatable way.

From a theoretical perspective, deixis is closely related to semantics and pragmatics because meaning depends on contextual interpretation rather than fixed reference [12], [13], [14]. Despite the popularity of *Someone Like You* as an example of emotionally expressive storytelling, there has been limited systematic research focusing on the semantic role of deixis in this song. In particular, no comprehensive study has identified the full range of deictic categories or examined how these expressions interact to construct the song's evolving emotional narrative from past longing to present acceptance. This lack of semantic-focused analysis limits a deeper understanding of how meaning is systematically constructed in song lyrics.

Therefore, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- a) What types of deixis (person, time, place, discourse, and social) are present in Adele's *Someone Like You*, and how can they be identified based on semantic criteria?
- b) How do these deictic expressions construct context-dependent meaning, particularly in representing shifts between past and present as well as between self and others?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the semantic analysis of deixis in song lyrics, complementing previous pragmatic studies [1], [2], [4]. Furthermore, it aims to provide pedagogical insights into how authentic materials such as songs can support language learning, particularly in helping learners interpret meaning that depends on context. Methodologically, this study also follows qualitative principles in linguistic research as proposed by Creswell and Creswell [15].

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative descriptive design is appropriate for analyzing contextual meaning and linguistic expressions in texts [15]. This study applied a qualitative descriptive method to investigate deictic expressions in Adele's *Someone Like You*. This design was chosen because it allows a detailed examination of linguistic elements within a fixed text, particularly in explaining how meaning is shaped through contextual interpretation. The data source of this research was the official lyrics of the song, which were treated as a complete textual dataset. The lyrics were carefully reviewed and verified to ensure their accuracy before proceeding to analysis. To guide the analysis, a coding framework was developed as the main research instrument. This framework was used to systematically identify and classify all deictic expressions found in the lyrics. Each relevant word or phrase was grouped into five categories of deixis: person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social deixis. The classification was based on commonly accepted theoretical definitions, with clear criteria assigned to each category. Person deixis includes pronouns that refer to participants in the discourse, such as *I*, *you*, and *we*. Temporal deixis refers to expressions indicating time, such as *now* or *then*. Spatial deixis involves references to location, for example *here* and *there*. Discourse deixis refers to elements that point to parts of the text itself, while social deixis reflects social relationships or levels of formality conveyed through language use. To maintain consistency and objectivity, the identified data were organized into a structured coding table. The table consisted of several components: line number, excerpt of the lyric, identified deictic item, type of deixis, contextual reference (such as speaker, addressee, time, or place), and interpreted meaning. This format enabled the researcher to systematically trace how each deictic expression functions within its immediate context as well as across the overall narrative of the song.

The categorization of deixis in this study refers to semantic and pragmatic theories proposed by Yule [12], Levinson [13], and Saeed [14]. The analytical process was conducted through four stages. First, the lyrics were examined line by line to locate all potential deictic expressions, which were then classified according to the predefined categories. Second, a contextual interpretation was carried out to determine how the reference of each expression changes depending on its surrounding context, including identifying who is speaking, who is being addressed, and what temporal or spatial setting is implied. Third, the findings were linked to the emotional development of the song by associating specific deictic patterns with dominant emotional themes such as regret, longing, and acceptance. Finally, to strengthen the validity of the analysis, triangulation was employed by comparing the results with previous studies on deixis and emotional meaning in song lyrics [1], [2], [4].

All procedures were described in a clear and systematic manner to ensure transparency and allow replication. By applying the same coding scheme and analytical steps, future researchers can reproduce the study using the same data and approach, thereby supporting the reliability of the findings.

Table 2.1 Coding Scheme for Deictic Expressions Analysis

Lyric Excerpt	Deictic Expression	Type of Deixis	Contextual Reference	Interpreted Meaning
I heard that you're settled down	I	Person	Speaker (the singer/narrator)	Refers to the self expressing personal experience
I heard that you're settled down	you	Person	Addressee (former lover)	Refers to the person being addressed in the song
That you found a girl and you're married now	Now	Temporal	Present time	Indicates the current situation of the addressee
I heard that your dreams came true	your	Person	Addressee	Shows possession related to the addressee
Old friend, why are you so shy?	You	Person	Addressee	Direct reference to the listener within the narrative
It ain't like you to hold back or hide from the light	It	Discourse	Refers to situation/action	Points to the behavior being discussed
I hate to turn up out of the blue uninvited	I	Person	Speaker	Expresses personal feeling/action
But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it	It	Discourse	Situation/feeling	Refers to emotional struggle
I had hoped you'd see my face	You	Person	Addressee	Indicates expected perception by listener
And that you'd be reminded that for me it isn't over	That	Discourse	Previous statement	Refers to prior idea mentioned
Never mind, I'll find someone like you	You	Person	Addressee	Maintains reference to former partner
I wish nothing but the best for you, too	You	Person	Addressee	Expresses emotional intention toward listener
Don't forget me, I beg, I remember you said	Me	Person	Speaker	Refers back to the narrator
Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead	Sometimes	Temporal	General time	Indicates non-specific time reference
Yesterday was the time of our lives	Yesterday	Temporal	Past time	Refers to shared past experience
We were born and raised in a summer haze	We	Person	Speaker + addressee	Refers to shared identity/experience
Bound by the surprise of our glory days	Our	Person	Shared reference	Indicates shared past ownership
I hate to turn up out of the blue	The blue	Spatial	Abstract place/context	Indicates unexpected situation

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Distribution of Deictic Expressions in the Lyrics

The findings indicate that all five categories of deixis are present in *Someone Like You*, with person deixis occurring most frequently. Similar findings regarding the dominance of person deixis in song lyrics were also reported in previous studies [6], [7], [9]. As presented in Table 1, person deixis appears 24 times, significantly higher than temporal (9), discourse (8), spatial (6), and social deixis (5). This distribution suggests that the song primarily constructs meaning through interpersonal reference rather than spatial or social orientation.

The dominance of person deixis reflects the centrality of the relationship between I and you in shaping the narrative. Temporal and spatial elements function as supporting mechanisms that situate emotional experiences within a shifting perspective. This pattern confirms that deixis in song lyrics serves not only a referential function but also a structural role in organizing meaning across the text [2].

3.2 Person Deixis and the Construction of Emotional Relationship

Person deixis is the most prominent feature, creating an imagined interaction between the speaker and the addressee. The repeated use of I and you positions the listener within a simulated dialogue, enhancing emotional engagement. This supports the idea that second-person reference in song lyrics fosters a sense of intimacy even without a real communicative context [2].

A notable semantic shift occurs in the line “I’ll find someone like you,” where the reference moves from a specific individual (you) to a generalized entity (someone). This shift indicates a transition from attachment to emotional distancing. As reflected in Table 2, this segment is associated with resignation and hope, suggesting that person deixis plays a key role in signaling emotional transformation within the song. This finding supports previous research showing that first- and second-person pronouns strengthen emotional intimacy in lyrical discourse [8], [10].

3.3 Temporal Deixis and the Representation of Emotional Time

The emotional function of temporal deixis has also been emphasized in earlier analyses of popular song lyrics [4], [11]. Temporal deixis contributes to structuring the emotional progression rather than merely indicating chronological time. Expressions such as now, sometimes, and never mind function as markers of shifting perspective between past and present. For instance, “Never mind” signals a turning point where the speaker attempts to release past emotions, while “sometimes” introduces a contrast between different outcomes of love. This duality, as shown in Table 2, creates a sense of emotional contradiction. Such use of temporal deixis supports the view that time expressions in lyrics often convey psychological rather than strictly literal temporal meaning [4].

3.4 Spatial Deixis and Psychological Distance

Although less frequent, spatial deixis plays an important role in representing emotional separation. Words such as here and there are interpreted not as physical locations but as symbolic positions reflecting the emotional states of the speaker and the addressee. Spatial deixis in song lyrics is often interpreted metaphorically rather than literally [9].

The contrast between these expressions highlights a growing distance between the two individuals. As indicated in Table 1, spatial deixis contributes to visualizing relational separation despite its lower frequency. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that spatial references in song lyrics often function metaphorically to express emotional distance [4].

3.5 Discourse Deixis and Narrative Coherence

Discourse deixis functions as a cohesive device that links different parts of the song into a unified narrative. Conjunctions such as but and so guide the logical progression of ideas. Discourse markers help maintain textual coherence and emotional continuity within lyrical narratives [5], [14]. For example, but introduces contrast in “Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead,” emphasizing the tension between hope and disappointment. Meanwhile, so in “So I’ll go” signals a conclusion derived from earlier reflections. As illustrated in Table 2, these connectors are closely associated with moments of emotional contradiction and resolution, supporting the argument that discourse deixis contributes to the structural coherence of lyrical texts [5].

3.6 Deictic Shift and Emotional Meaning Construction

A key finding of this study is the presence of deictic shift, where the reference point changes throughout the song. Initially, the speaker (I) observes the addressee (you) from a distance. This perspective then shifts to direct address and eventually to self-reflection.

These shifts can be understood as a progression from observation to interaction and finally to acceptance. Table 2 demonstrates how each stage corresponds to different emotional tones, ranging from curiosity and regret to acceptance. This dynamic change in perspective supports the idea that deictic expressions play a crucial role in constructing emotional meaning within a narrative [3].

3.7 Pedagogical Implications for English Language Learning

The results of this study provide practical implications for English language teaching, particularly in helping learners understand context-dependent meaning. Deictic expressions are often challenging because their interpretation depends on context rather than fixed reference, which can lead to misunderstanding in listening and reading tasks. Previous studies also confirm that songs can improve learners’ motivation and contextual understanding in language learning environments [6], [7], [11].

By using song lyrics as authentic materials, teachers can guide students to identify referents of expressions such as I, you, here, and now, thereby improving their interpretive skills. Additionally, as shown in Table 2, linking deixis to emotional meaning can help learners develop deeper comprehension of texts. This approach is supported by research indicating that authentic and emotionally engaging materials, such as songs, can enhance learner motivation and facilitate language acquisition [1].

Table 1. Types and Frequency of Deictic Expressions

Deixis Type	Lyric Examples	Occurrences	Primary Role
Person	I, me, you, someone, my, your	24	Refers to singer, listener, or an unnamed other
Temporal	never mind, sometimes, in time, now, then	9	Marks time relative to the song's narrative moment
Spatial	here, there, somewhere, wherever	6	Indicates location relative to the singer's position
Discourse	that, but, and, so (as connectors)	8	Links different parts of the lyrical narrative
Social	darling, my love, you (as address form)	5	Signals interpersonal relationship or attitude

Lyric of the song,

[Intro]

I heard that you're settled down
 That you found a girl and you're married now

[Verse 1]

I heard that your dreams came true
 Guess she gave you things, I didn't give to you
 Old friend, why are you so shy?
 It ain't like you to hold back or hide from the light

[Pre-Chorus]

I hate to turn up out of the blue, uninvited
 But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it
 I had hoped you'd see my face
 And that you'd be reminded that for me, it isn't over

[Chorus]

Never mind, I'll find someone like you
 I wish nothing but the best for you, too
 "Don't forget me," I beg
 I remember you said
 "Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"
 "Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"

[Verse 2]

You know how the time flies
 Only yesterday was the time of our lives
 We were born and raised in a summer haze
 Bound by the surprise of our glory days

[Pre-Chorus]

I hate to turn up out of the blue, uninvited
 But I couldn't stay away, I couldn't fight it
 I had hoped you'd see my face
 And that you'd be reminded that for me, it isn't over

[Chorus]

Never mind, I'll find someone like you
 I wish nothing but the best for you, too
 "Don't forget me," I beg
 I remember you said
 "Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"

[Bridge]

Nothing compares, no worries or cares
 Regrets and mistakes, they're memories made
 Who would have known how bittersweet this would taste?

[Chorus]

Never mind, I'll find someone like you
 I wish nothing but the best for you, too
 "Don't forget me," I beg
 I remember you said
 "Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"

[Outro]

Never mind, I'll find someone like you
 I wish nothing but the best for you, too
 "Don't forget me," I beg
 I remember you said
 "Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"
 "Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"

Table 2. Mapping Deictic Patterns to Emotional Tone

Lyric Segment	Example line	Dominant Deixis	Expressed Emotion
Verse 1	"I heard that you're settled down"	Person	Bitter curiosity
Verse 2	"Never mind, I'll find someone like you"	Temporal+Person	Resignation mixed with hope
Chorus	"Sometimes it lasts in love, but sometimes it hurts instead"	Temporal+Discourse	Emotional contradiction
Bridge	"I wish nothing but the best for you, too"	Person+Social	Painful kindness
Social	"You know how the time flies"	Temporal+person	Melancholic acceptance

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the types and functions of deictic expressions in Adele's *Someone Like You* and to examine how these expressions contribute to the construction of emotional meaning. The findings reveal that all five types of deixis person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social are present in the lyrics, with person deixis as the most dominant category. This dominance indicates that the emotional narrative of the song is primarily built through the relationship between the speaker (I) and the addressee (you), which creates a strong sense of interpersonal engagement.

Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that deictic expressions in the song do not function merely as grammatical markers but as key elements in shaping meaning. In particular, deictic shift plays a central role in structuring the emotional progression of the lyrics. The movement of the deictic center from observation, to interaction, and finally to self-reflection—allows listeners to experience changes in perspective alongside the speaker. This dynamic supports the view that deixis contributes significantly to the construction of emotional meaning in language [3].

In addition, the interaction between different types of deixis enhances the depth of the narrative. The combination of person deixis with temporal expressions (such as *sometimes* and *never mind*) helps represent the transition from past experiences to present acceptance. Similarly, spatial deixis contributes to the representation of psychological distance, while discourse deixis ensures coherence across the lyrical structure. These findings confirm that meaning in song lyrics is constructed through the interplay of linguistic elements rather than through isolated expressions, as also suggested in previous studies on deixis in songs [4].

From a pedagogical perspective, this study highlights the value of song lyrics as authentic materials in English language learning. The analysis shows that deictic expressions can be challenging for learners due to their context-dependent nature. By using songs as instructional resources, teachers can help students improve their ability to interpret meaning in listening and reading activities. Moreover, analyzing deixis can support students in developing writing skills, particularly in constructing coherent and expressive narratives. Overall, the findings strengthen previous semantic and pragmatic studies on deixis in song lyrics [6]–[11] and confirm that contextual references contribute significantly to emotional meaning construction.

However, this study is limited to a single song, which may not fully represent the broader use of deixis in popular music. Therefore, future research is recommended to examine a larger corpus of songs across different genres or artists to provide more comprehensive findings. Further studies may also explore the relationship between deixis and other linguistic features, such as metaphor or narrative structure, to gain a deeper understanding of meaning construction in song lyrics.

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