

## Exploring Deixis in Taylor Swift's Song 'Cardigan': A Descriptive Qualitative Analysis

Kartika S

*Faculty of Sharia, UIN Raden Intan Lampung, Indonesia*

### ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of deixis—a pragmatic linguistic concept of context-dependent expressions—in Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan." Utilizing a descriptive qualitative research design, the analysis categorizes deictic expressions in the lyrics into five types: personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse deixis. Personal deixis, represented by pronouns like "I," "you," and "we," establishes a sense of intimacy and emotional engagement by drawing listeners into the narrative. Spatial deixis, such as "back when you could touch me," evokes vivid imagery that enhances the song's nostalgic and intimate feel. Temporal deixis anchors the narrative in time, emphasizing themes of growth, reflection, and the lasting impact of past experiences, as seen in phrases like "when you are young." Social deixis reflects the complexities of relational dynamics, while discourse deixis helps maintain narrative cohesion by connecting different parts of the song. The findings highlight deixis as a powerful tool in songwriting, enabling artists to create emotionally compelling and relatable lyrics. This research underscores the importance of deixis in enhancing lyrical storytelling and emotional impact in music, offering insights for songwriters and language educators. However, the study's focus on a single song limits its generalizability across genres and languages. Future research should explore a wider range of songs and cultural contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of deixis in music. Comparative studies across languages and genres could further illuminate the universality and variability of this linguistic phenomenon in artistic expressions.

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## Introduction

Deixis is a critical concept in the field of pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics that examines how context influences the interpretation of meaning. Deixis refers to expressions that cannot be fully understood without considering the context in which they are used. These expressions, known as deictic expressions, include pronouns (e.g., "I," "you," "she"), adverbs of time and place (e.g., "now," "here," "there"), and demonstratives (e.g., "this," "that," "those"), among others (Levinson, 1983; Yule,

1996). Deictic expressions are inherently context-dependent, meaning their interpretation relies on factors such as who is speaking, to whom, when, and where the conversation occurs. Deixis is essential for effective communication because it helps establish connections between speakers and listeners, thereby contributing to the overall coherence and meaning of discourse (Fillmore, 1997).

Understanding deixis is crucial not only for general linguistic comprehension but also for appreciating its application in various forms of communication, including music. In song lyrics, deixis serves as a powerful tool that enhances the poetic and emotive quality of the language, fostering a deeper connection between the artist and the audience (Sinaga, Herman, & Marpaung, 2020). By using deictic expressions, songwriters can create intimate, immediate, and relatable experiences that draw listeners into the narrative world of the song. For instance, first-person pronouns such as "I" and "we" can make listeners feel as though they are part of the artist's personal story, while second-person pronouns like "you" directly address the audience, creating a sense of involvement and connection (Sitorus, 2019). Similarly, deictic adverbs of time (e.g., "now," "yesterday") and place (e.g., "here," "there") can anchor the song's events and emotions to specific moments and locations, enhancing the imagery and emotional impact of the lyrics (Taguchi, 2011).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the analysis of deixis in music, as scholars seek to understand how deictic expressions contribute to the narrative and emotional resonance of song lyrics. Research has shown that the strategic use of deixis in songs can evoke a range of emotions, from nostalgia and longing to hope and empowerment, by positioning the listener within the temporal and spatial framework of the lyrics (Gomes & Hidayah, 2019; Kakiay & Maitimu, 2021). For example, an analysis of deixis in John Legend's songs reveals how the singer's use of first-person and second-person pronouns creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy, making the listeners feel as though they are experiencing the singer's emotions and thoughts in real-time (Purba, 2018). Similar findings have been reported in studies on the use of deixis in other popular songs, demonstrating the importance of this linguistic phenomenon in music and its potential for enhancing the storytelling power of lyrics (Salamudin & Efransyah, 2021; Lisnawati & Parmawati, 2023).

Taylor Swift, one of the most prominent singer-songwriters of her generation, is renowned for her ability to tell compelling stories through her music. Her song "Cardigan," from the critically acclaimed album *Folklore* (2020), is a prime example of her storytelling prowess. "Cardigan" is a reflective and introspective song that deals with themes of love, loss, and nostalgia, encapsulating the emotional complexity of revisiting past relationships. In "Cardigan," Swift uses a range of deictic expressions to create a narrative that is both personal and universal, drawing listeners into the emotional landscape of the song. The song's lyrics are filled with personal deixis (e.g., "I," "you"), temporal deixis (e.g., "when," "then"), and spatial deixis (e.g., "here," "there"), all of which contribute to the vivid imagery and emotional depth of the narrative.

Personal deixis, for instance, is used extensively throughout "Cardigan" to create an intimate connection between Swift and her listeners. By using first-person pronouns

like "I" and "my," Swift invites listeners into her inner world, allowing them to experience her thoughts and emotions firsthand. The repeated use of "you" in the lyrics also serves to address the listener directly, creating a sense of immediacy and involvement. This direct address is further enhanced by the use of second-person possessive pronouns like "your," which adds a layer of intimacy and personal engagement (Yule, 1996). Such use of personal deixis allows Swift to blur the lines between the singer, the subject, and the listener, fostering a shared emotional experience that resonates deeply with her audience.

Temporal deixis also plays a significant role in shaping the narrative of "Cardigan." Through expressions like "when," "once," and "now," Swift anchors her story in specific moments of time, guiding the listener through a journey of reflection and memory. For example, the line "When you are young, they assume you know nothing" evokes a specific temporal frame, contrasting the innocence of youth with the wisdom gained through experience. Similarly, the use of "now" and "then" serves to juxtapose past and present, creating a sense of temporal movement that mirrors the emotional journey of the narrator. By employing temporal deixis in this way, Swift effectively conveys the passage of time and the lasting impact of past experiences on the present (Ifantidou, 2005).

Spatial deixis is another key element in the lyrics of "Cardigan," contributing to the song's vivid imagery and emotional impact. Expressions like "back when you could touch me" and "step into my cardigan" use spatial deixis to evoke a sense of physical closeness and distance, drawing the listener into the narrative's setting. The use of "back" as a deictic marker in "back when" not only refers to a temporal moment but also serves as a spatial anchor, suggesting a return to a place of emotional significance. This dual function of deixis as both temporal and spatial is a powerful tool that Swift uses to create a layered and immersive storytelling experience. The interplay of spatial and temporal deixis in "Cardigan" allows Swift to paint a rich emotional landscape, inviting listeners to visualize the scenes and emotions she describes (Levinson, 1983).

Additionally, social and discourse deixis are subtly woven into the lyrics of "Cardigan," further enhancing the song's narrative depth. Social deixis involves expressions that indicate social relationships and roles, such as the use of "you" to address both a specific person (the song's addressee) and the general audience (Istiaara et al., 2022). This duality allows Swift to speak directly to an individual while simultaneously engaging a broader listener base, creating a layered emotional effect. Discourse deixis, on the other hand, helps to structure the narrative and guide the listener through the unfolding story. Phrases like "I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss" use deixis to refer to earlier parts of the narrative, helping to maintain cohesion and build emotional tension as the song progresses (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

Given the intricate use of deixis in "Cardigan," this study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the deictic expressions employed in the song and explore their impact on the song's lyrical storytelling and audience engagement. By examining how personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse deixis are utilized in "Cardigan," the study seeks to shed light on the communicative and emotional effects of these deictic expressions. Moreover, this research intends to contribute to the broader understanding

of deixis in the context of popular music, offering valuable insights into the significance of this pragmatic linguistic phenomenon in the realm of songwriting and its potential implications for language education and communication (Taguchi, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

In summary, deixis plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative and emotional landscape of song lyrics, making it an essential tool for songwriters like Taylor Swift. The strategic use of deictic expressions in "Cardigan" not only enhances the song's storytelling potential but also fosters a profound emotional connection with the audience. As such, the study of deixis in music offers valuable insights into the ways in which language can be used to evoke emotions, convey personal experiences, and create meaningful connections in artistic expressions.

## Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the use of deixis in Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan." A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this research because it focuses on understanding and interpreting meanings, emotions, and narratives embedded within textual data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Unlike quantitative methods that emphasize numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research allows for a deeper exploration of linguistic phenomena in natural settings, making it ideal for examining deictic expressions in song lyrics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The descriptive qualitative methodology is chosen because it enables the researcher to describe and analyze the types of deixis in the lyrics without being confined by a particular theoretical framework (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach focuses on describing the natural occurrence of phenomena in their context, providing a rich and detailed account of how different types of deixis contribute to the narrative and emotional impact of the song (Nainggolan, et al., 2024). By categorizing and analyzing personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse deixis in "Cardigan," the study aims to provide insights into the communicative strategies used by Taylor Swift to create a profound connection with her audience.

The primary data source for this study is the lyrics of Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan," which were retrieved from a reliable online lyric database. The song was chosen because it is a well-known track from Swift's critically acclaimed album *Folklore* (2020), recognized for its storytelling and emotional depth. The lyrics of "Cardigan" are rich in deictic expressions, making it an ideal subject for analyzing how deixis is used to convey meaning and emotion in music. The data collection process involves several steps. First, the lyrics were carefully transcribed and reviewed to ensure accuracy. Following this, the lyrics were broken down into individual lines and stanzas to facilitate the identification and categorization of deictic expressions. This step is crucial because it allows for a more precise analysis of how different types of deixis are used throughout the song. The data was then categorized into five main types of deixis: personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse deixis, based on established linguistic theories (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

To enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis, the study also draws on

secondary data sources, including previous research on deixis in song lyrics (Gomes & Hidayah, 2019; Kakiay & Maitimu, 2021; Purba, 2018). These studies provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how deictic expressions function in different musical contexts, offering valuable insights into the communicative and emotional effects of deixis. By comparing the findings of this study with existing literature, the research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of deixis in music and its role in lyrical storytelling.

The data analysis process in this study involves several stages. The first stage is the identification of deictic expressions in the lyrics of "Cardigan." This involves a close reading of the lyrics to locate words and phrases that serve as deictic markers, such as pronouns (e.g., "I," "you"), adverbs of time and place (e.g., "now," "here"), and demonstratives (e.g., "this," "that") (Putri et al., 2023). The identification process is guided by established frameworks for analyzing deixis in linguistics (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996), ensuring a systematic and comprehensive approach.

After identifying the deictic expressions, the next stage involves categorizing them into five main types of deixis. Personal deixis refers to pronouns and expressions that denote participants in the communication (e.g., "I," "you," "we"). In "Cardigan," personal deixis is used extensively to create a sense of intimacy and direct engagement with the listener. For instance, the use of "I" and "you" serves to draw listeners into the narrative, making them feel personally involved in the singer's experiences and emotions (Sitorus, 2019). Spatial deixis refers to expressions that indicate locations or directions (e.g., "here," "there"). In the song, spatial deixis is used to evoke imagery and set the scene, creating a vivid backdrop for the narrative. Expressions like "back when you could touch me" use spatial deixis to suggest physical proximity and emotional closeness, enhancing the song's emotive quality (Ifantidou, 2005).

Temporal deixis refers to expressions that point to specific moments or time frames (e.g., "now," "then," "when"). Temporal deixis in "Cardigan" is employed to convey the passage of time and the emotional weight of past experiences. Phrases like "when you are young" juxtapose the innocence of youth with the wisdom of experience, anchoring the narrative in time (Yule, 1996). Social deixis involves expressions that indicate social relationships and roles. Social deixis in "Cardigan" is more subtle but equally important, as it helps establish a sense of shared experience and community. The use of "we" creates a feeling of collective understanding and empathy, inviting listeners to join the narrator in her emotional journey (Levinson, 1983). Discourse deixis refers to expressions that help structure the discourse and guide the listener through the unfolding narrative. Discourse deixis in "Cardigan" helps maintain cohesion and build emotional tension, with phrases like "this is" and "when the" serving as markers that signal shifts in the narrative focus (Levinson, 1983).

Once the deictic expressions have been categorized, the final stage involves analyzing their function and significance within the song's lyrics. This involves examining how the use of deixis contributes to the overall meaning, emotional impact, and narrative structure of the song (Hastomo & Aminatun, 2023). The analysis draws on existing literature on deixis and its role in communication and storytelling (Taguchi, 2011; Ifantidou, 2005) to provide a comprehensive understanding of how deictic

expressions enhance the song's lyrical content.

This study adheres to ethical standards for research in linguistics and music analysis. Since the primary data source is publicly available song lyrics, there are no issues related to privacy or confidentiality (Nasution et al., 2020). However, the study takes care to ensure that the analysis is fair, accurate, and respectful of the artist's work. Proper citations and references are provided for all secondary sources used in the study, ensuring academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism. Additionally, the study is mindful of the potential cultural and social implications of the findings and ensures that the analysis does not misinterpret or misrepresent the artist's intent or the cultural context of the song.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan" reveals a nuanced use of deictic expressions that create a vivid and emotionally resonant narrative. Deictic expressions, including personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse deixis, serve multiple functions in the lyrics. These expressions not only help to situate the narrative in time and space but also create an intimate connection between the singer and the listener. Through the use of deixis, Taylor Swift effectively engages her audience, evokes emotions, and builds a compelling storytelling experience. The following sections discuss each type of deixis and its contribution to the song's narrative.

### Findings of Deictic Expressions in "Cardigan"

The table below presents the findings of deictic expressions identified in Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan," categorized by type, examples from the lyrics, their functions, and significance.

**Table 1. Deictic Expressions in "Cardigan"**

Type of Deixis	Example from Lyrics	Function	Significance
Personal Deixis	"I knew you'd miss me once the thrill expired."	Refers to the narrator and the listener or a specific addressee, establishing intimacy and involvement.	Creates an emotional connection between the singer and the audience, making listeners feel part of the narrative by experiencing the emotions directly.
	"You put me on and said I was your favorite."	Addresses the listener or a particular person, involving them in the narrative.	Builds a direct relationship with the listener, creating a sense of closeness and personal involvement in the song's narrative.
	"We are a cardigan under someone's bed."	Indicates shared experiences or collective identities, including both the singer and the listener.	Fosters a sense of unity and shared sentiment, reinforcing the song's themes of memory and nostalgia.
Spatial Deixis	"Back when you could touch me, I	Refers to a location in the past that is emotionally	Evokes imagery that connects physical proximity with emotional



	felt like I was an old cardigan." "You drew stars around my scars."	significant.  Indicates a specific physical action that symbolizes emotional healing or marking.	closeness, enhancing the song's nostalgic and intimate feel. Creates a vivid mental picture, reinforcing the imagery of closeness and care within a personal relationship.
Temporal Deixis	"When you are young, they assume you know nothing."  "Chase two girls, lose the one."  "But I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss."	Refers to a specific moment in time, contrasting past experiences with present understanding.  Suggests a temporal sequence of events or choices.  Indicates a continuous impact or presence over time.	Highlights the passage of time and growth, anchoring the narrative in both past and present contexts.  Conveys a sense of inevitability and consequences, reflecting the song's themes of regret and reflection. Emphasizes the lasting emotional effect of memories and experiences, enhancing the song's sense of nostalgia.
Social Deixis	"I knew you'd haunt all of my what-ifs."	Indicates social relationships and emotional connections.	Reflects personal and relational dynamics, contributing to the emotional complexity and realism of the narrative.
Discourse Deixis	"And when I felt like I was an old cardigan, under someone's bed..."	Refers back to a previous or upcoming discourse, connecting different parts of the narrative.	Helps maintain cohesion and flow within the lyrics, guiding listeners through the unfolding story and creating a coherent narrative arc.

### Personal Deixis

Personal deixis is the most frequently used type of deixis in "Cardigan." It is predominantly realized through first-person and second-person pronouns such as "I," "you," and "we." These pronouns serve to establish a personal and intimate connection between the narrator (Taylor Swift) and the listener. For example, the repeated use of the first-person pronoun "I" throughout the song provides a window into the narrator's innermost thoughts and emotions. In lines like "I knew you'd miss me once the thrill expired," Swift uses "I" to anchor the narrative in her perspective, allowing listeners to experience the emotions and reflections directly from the narrator's viewpoint. This use of "I" also makes the narrative feel more immediate and personal, drawing the listener into the emotional journey of the song (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

The second-person pronoun "you" is used to address a specific person, likely the subject of the song, but it also serves to engage the listener directly. In the line "You put me on and said I was your favorite," the pronoun "you" not only addresses the song's subject but also invites the listener to imagine themselves in the narrative, creating a participatory experience. This direct address is a powerful narrative device that builds a relationship between the singer and the listener, making them feel as though they are being spoken to personally (Sitorus, 2019). Similarly, the use of "we" in "We are a cardigan under someone's bed" evokes a sense of shared experience, further enhancing the intimacy and relatability of the song. This creates a collective identity that

encompasses both the singer and the listener, fostering a sense of unity and shared sentiment.

### **Spatial Deixis**

Spatial deixis in "Cardigan" is employed to evoke specific imagery and set the scene for the narrative. Expressions like "Back when you could touch me, I felt like I was an old cardigan" are used to refer to a location in the past that holds emotional significance. Here, the phrase "back when" serves as a spatial and temporal anchor, connecting physical proximity with emotional closeness. This use of spatial deixis creates a vivid mental image that enhances the song's nostalgic and intimate feel, drawing listeners into a specific place and time in the narrator's memory (Ifantidou, 2005).

Another example of spatial deixis is found in the line "You drew stars around my scars," where the deictic expression "around" indicates a specific physical action that symbolizes emotional healing or marking. The use of spatial deixis in this context not only creates a vivid mental picture but also reinforces the imagery of closeness and care within a personal relationship. Such expressions help listeners visualize the emotional landscape of the song, making the experience more immersive and relatable.

### **Temporal Deixis**

Temporal deixis in "Cardigan" is crucial for conveying the passage of time and the emotional weight of past experiences. Swift uses expressions like "When you are young, they assume you know nothing" to anchor the narrative in a specific moment in time, contrasting past experiences with present understanding. The use of "when" as a temporal marker helps situate the narrative within a broader temporal context, allowing listeners to reflect on their own experiences of growth and understanding. This creates a sense of temporal movement that mirrors the emotional journey of the narrator, highlighting themes of maturation and self-awareness (Yule, 1996).

Similarly, the line "But I knew you'd linger like a tattoo kiss" employs temporal deixis to suggest a continuous impact or presence over time. The word "linger" indicates that the subject's presence is felt even after they are gone, emphasizing the lasting emotional effect of memories and experiences. This use of temporal deixis enhances the song's sense of nostalgia, underscoring the idea that some memories and emotions persist long after the events have passed.

### **Social Deixis**

Social deixis in "Cardigan" is used to indicate social relationships and emotional connections. An example of this is the line "I knew you'd haunt all of my what-ifs," which reflects the relational dynamics between the narrator and the subject of the song. The use of "you'd" (you would) highlights a sense of familiarity and emotional closeness, suggesting a deep personal connection that continues to influence the narrator's thoughts and feelings. This type of deixis adds to the emotional complexity and realism of the narrative, as it reflects the intricacies of personal relationships and their lasting impact on individuals (Levinson, 1983).



### Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis is used in "Cardigan" to structure the narrative and guide the listener through the unfolding story. Expressions like "And when I felt like I was an old cardigan, under someone's bed..." serve as discourse markers that refer back to previous or upcoming parts of the narrative. These markers help maintain cohesion and flow within the lyrics, providing a coherent narrative arc that allows listeners to follow the emotional progression of the song. The use of discourse deixis in this manner is effective in creating a compelling storytelling experience, as it helps to build tension and guide the audience's emotional response to the song's themes of love, loss, and nostalgia (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996).

### Conclusion

The analysis of Taylor Swift's song "Cardigan" shows how various types of deixis—personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse—enhance the song's narrative and emotional depth. Personal deixis creates intimacy by drawing listeners into the singer's emotional world, while spatial deixis evokes vivid imagery and emotional settings. Temporal deixis highlights themes of growth and nostalgia by anchoring the narrative in time, and social deixis reflects complex relational dynamics. Discourse deixis provides cohesion and guides listeners through the unfolding story. These findings imply that deixis is a powerful tool in songwriting, allowing artists to create engaging and emotionally impactful lyrics. For songwriters and language educators, understanding deixis can offer valuable insights into effective storytelling and emotional communication.

However, the study has limitations, as it focuses on a single song by Taylor Swift and may not fully represent the use of deixis across different artists, genres, or languages. Future research could address these gaps by exploring a broader range of songs and cultural contexts, examining how deixic expressions vary across languages and genres, and considering audience perspectives on how these expressions influence their emotional responses. Comparative studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how deixis functions in music and its role in enhancing narrative and emotional engagement.

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