Deixis and Existential Expression in Emily Dickinson's Poems: A Cognitive Pragmatics Analysis to Reveal Existential Meaning

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Abstract: This article aims to reveal how deixis is applied to express the existential expression in Emily Dickinson's poems. The poems taken for this analysis are "That is solemn we have ended" and 'I could suffice for Him, I knew." The study was focused on deixis and existential expression. The deixis was based on discourse analysis, and existential expression was studied based on existentialism as proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Deixis studied is personal deixis. The analysis shows three words categorized as personal deixis, i.e., certain words that contextually refer to persons such as *I, we, and Him* The research found that deixis plays a role in existential expression. *I* and *we* experience the existential relationship with him, in this sense, as the subject and *him* as the object. The method was a content analysis conducted in qualitative research. This results in the state of *being-in-itself* and being for itself

Keywords: Existential, Subject, Object, Being-in-itself, Being-for-itself

I. INTRODUCTION

This is an application of linguistics theory analyzing deixis in Emily Dickinson's selected poems to reveal the existential expression. The poem studied was selected subjectively because it is based on my subjective interest. The choice of analyzing deixis is based on the thought that deixis refers to some words with fully contextual meaning. Therefore, the meaning of the first person *I* fully depends on who is speaking. This deixis can reveal the existential being of the poet.

Some similar articles on different poems inspired this writing. The first is entitled *A pragmatic analysis of the use of types of deixis in poetry and novels of the author Ismail Kadare - The importance and complexity to the pragmatic process concerning the different realities evoked in social interaction, communication, and language* (Gjergji, 2015). This discusses the pragmatics concerning the types of deixis concerning social interaction. The second is *"Deiksis" dalam Puisi Perlawanan dari Persantren Nazam Tarekat Karya K.H. Ahmad ar-Rifai Kalisalak Tinjauan Pragmatik* (Suparno, 2016). This Indonesian article discusses the types of deixis in a poem *Perlawanan* (Resistance). This focuses on categorizing the deixis in the poem and the intention of using deixis. This research shows that there are 25 deixis of place, 11 deixis of person, and 10 deixis of social.

The second article is *Experimental Deixis in The Space Of Poetic Text* (Feshchenko, 2023). This article discusses the linguopoetics of deixis as one of the key mechanisms for expressing subjectivity in artistic communication. It aims to study the specifics of deictic words and constructions in experimental poetic discourse and the function of personal. Spatial, and discourse (textual) deixis in the visual layout of a poetic text on Edward Cummings' experimental verse, conceptual poetry, US Language Writing, and Arkadii Dragomoshchenko's poetic text. The study found that the deictic means of language interacting with the poetic text's visual space actualizes the aesthetic utterance's dynamic subjectivity. In poetic discourse, the spatiality, length, and duration of the utterance (message) as such is a particularly active field of indexicality.

There are some differences between this article and the ones discussed above. Both of the above articles discuss deixis in poems. The first article focused on categorizing deixis only. The

second one focuses on the meaning of deixis in interacting with the poetic texts visual space, actualizing the aesthetic utterance's dynamic subjectivity. Both do not discuss deixis in relation This article discusses the deixis with existential expression. This is one aspect of human being reflected in language activity. Deixis is more related to the origin of speech; therefore, it is closer to the existential expression.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Previous Study

I have found three previous existential studies of Dickinson's poems. The first is entitled "The Sound of Death" in Emily Dickinson's Poems. (Jiang, 2023). This study focuses on how death is sounded in her poems. This study shows that death is sounded in poems through auditory imagery. By this type of imagery, the poet applies the words and phrases that construct the readers' auditory imagination. Death is sounded as noise and sorrow. The second is entitled " Dickinson's Transcendentalist Vision in Verse, Non- Heteronormativity, & the Saga of a Timeless Literary 'Couple.' (Ghosh, 2024). This study investigated the issue of heteronormativity. The study concludes that Dickinson's transcendental views are manifested, first, by revealing intense emotional and physical longing for Susan, her sister-in-law. Second, by rejecting patriarchal norms.

Third, Suffering in Emily Dickinson's Selected Poems (Suhadi & Purwarno, 2024). This is a study of how suffering is expressed in Dickinson's selected poems. This study finds that Dickinson articulates her suffering through innovative use of language and metaphor, which makes her poem timeless and universally relatable.

The three studies show that Emily Dickinson's poems are familiar with existential expression. Dickinson expresses her transcendental feeling of death by applying auditory imagery, i.e., death as noise and sorrow. Dickinson expresses death as noise and sorrow that destroys the existence of a human being. Dickinson also expresses her rejection of the norms of patriarchy. She perceives that this norm impedes her existence as a woman. The last, Dickinson expresses her existential suffering through the creative use of language and metaphor. This indicates that Dickinson uses poems as a medium of existential expression. The medium to express the freedom, rebellion against the social norm, such as patriarchy, and existential suffering.

None of the studies investigates the use of deixis to express the existential state. This is based on the assumption that the poem, as a literary genre, uses language as the medium to express subjective emotion. This means that deixis plays an important role in a poem, especially when expressing the existential state. This thought leads the writer to discuss deixis and, as well, poetry as a language phenomenon in the following discussion. The discussion of existentialism is also conducted in this article as a guideline of the analysis.

B. Poetry

Poetry as a language phenomenon. Poetry is the use of language. It applies the language aspect, i.e. language sound, words, sentence structure, and semantics (Perlope et al., 2009; Hilmawati et al., 2021; Tenrisanna et al., 2022). It means that a poet when creating a poem activates the language aspects which are the potencies to construct the poetical effects such as rhymes, rhythm, and meaning,

This leads us to the thought that poetry is a literary discourse. Discourse analysis analyzes the language used in a certain context (Katili, 2021; Pattu et al., 2022; Mahdori et al., 2025). Therefore, it is important to do discourse analysis in the study of literature, including the study of poetry (Katili & Mahmud, 2023; Junaid et al., 2025). The keywords are the study of language in a certain context. This leads to the approach of doing discourse analysis, i.e. pragmatics. Pragmatics is the analysis of how a speaker/writer.

The study of deixis in poetry is the application of Pragmatics to the study of literature

(Gjergji, 2015). Therefore, if we define pragmatics as the study of language in communication, that study of what a speaker might mean by his or her utterance, then the study of pragmatics in poetry is the study of what a poet might mean by his words in the poem. Consequently, the study of deixis in a poem analyzes what a poet might mean with the deixis.

Deixis in poetry is similar to deixis in common communication, i.e., certain words with totally contextual meanings. Context defines an utterance's meaning in the sense an utterance may have different meaning in different context (Katili, 2007; Najihuddin et al., 2021; Cahyani et al., 2025). It defines the utterance meaning that is more relevant to the speaker's intended meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 2001). Therefore, in poetry analysis, the study of deixis is meant to study the meaning that the poet might express.

To conclude this session, we want to state that the study of deixis is part of pragmatics study and pragmatics belongs to discourse analysis. Poetry is to be studied using the pragmatic approach. Since poetry is a subjective expression, studying the use of deixis in a poem is suggested. Deixis is the meaning of words with the meaning is fully contextual; it depends on who is speaking such as I, we, you; where he is speaking, such as here, and there; and when he is saying such as today, tonight, tomorrow, this year, etc.

C. Functions of Poetry

There are at least, six functions of poetry for men. The first is for entertainment (Adeseye et al., 2022). In function, poetry is intended for entertainment like song. The second function is didactic (Harun et al., 2020), i.e. the function of poetry as the media of education. The third function is for psychological healing (Zhang, 2022), i.e. the function of healing psychological disorders. The fourth is a social function (Khosravishakib, 2017; Junaid & Andini, 2025), i.e. the function of poetry for maintaining social relationships. The fifth is a philosophical function (Vizgin, 2021). This is a function of poetry to express a philosophical view or thought. The last function of expressive (Rahmah, 2023). This is a function of expressive speech acts.

D. Existentialism

Existentialism is a school of philosophy on how an individual exists. It is a philosophical question of individual human beings' meaning, purpose, and value. According to this philosophy, the value of human beings lies in freedom, choice, and subjectivity (Sartre, 2022). The very important issue in existentialism is the state of an individual being. The states of being consists of *being-in itself* and *being-for-itself.* The first is that a state in which a being suffice for itself. The second one is a state of being by which it needs

However, all the individual values were condemned by others into nothingness, the presence of other individuals is a threat to personal freedom, choice, and subjectivity. The presence of the other potentially puts an individual into nothingness, This is what Sartre expresses as *Hell is the other* (Mahdi, 2020). Sartre's expression that hell is the other leads us to think of the subject-object relationship. This is a relationship among individuals as unique and free beings. This condition of relationship can be viewed in verbal expression.

E. Existentialism in Poetry

Existentialism is the idea of the state of human existence as a being. It is in relationship with to the other being ("An Analysis of Sartre's Existentialism," 2023). This session discusses the nature of existentialism in literature, and more specifically, poetry. Poetry is the expression of the poet's existential state (Uddin, 2012). In the poem, the topic of being, being and nothingness are expressed. Therefore, the poet as a being, how he or she treated the other being through the use of deixis in a poem.

Poetry expresses the existential state of the poet since it is the accumulation of the poet's experience. The experience is how the poet lives, his or her vision of God, and the vision of the other.

(Mysovskikh, 2022). In the sense of being a subject and object, the poet may express the two states in terms of *I* and *me.* The role of being as a subject and object (Woźniak, 2018).

F. Deixis and Existential Expression

Existentialism is a philosophical idea regarding human existence (Crowell, 2019). It dealt with human existence as a subject with free choice, subject-object relation. According to this philosophy, a man, as an individual, is free. Freedom is in terms of choosing. However, this freedom is potentially destroyed by the presence of the other subject. When there is another subject, a man automatically becomes an object. In other words, there will be conflict between individuals.

The use of personal deixis such as *I, you, he, s/he, Sir, Mam;* the use of time deixis such as today, tonight, tomorrow, next time, etc; the use of place deixis such as here, there, on the right side, to the left, etc, will indicate the existential state of the poet. It is how he or she treats. However, this analysis is not intended to find how the poet, as an individual, treats the other subjects as enemies. This is a study of the implications of deixis used in the existential state as expressed in a poem. Through this study, we find the nature of existentialism as expressed in poems.

Her poems suggest that pain and suffering are integral to personal growth and resilience. Dickinson's ability to articulate the complexities of suffering through her innovative use of language and metaphor makes her work both timeless and universally relatable. The language and metaphor show that the poet is a necessary aspect of human life.

III.   METHODS

This is a content analysis conducted in a qualitative research methodology. The data resources are two poems composed by Emily Dickinson and published at https://poets.org/poem. The poems analyzed were *That is Solemn We Have Ended* and *I could suffice for Him, I knew.* The data collected were words categorized as deixis. After that, they were analyzed to reveal the existential meaning.

The data analysis was conducted in two steps. First, we read the whole poem to have a general meaning. Second, we recognized the deixis in the poems. Third, we categorized data into personal deixis, time deixis, place deixis, and social deixis. However, it was focused on the personal deixis. Fourth we analyzed the deixis meaning by considering the context. Finally, I interpret the analysis by applying the philosophy of existentialism. This is due to the theory that says that deixis is the meaning of certain words meanings which are contextual. More specifically, the personal deixis to find the existential implication of the individual.

IV.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first poem to be analyzed was *This is Solemn We Have Ended,* was follows:
   Data 1
   That is solemn we have ended,
   That is solemn we have ended,—
   Be it but a play,
   Or a glee among the garrets,
   Or a holiday,
   Or a leaving home; or later,
   Parting with a world
   We have understood, for better
   Still it be unfurled.
   I could suffice for Him, I knew
   (Dickinson, 2012)

By the skimming reading, we found that this is a poem of two persons who are going to end a relationship with the world. The first person *I* who is Emily Dickinson is going to end her life with a

man *him.* This poem impresses that the two people, *I* and *Him,* will end their lives. In terms of deixis analysis, this poem has two deixis, i.e., personal deixis and time deixis. Personal deixis are *we, I,* and *him.* Time deixis is *later.*

The first personal deixis is *we.* Semantically this is the first plural person that consists of the speaker and the others. The poet speaks on behalf of herself and the others that he represents. *We,* as read in the line, have ended the solemn. It seems that it is no more the solemn but a play. Some words in the following lines, i.e. *glee, holiday, a leaving home,* and *parting with a world.* Those words and phrases indicate the experience of the poet and the others. In other words, those are the poet's experiences when she was part of the plural first person *we.*

The verb *suffice* indicates the relationship between the poet *I* and the other *Him.* The singular first person *I* is a subject and *Him* is the object. *Him* is the object of *I.* However, this is in line with Sartre's philosophical view that *hell is the other.* The other person called *him* dominated the poet to fulfill his needs. In other words, he dominated her for his *being- for- itself.* In short, deixis *we, I, Him,* are the existential expressions of the poet. The poet *I,* through her words, expresses the experience in relation with other. She experiences life as a play in which she is the subject of the verb *suffice* for the other's *being-for-itself.*

The second poem is the following:
Data 2
I could suffice for Him, I knew
I could suffice for Him, I knew—
He—could suffice for Me—
Yet Hesitating Fractions—Both
Surveyed Infinity—
"Would I be Whole" He sudden broached— 5
My syllable rebelled—
'Twas face to face with Nature—forced—
'Twas face to face with God—
Withdrew the Sun—to Other Wests—
Withdrew the furthest Star   10
Before Decision—stooped to speech—
And then—be audibler
The Answer of the Sea unto
The Motion of the Moon—
Herself adjust Her Tides—unto—   15
Could I—do else—with Mine?
(Dickinson, 2012)

By skimming it is found that this is an existential experience of the poet. The poet is experiencing her being in relation with the other being, *Him* that is initiated with uppercase to mean the Divine. By scanning, it is found that some deixis. Deixis in this poem is personal deixis. They are *I, me, mine,* and *him.* The deixis of the first person was both subject and object. The deixis of the third person is an object (him). The *I* in line one refers to the poet, and it is the object to *Him* and *He* (line 2) is the object to *me* (the poet). The verb *suffice* indicates that both are the subject and object of the same condition. The poet was experiencing the condition with the other *Him.*

The poet *I* was positioned equally to the divine *Him* as indicated by lines one and two. She suffices for him, and *he* suffices for her. This is a reciprocal relationship between two persons. *I* in line 5 refers to *He.* The line that says, "*Would I be Whole" He sudden broached—* is addressed to the poet. This interrogative line indicates that *He* needs recognition from the poet. It means that an individual needs recognition from another individual. This suggests that the poet *I* and the divine *He.* Hence, the poet, through personal deixis, expresses the existential experience concerning another being.

The third poem reads:
Data 3
I'm Nobody! Who are you?
I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!   5
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!
(Dickinson, 2012)

By skimming, we have the impression that this poem is about the poet's state of being. The poet says she is a nobody and asks about the other's identity and whether he or she is a nobody. If the other is nobody too, then both of them are nobody. Then she asks not to tell the others that they are both nobody because they will advertise. After all, it may cause them to be somebody. According to the poet *I,* to be somebody based on public admiration.

From the perspective of existentialism, the use of deixis *I, you, they,* and *us.* There are three things considerably important from the perspective of existentialism. First, the state of being nobody of the poet *I.* The second is the relationship between the poet *I* as the subject and *you* as the object. The deixis *I* asks *you* whether he or she is nobody too. The third is the state of being nobody of both *I* and *you.* Then the relationship between the deixis *I* and *you* results in us (line three), which becomes the object of the others. The poet *I* and *you* become a pair, and they become the subject of the others (they). In this sense, they are the subject of acting, preventing them from telling their existence.

B. Discussion

Based on the research findings, linguistic politeness in Bugis families cannot be understood solely through the framework of age hierarchy and intimacy, as is commonly assumed in family interactions. The data show that the use of polite pronouns and particles such as **idi**, **-ta**, and **-ki** by **aunts and uncles toward their nieces and nephews** reflects the influence of another significant social factor: education. These findings challenge the assumption that politeness in Bugis families is static and entirely determined by kinship relations, and instead affirm that linguistic practices are dynamic and contextual.

The above analysis reveals that deixis in Emily Dickinson's poems is applied to express the existential state of the poet. In the first poems. The poet used the first-person pronoun *I* in relation to the third person pronouns *him.* This is the subject-object relation. The relation indicates the domination between two existences. However, the relation in the line is unique in the sense that, in general, it is the subject that dominates the object. In this expression, the object dominates the subject. The line says *I could be suffice for Him, I knew.* The phrase *be suffice for him* indicates that the *I* is for the other. In terms of Philosophy of Existence, it is a state in which a being is dominated by the other. Therefore, the domination position is not always indicated by the position of person deixis in a sentence.

Unlike the first poem, the second one *I could suffice for Him, I knew,* the subject-object relation is a dominant-dominant relation. In the first line, the first person is the subject, and the third person is the object. In the second line, the position is changed. This is to indicate that the position of the first person and the third person is equal. Both dominated each other. The following indicates the same state, i.e., the equal position between the first person and the third person. The use of the person deixis indicates that the first person and the third person are in unity. The second person asks the first person whether they can be the whole. This means that the existential state in this poem is not

individual but it is a togetherness existential state.

In the third poem *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* There are two-person deixis, the first person *I* and *you.* This is the use of person deixis *I* and *you* to express the existential being of *I,* that is *I am nobody.* She asks the second person *Are you nobody too?* This is a relation of two beings. Both *I* and *you* are nobody due to the others advertising them. This poem does not provide adequate information on the reason why being advertised causes the nobody. The poet just says that this state turns them into a nobody.

V.   CONCLUSION

To conclude, there are two points to be discussed in this session. The first point is that Dickinson's poems above use personal deixis as an existential expression. The deixis used are the first person *I* and *we.* The personal deixis *I* is applied to express the existential experience in the world. Concerning the other person, it plays the role of both as the subject and the object.

In *That is Solemn We Have Ended,* the poet is the subject, both as the part of the first person *we,* and *I.* Together with others *In I Could be Suffice for Him, I Knew, the poet is the subject of Him experiencing the relationship with Him and nature existentially.* She is experiencing being the subject to *Him* and *Nature.* Therefore, deixis in Dickinson's poems is used to expressed the existential being of the poet in relation to the others.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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