

# Abstract deixis<sup>1</sup>

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Pointing has the job of picking out overt concrete objects. But what of pointing when there is no overt target? In narrative discourse (and other genres as well), people point at empty space. Such *abstract deixis* is extremely common. Concrete pointing to overt concrete targets, in contrast, is exceedingly rare in the narratives we have studied. Our argument in this paper is that pointing at empty space is an integral part of the process of storytelling. Pointing indicates a space, and this space is part of the story structure. There are referents — invisible but existing — and by pointing the speaker can situate these referents in space. The referents, although abstract, obtain a degree of physical reality.

## Deixis

In the linguistic literature, deixis refers to 'those linguistic elements whose interpretation in simple sentences makes essential reference to properties of the extralinguistic context of the utterance in which they occur' (Anderson and Keenan 1985: 259). With deictic pointing, this definition can be reversed: a pointing gesture can *create* a referent in the extralinguistic context. This is, as we will show, a principal function of abstract pointing.

Pointing is not a simple act. In one form of analysis, it has three basic components: a point of *origin*, or *origo* (Bühler 1934, 1982), a target, and an iconic line or trajectory linking the *origo* to the target. In concrete pointing there is a demonstrable target, but in abstract pointing the target is created by the speaker and concretely instantiated as a locus or direction. Otherwise, the two levels of pointing — concrete and abstract — are schematically the same:

Origo —→ Referent Object

In this schema, the pointing gesture iconically depicts the line that connects the locus of the *origo* to that of the referent object. A pointing gesture