



TEMPORAL DEIXIS IN ITALIAN: FUNCTIONAL AND COGNITIVE ASPECTS IN DISCOURSE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

This article analyzes temporal deixis in Italian from functional and cognitive perspectives. The study focuses on the role of temporal deictic expressions in organizing discourse and creating temporal reference points in communication. The research examines various types of temporal markers in Italian, including adverbs, verb tenses, and temporal conjunctions, analyzing their pragmatic functions in different communicative contexts. Special attention is given to the cognitive mechanisms underlying temporal deixis and its influence on the perception of temporal relationships in Italian discourse. The work demonstrates how temporal deictic elements contribute to discourse coherence and facilitate successful communication between interlocutors.

Keywords: Temporal deixis, Italian language, discourse organization, temporal reference, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, communication, verb tenses, temporal adverbs, discourse coherence.

INTRODUCTION

Modern pragmatic linguistics emphasizes the importance of studying deictic phenomena as fundamental mechanisms of human communication. Among various types of deixis, temporal deixis occupies a special position due to its



crucial role in organizing discourse and establishing temporal reference points for communication participants. In Italian, temporal deictic expressions form a complex system that reflects both universal cognitive patterns and language-specific features of temporal conceptualization.

The study of temporal deixis in Italian is particularly relevant for several reasons. First, Italian possesses a rich system of verb tenses and temporal adverbs that allows for precise temporal positioning of events and states. Second, the Mediterranean cultural context influences the conceptualization and expression of temporal relationships in Italian discourse. Third, understanding temporal deixis is essential for effective cross-cultural communication and language teaching.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TEMPORAL DEIXIS

1.1. Definition and Characteristics

Temporal deixis refers to linguistic expressions whose temporal reference depends on the time of utterance. Unlike absolute temporal expressions that have fixed temporal reference (e.g., *il 15 marzo 2024* - March 15, 2024), deictic temporal expressions require knowledge of the speech situation for proper interpretation.

In Italian, temporal deixis is realized through various linguistic means:

- Temporal adverbs: *ora, adesso, oggi, ieri, domani, presto, tardi*
- Deictic temporal phrases: *in questo momento, l'altro ieri, dopodomani*
- Verb tenses with deictic function: *presente, passato prossimo, futuro semplice*
- Temporal conjunctions: *quando, mentre, appena, dopo che*

1.2. Classification of Temporal Deictic Expressions

Italian temporal deixis can be classified according to several parameters:

By temporal distance:

- Proximal: *ora, adesso, oggi* (now, today)
- Medial: *ieri, domani* (yesterday, tomorrow)
- Distal: *l'altro ieri, dopodomani* (day before yesterday, day after tomorrow)



By temporal precision:

- Specific: *oggi alle tre* (today at three)
- General: *presto, tardi* (soon, late)
- Relative: *prima, dopo* (before, after)

2. PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF TEMPORAL DEIXIS IN ITALIAN

2.1. Discourse Organization

Temporal deictic expressions serve as crucial tools for structuring Italian discourse. They help establish temporal frameworks within which events and states are situated. Consider the following example:

"Stamattina ho incontrato Marco. Ora devo chiamarlo per confermare l'appuntamento di domani."

(This morning I met Marco. Now I need to call him to confirm tomorrow's appointment.)

In this discourse fragment, *stamattina* (this morning), *ora* (now), and *domani* (tomorrow) create a temporal sequence that guides the listener through the narrative structure.

2.2. Reference Point Establishment

Italian speakers use temporal deixis to establish reference points that serve as anchors for temporal interpretation. The present moment (*ora, adesso*) typically serves as the primary reference point, but speakers can shift temporal perspective using various linguistic strategies:

"Ieri pensavo che oggi sarebbe stato difficile, ma ora vedo che domani sarà ancora peggio."

(Yesterday I thought that today would be difficult, but now I see that tomorrow will be even worse.)

2.3. Subjective Temporal Positioning

Temporal deixis in Italian allows speakers to express subjective attitudes toward time and temporal relationships. The choice between near-synonymous expressions like *ora* and *adesso* can convey different pragmatic nuances:

- *Ora* tends to be more formal and objective



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- *Adesso* carries more immediacy and emotional intensity

3. COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF TEMPORAL DEIXIS

3.1. Conceptual Time Metaphors

Italian temporal deixis reflects underlying conceptual metaphors that structure temporal thinking. The most prominent metaphor is TIME AS SPACE, manifested in expressions like:

- *il futuro davanti* (the future ahead)
- *il passato dietro* (the past behind)
- *attraversare un periodo difficile* (to go through a difficult period)

3.2. Cultural Conceptualization of Time

Italian temporal deixis reflects specific cultural attitudes toward time. The distinction between *fra poco* (in a little while) and *subito* (immediately) reveals cultural concepts of temporal precision and flexibility that differ from other linguistic communities.

3.3. Cognitive Processing of Temporal Reference

Research in cognitive linguistics suggests that temporal deictic expressions activate specific mental representations of temporal relationships. Italian speakers must constantly update their temporal reference frame as discourse progresses, requiring sophisticated cognitive mechanisms for temporal tracking.

4. FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF ITALIAN TEMPORAL MARKERS

4.1. Present-Oriented Expressions

Ora/Adesso (now)

- Primary temporal anchor
- High frequency in spoken discourse
- Functions: immediacy marking, contrast establishment

Oggi (today)

- Extended present reference
- Cultural variability in scope (morning vs. entire day)



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- Pragmatic uses: emphasis, contrast with other days

4.2. Past-Oriented Expressions

Ieri (yesterday)

- Immediate past reference
- Often combined with time specifications: *ieri sera, ieri mattina*
- Discourse function: recent event introduction

L'altro ieri (day before yesterday)

- Extended past reference
- Less frequent than *ieri*
- Implies temporal distance while maintaining relevance

4.3. Future-Oriented Expressions

Domani (tomorrow)

- Immediate future reference
- High certainty implication
- Planning and commitment functions

Dopodomani (day after tomorrow)

- Extended future reference
- Lower certainty than *domani*
- Often used in tentative planning contexts

5. DISCOURSE-FUNCTIONAL PROPERTIES

5.1. Cohesion and Coherence

Temporal deictic expressions contribute significantly to discourse cohesion in Italian. They create temporal chains that link different parts of discourse:

"Oggi ho ricevuto la tua lettera. Ieri non immaginavo che avresti scritto. Ora capisco la situazione."

(Today I received your letter. Yesterday I didn't imagine you would write. Now I understand the situation.)



5.2. Topic Management

Italian speakers use temporal deixis to manage discourse topics and signal topic shifts:

"Ora, parlando di un altro argomento..." (Now, speaking of another topic...)

"A proposito, ieri ho sentito che..." (By the way, yesterday I heard that...)

5.3. Interaction Regulation

In conversational contexts, temporal deixis helps regulate turn-taking and interaction flow:

"Adesso tocca a te" (Now it's your turn)

"Ora dimmi cosa pensi" (Now tell me what you think)

6. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

6.1. Cross-linguistic Variation

Comparison with other Romance languages reveals both similarities and differences in temporal deictic systems. While Spanish and Italian share many temporal expressions, their pragmatic uses may differ:

- Italian *adesso* vs. Spanish *ahora*
- Italian *stamattina* vs. Spanish *esta mañana*

6.2. Dialectal Variation

Italian dialects show considerable variation in temporal deictic expressions, reflecting regional differences in temporal conceptualization and cultural attitudes toward time.

Conclusions

The analysis of temporal deixis in Italian reveals its crucial role in discourse organization and communication effectiveness. Temporal deictic expressions serve multiple functions: they establish reference points, organize discourse structure, express subjective temporal attitudes, and facilitate successful communication between interlocutors.



Key findings include:

1. Italian temporal deixis forms a systematic network of expressions that reflect both universal cognitive patterns and language-specific features.
2. The pragmatic functions of temporal deixis extend beyond mere temporal reference to include discourse organization, attention management, and social interaction regulation.
3. Cognitive aspects of temporal deixis reveal underlying conceptual metaphors and cultural attitudes toward time that influence language use.
4. Understanding temporal deixis is essential for effective communication in Italian and provides insights into the relationship between language, cognition, and culture.

Future research directions should include corpus-based studies of temporal deixis in different discourse genres, cross-cultural comparison of temporal conceptualization, and the role of temporal deixis in second language acquisition.

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*Modern American Journal of Social Sciences
and Humanities*

ISSN (E): 3067-8153

Volume 01, Issue 07, October, 2025

Website: usajournals.org

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