

Blended Origo – Deixis in Virtual Reality

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Empirical studies on communication in Social Virtual Reality (SVR) have shown that the immersive qualities of VR technology – the sense of presence and a sense of embodiment through increasingly realistic motion tracking and avatars (Kilteni et al 2012) – have a strong impact on verbal interactions in this new medium (Senkbeil et al. 2020, Stukenbrock & Auer 2022). While using VR, our minds experience a virtual space as (almost) real, while our bodies remain in the physical world, which instantaneously doubles our possibilities for communicative and bodily interactions with people in our virtual and physical vicinities. Misunderstandings and moments of linguistic creativity are observable, and many of them revolve around ambivalent locations, doubled ‘bodies’, and issues while coordinating attention. In other words: they concern deixis.

This paper presents the analysis of the usage of deictic terms in authentic communication recorded in SVR (in English and German) by speakers involved in a multilingual ‘escape-the-room’-style multiplayer game. It demonstrates that the unusual communicative circumstances in immersive VR directly affect a speaker’s origo, the deictic zero-point of orientation in space and time (Dancygier & Sweetser 2012, Stukenbrock 2014). While traditional deixis theories have implied that a person’s mind and body are naturally and always present in the same location in space-time, VR technology undermines this default case originally observed in analogue settings (Meyer & Jucker 2022). The data shows that hybrid and blended forms of deictic referents are observable regularly.

As speakers adapt to new cognitive circumstances in a new medium, the cognitive linguistic toolbox describing their communicative reactions needs to do the same, so this paper concludes in proposing the term blended origo to understand the cognitive state brought forward by communicatively interacting in two ‘realities’ simultaneously. It draws on Blending Theory (Fauconnier 2003, Turner 2019), and on Dancygier & Sweetser’s (2012) and van Krieken et al.’s (2019) work on “blended viewpoints”, and combines these insights with current pragmalinguistic perspectives on deixis in spontaneous, multimodal, technology-mediated communication (e.g. Fricke 2014; Auer & Stukenbrock 2022).

Beyond the concrete use case of (Social) VR, this conceptualization is intended to contribute to the discussion on the intersection of cognition, body, and increasingly immersive technologies, particularly concerning the growing impact of the (digitized) body as an authentic and potent substrate of communication in the digital realm.

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