

LANGUAGE AS A WEAPON: THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTION OF POINTERS AND REFERENCES IN *SUPER SUS IMPOSTOR* COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract : Online multiplayer games such as *Super Sus* have become new linguistic environments where persuasion, deception, and identity are enacted through digital communication. This study investigates the pragmatic use of pointing (deixis) and referring (reference) expressions by Impostor players in *Super Sus*. By applying Levinson's (1983) deixis theory and Yule's (1996) reference framework, the study examines how linguistic expressions function as strategic tools for manipulating attention and constructing credibility. Data were collected qualitatively from in-game text and voice interactions between June and August 2025. Findings indicate that Impostors use four main pragmatic strategies: (1) vague deixis to diffuse suspicion, (2) specific reference to target others, (3) spatial-temporal deixis to fabricate alibis, and (4) person deixis to align or disalign with player groups. These findings demonstrate that in *Super Sus*, language functions not merely as communication but as a weapon, an instrument of survival and deception in digital interaction.

Keywords: deixis, reference, pragmatics, digital communication, deception, *Super Sus*

INTRODUCTION

Online multiplayer games are not only a form of entertainment but also a medium where communication, persuasion, and identity construction take place. In social deduction games such as *Super Sus*, language becomes the main weapon for survival. The game relies heavily on discussions, accusations, and defenses among players to identify the hidden Impostor. In this context, the use of pointing (deixis) and referring (reference) expressions plays a crucial role in shaping suspicion, building credibility, and manipulating group perception.

The role of the Impostor in *Super Sus* is particularly interesting because it involves linguistic strategies to deceive others. Using deictic expressions Levinson (1983) such as "he," "there," or "that person," the Impostor can point attention away from themselves and redirect suspicion toward others. At the same time, reference expressions Yule (1996) like "the blue player" or "someone from electrical" allow the Impostor to construct narratives that either accuse or defend. These linguistic acts are not merely random speech, but pragmatic strategies that reflect the player's ability to manipulate meaning within context and influence group judgment.

Several previous studies have examined communication strategies in online games and deception-oriented interactions. Cooperrider (2011) explored how pointing and reference operate together in building meaning, emphasizing the pragmatic link between gesture and deixis. Rubin and Camm (2013) discussed deception in online games, showing that griefing behaviors rely on manipulation of trust and credibility. Stukenbrock (2020) explained deixis and joint attention, demonstrating how pointing and reference serve as tools of coordination and suspicion. More recent work by Barsever, Steyvers, & Neftci (2023) investigated deception corpora built from gaming contexts, highlighting how deceptive communication can be systematically studied. Finally, the study of deception in gaming by Kou and Gui (2021) confirmed that in social deduction games such as *Among Us*, players use both vague and specific references to redirect attention and survive.

These studies provide valuable insights into the role of language in online games, deception strategies, and digital interaction. However, there has been little research that specifically examines the micro-level use of pointing and referring expressions in the Impostor's role within *Super Sus*. Most existing studies tend to focus on broader aspects of gaming communication, such as teamwork, identity construction, or general deception strategies, without highlighting how deixis and reference function pragmatically in shaping suspicion and manipulating group perception.

This article therefore offers a contribution by analyzing how pointing and referring expressions operate as pragmatic strategies in the Impostor's discourse in *Super Sus*. By focusing on these micro-level linguistic elements, the study provides a clearer understanding of how players exploit deixis and reference not only as communicative tools but also as weapons of survival and deception in digital interaction.

1. How do pointing (deixis) and referring (reference) expressions function as pragmatic strategies for the Impostor's role in *Super Sus*?

Data Sources

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method combined with a pragmatic perspective, concentrating on the use of deixis and reference by players in *Super Sus*, especially those playing as the Impostor. The data were collected from gameplay recordings of *Super Sus* sessions held between June and August 2025. The dataset includes linguistic expressions from both text and voice chats that occur during in-game conversations, specifically during Emergency Meetings where players make accusations, defend themselves, or shift suspicion onto others. These interactions were recorded, transcribed, and organized according to Levinson's (1983) deixis framework and Yule's (1996) reference theory.



Picture 1. Discussion Findings Impostor



Picture 2. Voting Session

The researchers selected *Super Sus* as the data source because it provides natural linguistic interaction under the pressure of deception and survival. The game's real-time communication reflects authentic pragmatic choices, allowing analysis of how deixis and reference become tools for strategic manipulation.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a qualitative pragmatic approach inspired by Levinson's (1983) theory of deixis and Yule's (1996) framework of reference. Analysis focused on the contextual function of each expression rather than its grammatical form, identifying how players use language to direct attention, mislead others, and manage suspicion. The process followed three analytical stages, adapted from open-access frameworks in discourse and deception studies:

1. Identification stage, extract all utterances containing deictic or referential forms like pronouns, spatial markers, time references.
2. Categorization stage, classify each expression according to its pragmatic function, like deflecting blame, targeting suspicion, constructing alibi, managing alignment.
3. Interpretation stage, explain how each function contributes to deception or credibility building in the game's social interaction.

The categorized data were organized into the following analytical table:

Table 1. Data and Analytical Categories

Utterance Example	Type of Deixis or Reference	Pragmatic Function	Interpretation (Contextual Meaning)
“Someone was near the body, but I didn’t see who.”	Person or Spatial Deixis	Deflecting Blame	The speaker introduces an unspecified referent to blur accountability. This mirrors vague-language strategies that diffuse responsibility (Loy, et al. 2018).
“I saw Blue in electrical just before the alarm.”	Reference (Definite NP)	Targeting Suspicion	Specific naming (“Blue”) and time marker (“just before”) simulate factual reliability. Similar deceptive precision appears in Zhang et al. (2022)
“I was in cafeteria when it happened.”	Spatial–Temporal Deixis	Constructing Alibi	Spatial and temporal cues form a coherent narrative of innocence. This reflects the coherence-based deception patterns described in Zhang et al. (2022).

“We all saw Red vent, right?”	Person (Inclusive) Deixis	Managing Alignment	Inclusive pronoun “we” promotes shared perception and trust, aligning with cooperative deception dynamics reported by Loy et al. (2018).
“He went there, not me.”	Person plus Spatial Deixis	Redirecting Suspicion	Contrastive deixis (“he ... there”) transfers blame to another participant. This resembles attention-control tactics in interactive lies discussed in Loy et al. (2018).
“I was doing tasks over there near storage.”	Spatial Deixis	Supporting Alibi	Locative detail strengthens plausibility by creating verifiable context, consistent with deception-timing cues in Zhang et al. (2022).

FINDINGS

Overview

The linguistic analysis of *Super Sus* gameplay demonstrates that language operates not merely as a communicative tool but as a strategic mechanism of deception and persuasion. Within the recorded sessions, the Impostor role consistently displayed specific pragmatic patterns involving deixis and reference. These patterns appeared most clearly in the discussion and voting phases, as illustrated in Picture 1 and Picture 2.

During the discussion phase, players exchanged short bursts of language to accuse or defend one another. Here, deixis such as he, they, over there, and in cafeteria frequently appeared as markers of suspicion and misdirection. In the voting phase, linguistic choices became sharper, players combined reference, deixis, and temporal sequencing to justify their votes. The data thus reveal that the Impostor’s linguistic behavior in *Super Sus* is built upon four interrelated strategies: vague deixis, specific reference, spatial-temporal deixis, and person deixis. Each reflects how players use context-dependent language to manipulate the shared perception of events.

Vague Deixis as Defensive Ambiguity

One prominent pattern is the use of vague deixis: expressions such as “someone”, “they”, “over there”, “that guy” surface frequently. For example, after a report of a body one player said: “Someone was near the body, but I didn’t see who.” This utterance strategically introduces a referent yet withholds identification, thus diffusing the locus of suspicion while maintaining plausible engagement. In this way the speaker appears cooperative without committing to a verifiable claim. This mechanism aligns with findings that in interactive deception games speakers may avoid producing the cues listeners expect, a tactic of attempted control (Loy, J. et al. 2018).

In the game context, vague deixis buys time, delays group consensus, and allows Impostors to remain under the radar. It creates interpretive burden on others, shifting cognitive load away from the speaker. At early stages of discussion when evidence is minimal, the reliance on ambiguous reference is highest, consistent with the concept that deception leverages information-control rather than outright falsehood (Loy, J. et al. 2018).

Specific Reference and the Illusion of Credibility

Contrasting the previous strategy, when Impostors shift from defence to offence they deploy specific reference: “I saw Blue in electrical just before the alarm.” Here the speaker names a precise player identifier, locational context, and temporal marker. This level of detail creates the impression of observation and certainty, thereby enhancing credibility. Empirical research by Zhang, Z. et al. (2022), shows that in social-deduction board games lying speakers exhibited longer and more frequent pauses in their speech, indicators of cognitive tension, yet the act of providing specific detail may mask this tension by simulating fluent certainty.



Picture 3. The discussion phase when the Impostor creates an alibi for defence.



Picture 4. The discussion phase where the Impostor strategy is used against other players.

Spatial Temporal Deixis and Construction of Alibis

Another recurrent pattern is the use of spatial and temporal deixis to create narrative coherence and distance from the crime scene. For example: “I was in cafeteria when the body was found”, or “I fixed lights before the reactor went off”. These utterances situate the speaker in time and space, creating an alibi that seems both plausible and verifiable within players shared world. The combination of locative cafeteria/in storage and temporal when, before markers gives the statement a sense of concreteness.

Such strategy resonates with the reality-monitoring framework (used in online review deception studies) which emphasises sensory, time and spatial detail as indicators of

truthfulness. While our setting is game-based, the use of spatial-temporal anchoring behaves similarly: the alibi is constructed via deixis. For instance, that deceptive speech in a board-game context exhibited longer pauses and slower delivery, suggesting that narrative coherence requires greater cognitive effort (Zhang, Z. et al. 2022).

Person Deixis Managing Group Alignment

The use of pronouns such as we, you, they plays a critical role in aligning or distancing the speaker socially. Inclusive pronouns like “We all saw Red vent, right?” create an in-group alliance, fostering trust. Conversely, exclusive pronouns as in “If they keep blaming randoms, we’ll lose” distance the speaker from the accusation and redirect group frustration outward. These maneuvers reflect the relational dimension of deception: not only what is said, but how belonging and exclusion are managed. That in interactive deception games, listener expectations and speaker behaviour co evolve speakers may manage pronoun use as part of their control strategy (Loy et al. 2018).

Integrated Interpretation

These strategies illustrate that the Impostor’s language in *Super Sus* is far from random chatter; it is strategically structured. Vague deixis creates ambiguity specific reference fabricates credibility; spatial-temporal deixis constructs alibis; person deixis manages social alignment. Moreover, these strategies are deployed in combination rather than isolation: an Impostor might begin with vague deixis during early discussion, then shift to specific reference when voting looms, all the while using person deixis to maintain a coalition. The findings reaffirm that deception in social-deduction contexts is pragmatic performance. While some cues of deception may be subtle as research shows, linguistic cues often fail to generalise across contexts. In interactive game environments they become potent because players share common world knowledge and time pressure (Velutharambath, A. et al. 2025).

CONCLUSION

In *Super Sus*, language is much more than just a way to communicate; it is a strategic tool that players, especially Impostors, use to influence others and stay safe in the game. Impostors skillfully use different kinds of pointing and referring expressions to shift attention, build trust, and manage how suspicion falls on themselves or others. Their main strategies include keeping things vague to avoid being directly accused, giving specific details to make their accusations seem believable, using references about time and place to create convincing alibis, and carefully choosing pronouns and mentions to either connect with or distance themselves from other players.

These strategies are not used one by one but usually work together and change depending on the game’s flow and pressure. This shows how language can be very flexible and powerful in shaping social interaction and decision-making. Looking closely at how small choices in language work reveals much about the complex social dynamics in online games, where every word can be a tool for survival or deception.

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