How Spatial and Temporal References Construct Cultural Identity and Ecological Awareness: The Case of Little Forest Movie

Idah Hamidah[1*], Yusida Lusiana[1], Nani Sunarni[2], Faizal Risdianto[3]
[1]Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Indonesia, [2]Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia, [3]Universitas Islam Negeri Salatiga, Indonesia

Abstract This research analyses the use of spatial and temporal deixis in the Little Forest movie to explore the interconnection between language, Japanese culture, and ecology. It employed a qualitative approach based on an ecolinguistics analysis framework grounded in the positive discourse analysis (PDA) model and the concept of symbolic competence. The analysis reveals that the use of local place (35.71%) and cultural place names (39.29%) is more dominant than proximal explicit (14.29%), medial (7.14%), and distal (3.57%) deixis. In terms of temporal deixis, specific time (48.28%) and repeated time (24.14%) references reflect a natural cycle-based time construction. These findings suggest that space and time in the movie are not merely narrative backdrops but play a crucial role in constructing cultural identity, fostering ecological awareness, and articulating resistance to global homogenization (Kramsch, 2010; Stibbe, 2020). The movie presents rural life as a deliberate, meaningful choice rooted in tradition and nature. Thus, Little Forest can be seen as offering an alternative, sustainable model of life grounded in local wisdom and ecological values and showing cultural continuity in society.

Keywords: *Deixis, Ecolinguistics, Japan, Language and culture, Little Forest Movie*

***Corresponding Author:**
Idah Hamidah
idah.hamidah@unsoed.ac.id

Received: March 2025
Revised: May 2025
Accepted: May 2025
Published: June 2025

© 2025 Hamidah, Lusiana, Sunarni, and Risdianto.
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

Ecolinguistics is an interdisciplinary field that emphasizes the relationship between language and the environment (Fill & Penz, 2017, 2022; Stibbe, 2015, 2021). Scholars have shown that language not only reflects but also constructs worldviews and mediates the interaction between humans and nature (Döring, 2002; Kravchenko, 2016; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Law & Matthiessen, 2019). From an ecolinguistics perspective, language contributes to sustaining human-environment relationships through expressions about nature and the ideologies embedded in social structures (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Penz & Fill, 2022; Stibbe, 2015). Ecological realities are not merely depicted by language; they are shaped through narrative, diction, and metaphor (Kravchenko, 2016; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Law & Matthiessen, 2019). As a meaning-making medium, language

https://doi.org/10.22034/ijscl.2025.2059443.4026

constructs ecological awareness and helps form environmental understanding (Penz & Fill, 2022; Stibbe, 2015). In recent decades, ecolinguistics research has increasingly turned to media, particularly films, as they provide a unique interplay between language, visual narrative, and ecological ideology (Cobley, 2009; Hansen & Machin, 2013; Nöth, 1997; Sreekandan, 2018; Strate, 2019). Film becomes a rich site for exploring how language can shape ecological awareness, influence communal behavior, and reflect cultural values related to nature (Kramsch, 1998; Ren, 2020; Zhu, 2023). One notable example is *Little Forest* (2018), a film that depicts rural life and the cultural relationship with the natural world (Indrawan et al., 2014; Urata et al., 2023).

Little Forest presents strong potential for ecolinguistics inquiry, as it intricately weaves together language, culture, and the natural environment (Stibbe, 2021). Adapted from a Japanese manga by Daisuke Igarashi (2002–2005), the story illustrates rural life, the human–nature relationship, and seasonal cycles through the acts of farming and cooking (Ren, 2020; Sreekandan, 2018). The manga has been adapted into two film versions: a Japanese version by Junichi Mori (2014–2015) and a Korean version by Yim Soon-rye (2018), both of which highlight ecological balance and emotional well-being through narrative and visual storytelling (Strate, 2019; Zhu, 2023). Deixis, particularly spatial and temporal deixis, serves as a crucial linguistic device in constructing ecological narratives. In ecolinguistics, deixis functions not only to locate time and space but also to contextualize human relationships with the environment (Levinson, 2009; Stibbe, 2015). Expressions such as “here” or “last season” reflect the protagonist’s connection to nature and the rhythm of natural cycles (Fill & Penz, 2017, 2022). A critical ecolinguistics lens regards deixis as part of the “stories we live by”, narratives that shape human understanding and response to the world (Fill & Penz, 2022; Stibbe, 2015). The Japanese version of *Little Forest* is particularly appropriate for this study, given the Japanese language’s tendency toward non-anthropocentrism, collectivism, and harmony with nature (Heinrich, 2012; Inoue, 2006; Luft, 2019). Linguistic features such as subject omission, passive voice, and a focus on relational harmony reinforce ecological values (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; McGee, 2019; Obana & Haugh, 2023; Pourbakht, 2025). Moreover, cultural concepts like *satoyama* (village forest) illustrate the integration of human communities with natural ecosystems (Indrawan et al., 2014; Urata et al., 2023).

Although previous pragmatic analyses of deixis in the film tend to focus on linguistic function (Tanjung et al., 2023; Toyibah, 2019), few have examined its ideological or ecological significance. A critical ecolinguistics approach can illuminate how language in media sustains ecological narratives and values (Fill & Penz, 2017; Stibbe, 2015). Multimodal analyses that incorporate linguistic, visual, and auditory dimensions are still rare in this context (Cobley, 2009; Nöth, 1997). In *Little Forest*, the protagonist Ichiko constructs an ecological identity through everyday practices such as farming, cooking, and self-sufficiency (Kramsch, 1998; Zhu, 2023). Language in this film is more than a communicative tool; it is a cultural symbol reflecting ecological experience and spiritual connection (Kramsch, 1998; Ren, 2020). While previous studies have explored *Little Forest* in terms of cinematography or sustainable living (Sreekandan, 2018; Willpower, 2024), few have adopted an ecolinguistics approach that examines deixis as an ideological means of ecological representation. This study aims to fill that gap by combining critical ecolinguistics, deixis theory, and Kramsch’s view of language as a cultural symbol to examine ecological narratives in Japanese cinema (Fill & Penz, 2017, 2022; Fløttum & Gjerstad, 2017; Kramsch, 1998; Lakoff, 1980; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Therefore, the objective of this research is to analyze the use of spatial and temporal deixis in *Little Forest* to explore the interconnection between language, Japanese culture, and ecological awareness.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research departs from the understanding that language is not only a means of communication, but rather it is a means to represent identity, culture, and ecological relations (Kramsch, 1998; Stibbe, 2015). It focuses mainly on analyzing spatial and temporal deixis in the *Little Forest* movie since these deixis are considered essential linguistic elements in shaping the relations between humans, space, and the environment (Fill & Penz, 2017; Heinrich, 2012).

In pragmatic theory, deixis refers to linguistic expressions whose meanings are determined by the speech context. According to Levinson (2006), deixis, particularly the temporal and spatial ones, is an

anchor for giving meanings that connect speeches to situational coordinates such as location, time, and participant identity. This is consistent with the classical concept of *origo*, i.e., the deictic center, which serves as the orientation point for speakers when determining space and time (Bühler & Eschbach, 2011). In addition to serving as a referential clue, deixis also contains ideological potential that shapes the speakers' social and relational position towards the world (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). This approach is then sharpened through the ecolinguistics lens as developed by (Stibbe, 2021), who views language as a medium that brings stories we live by, a cognitive narrative that shapes how humans give meaning to, feel, and act upon the natural world. Deixis in a movie is not just a temporal or spatial marker; rather, it is a part of the ecological narrative that has local values, memories, and ecological ethics (Indrawan et al., 2014; Stibbe, 2015). Utterances such as "winter brings pumpkin soup" mark the time and represent the sustainable affective and ecological relations between humans, foods, and seasons (Zhu, 2023). Thus, this conceptual framework combines deixis theory in classical pragmatics (Bühler & Eschbach, 2011; Levinson, 2009), cultural symbolization in the framework (Kramsch, 1998), and ecological narrative in critical ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015), to analyze intensively how a movie builds a spatial and temporal representation as a part of shaping its character's ecological identity (Obana & Haugh, 2023).

2.1. Language, Culture, and Identity

The current research bases itself on the theoretical framework developed by Claire Kramsch in two main approaches: language as a part of the social and cultural ecosystem (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) and language as a symbolic power (Levine-West, 1990). Both approaches complement each other in analyzing how linguistic forms such as spatial and temporal deixis serve as technical marking tools and a means for constructing meanings, identity, and ecological relations (Stibbe, 2021).

First, in *Language Acquisition and Language Socialization: Ecological Perspectives*, Kramsch (2003) views language as an activity situated in a specific physical and social environment or situated language use. Language is not learned or used in an isolated manner but rather as a part of the interaction network that covers space, time, objects, cultural practice, and interindividual relations (Gee, 2014). In this context, deixis, particularly the spatial and temporal markings, becomes an essential element in understanding how speakers navigate their world socially and ecologically (Levine-West, 1990). Therefore, the use of utterances such as "here", "winter", or "the past" in *Little Forest* reflects more than just linguistic coordinates; it shows a deep ecological meaning implanted in local cultural practice and life experience (Heinrich, 2012).

Second, in *Language and Culture* and *The Multilingual Subject*, Kramsch (1998) develops the language as a symbolic power concept, i.e., language as a tool to build and negotiate meanings, identity, and social position of the speakers in their community (Levine-West, 1990). This concept is enriched by the term symbolic competence, i.e., the ability to interpret symbolic meaning in language uses, including its relation to cultural values and human-nature relations (Bühler & Eschbach, 2011). In the *Little Forest* movie context, Ichiko's utterances that refer to space and time not only express location or chronology but also symbolic act that indicates ecological attachment, nostalgia, and resistance form against modern lifestyles that are disconnected from nature (Sreekandan, 2018).

By combining the two approaches, the analysis in this research not only maps the deixis linguistic forms but also reveals how deixis serves as an ecological narrative that depicts the relationships between individuals, local culture, and nature (Stibbe, 2015). This approach is strengthened with the critical ecolinguistics framework developed by Arran Stibbe, who sees language as a place for *stories-we-live-by*, namely the latent narratives in language uses that form the ecological perspective and behavior (Fløttum & Gjerstad, 2017).

2.2. Deixis Theory

In pragmatic linguistic study, deixis refers to the elements of language whose meanings depend on the situational context, especially the speaker's identity, time, and place where the utterance takes place (Cutting, 2002; Yule, 2008). In this research context, deixis is understood not only as a technical

marking tool but also as a representation of the speaker's symbolic and ecological position in their world (Levinson, 2009).

According to Levinson (2006), deixis is divided into five main categories: personal, spatial, temporal, social, and discourse deixis. This research focuses on spatial and temporal ones, i.e., the words or phrases referring to the specific location and time in the speech context. Levinson (2006) suggests that deixis is essential in building the interaction structure since "deictic expressions are anchored in the speaker's point of view" (p. 64). This means that forms such as here, there, now, or last season cannot be interpreted neutrally; rather, they are always bound to the speaker's subjective and situational position (Fillmore, 1997). Meanwhile, Bühler and Eschbach (2011), in their work *Theory of Language*, develop the concept of *origo*, namely the central point of deixis orientation, i.e., the speaker serves as the reference center from which all spatial and temporal references begin. In Bühler's deictic field theory, space and time are built linguistically based on the speaker's egocentric perspective; thus, the utterances become some kind of "placement act" in a symbolic world (Lyons, 1977). Therefore, utterances such as "the winter here is faster" are not conveyed merely as information about the weather but also as Ichiko's emotional, historical, and ecological position as the speaker who relates to her environment (Zhu, 2023).

The integration of Levinson and Bühler's theories in this framework allows the researchers to examine how the use of deixis in the *Little Forest* movie contains the structure of the character's ecological closeness and personal experience reflection to place and time. Employing the theories of Kramsch (2003), Levine-West (1990), and Stibbe (2015, 2021), the deixis analysis not only describes the linguistic forms but also reveals the symbolic and ecological narratives inherent to the main character's language use. As emphasized by Fill and Penz (2017), the use of language in an ecological context contains a complex meaning structure, including local identity, collective memories, and sustainability relations.

2.3. Ecolinguistics

Ecolinguistics is an interdisciplinary approach that studies how language shapes the way humans understand, feel, and act upon the natural world (Alexander & Stibbe, 2014; Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). In his work *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*, Stibbe (2015) emphasizes that language stores latent narrative that he calls *stories-we-live-by*, which is a cognitive and narrative structure that forms ecological awareness and affects human behavior towards the environment. According to Stibbe, this narrative can be either destructive, such as the consumptive, dominative, and anthropocentric narratives, or constructive, i.e., the narrative that nourishes empathy for nature, sustainability, and ecological harmony (Stibbe, 2015). The job of ecolinguistics is to identify and criticize the destructive narratives and explore and strengthen the alternative narratives that contribute to a more harmonious life with nature (life-sustaining narratives) (Döring, 2002). In this research, spatial and temporal deixis analysis was positioned as a way to read the ecological narrative emerging from the main character's linguistic experience in the movie. Utterances that referred to places ("here", "in the farm", "at mom's home") and times ("this season", "winter", "the past") reflected the life experiences rooted in the interrelatedness with the nature, and at the same time shaped the ecological awareness that resisted the modernity narrative that is fast-paced and disconnected from the natural rhythm (Indrawan et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Stibbe (2021) develops an ecolinguistics analysis framework based on the positive discourse analysis (PDA) model, which searches not only for hidden ideology, such as in critical discourse analysis (CDA), but also escalates the positive narratives that can be exemplified. In this movie, PDA helps highlight how the main character's language contains robust ecological values, such as modesty, bond to the season, and respect for local natural resources (Fill & Penz, 2017). Hence, Stibbe's ecolinguistics theory provides a conceptual framework to comprehend how the language used in the narratives of *Little Forest* movies represents the world but also serves as a means to create ecological relations, strengthen the character's ecological identity, and convey the alternative narratives to modern lifestyle (Haugen, 1972). In brief, language, culture, and identity are deeply intertwined, with deixis serving as a tool to express context-dependent meanings that represent cultural values and ecological relationships. This research proposes to scrutinize spatial and temporal deixis in the *Little*

Forest movie to explore how language unveils the reciprocal relationship between Japanese culture and ecological awareness.

3. Methodology

3.1. Materials

The primary material in this research was the Japanese version of *Little Forest*, which consisted of two parts. *Little Forest: Summer & Autumn* (2014) was directed by Junichi Mori and adapted from Daisuke Igarashi's manga. This movie was chosen since its narrative focused on the ecological experience of the main character, Ichiko, who returned to her hometown in Tōhoku rural area to lead a life in harmony with nature (Indrawan et al., 2014). This work portrayed an alternative lifestyle that was based on dependence on season, nature, and local tradition, in harmony with the ecological self-concept in ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015). The dialogs in this movie were rich in spatial and temporal deixis uses, which reflected the relations between human, place, and time, as explained by Bühler and Eschbach (2011) through his *origo* theory, as well as by Levinson (2006), who suggested that deixis was always linked to the speaker's perspective. In addition, the cultural and symbolic values in the main character's language reflected symbolic competence, as Levinson (2009) suggested, which indicated the character's relatedness to her social and ecological environment.

The data were dialog transcripts taken from the movie's official subtitles and rechecked by replaying the scenes to ensure accuracy (Brandão, 2015). The data were selected purposively, i.e., the quotes explicitly or implicitly showed the use of spatial deixis (such as "here", "on the mountain", and "in the farm") and spatial deixis (such as "this season", "the past", "winter"), as suggested in the multimodal discourse study approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

3.2. Procedure

The analysis procedure followed the PDA-CDA-based qualitative approach with an ecolinguistics framework (Stibbe, 2015) and symbolic competence concept (Levinson, 2009). The analysis steps included:

1. Deixis identification: The dialog data were focused on spatial and temporal deixis forms. The classification was based on the deixis basic theory according to Levinson (2006), focusing on spatial and temporal deixis. This approach was strengthened by the understanding that utterances were situated in nature and always rooted in the speaker's experience world (Kramsch, 2003).

2. Ecological contextualization: Every utterance containing deixis was analyzed within the movie's visual and narrative contexts. This approach was in line with the principle that meanings in language are multimodal and contextual (Gee, 2014) and related to the character's ecological relationship with the surrounding environment (Stibbe, 2021).

3. Narrative and ideological interpretations: Utterances with ecological content were then interpreted based on the stories-we-live-by framework from Stibbe (2015) to reveal the latent narrative that shaped the character's ecological identity. Emphasis was given to the resistance to anthropocentric narrative and fast-paced modernity, as criticized by Haugen (1972) and Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001).

4. Interpretation validation: The interpretation was carried out by triangulating the theories. This triangulation was done by reviewing the latest literature on ecolinguistics and ecological sociolinguistics and cross-referencing the visual and non-verbal narratives in the movie. This approach was aimed at maintaining reliability and avoiding interpretative bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The analysis did not merely describe the linguistic forms but also explored the values and ideology within the language as an ecological and cultural practice, as suggested by Kramsch, who argued that language always operated in a dynamic social and symbolic ecosystem (Kramsch, 2003).

4. Results

4.1. Spatial Deixis Analysis in the *Little Forest* Narrative

In the *Little Forest* movie, 27 spatial deixis and 29 temporal deixis data were found. For analysis, each piece of data was divided into four parts. The spatial deixis data (Table 1) were divided into two major groups, namely explicit type (consisting of 4 data of proximal deixis, 2 data of medial deixis, and 1 data of distal deixis) and implicit type or the specific deixis referring to place names (10 data), and cultural spatial deixis (11 data).

Table 1
Spatial Deixis Analysis Result

Aspect	Finding	Academic Interpretation
Proximal ("ここ") 14.29%	Close reference, "here "	Showing emotional bond with private and local spaces. Consistent with the *uchi* (inside) concept in Japanese culture. (Kramsch, 2009)
Medial ("そこ") 7.14%	Medium reference, "there "	Marking a social space that is still familiar yet not as intimate as "here ".
Distal ("あそこ") 3.57%	Far reference, "there far away"	Symbolizing the physical and emotional distance from the urban space or center of power. (Kramsch, 2009; Stibbe, 2015)
Place Name Specific 35.71%	Local place name (Komori, village center)	Reiterating local community identity and strengthening the locality-based ecological sustainability narrative (Stibbe, 2021)
Cultural Place 39.29%	Village, rice field, cooperative	Enlivening traditional farming culture and community-based microeconomic system, reflecting the *satoyama* value. (Takeuchi, 2010)

The analysis of the use of spatial deixis in the *Little Forest* data showed that the reference to cultural places (39.29%) and specific place names (35.71%) dominated up to 75% of the total data. This phenomenon reaffirmed Kramsch's (1998, 2010) view that language served not only as a means of communication but also as the shaper of cultural space and a collective memory symbol. The reference to local names, such as *Komori* or *rice field*, represented physical location and built identity narrative, community sustainability, and emotional bond with the environment.

From the ecolinguistics perspective, as Stibbe (2021) suggested, place representation through language reflects the ecological relationship construction between humans and the environment. The language accentuating natural places such as villages, cooperatives, and rice fields indicated a sustainability narrative rejecting ecological exploitative values. This was consistent with Zhu's (2023) findings, which revealed that natural locality-based discourse strengthened ecological awareness and stimulated responsibility for nature and rural communities. From an ecolinguistics perspective, Stibbe (2021) highlighted that language could strengthen the ecological relationship. The natural space choices, such as rice fields and cooperatives in *Little Forest*, supported the sustainability (*jizoku kanō*) narrative, human-nature harmonization, and subtle criticisms of urban modernity (Ito & Sugiura, 2021; Sasaki, 2018).

The low use of explicit deixis, such as "ここ" (*koko*, here) at 14.29%, "そこ" (*soko*, there) at 7.14%, and "あそこ" (*asoko*, there far away) at 3.57%, indicated the presence of shared knowledge regarding space between speech participants (Levinson, 2004). Thus, the discourse in *Little Forest* informed the geographic positions and operated in an intimate space where the location had been socially and culturally internalized. In Japanese culture, as explained by Kramsch (1998, 2010), places were not

merely geographic locations; rather, they were symbolic spaces (*symbolic environment*) that shaped identity and emotional bonds. The use of local place names reflected the *uchi* (inner realm) and *furusato* (hometown) concepts, underlining the social closeness value and nostalgia (Bulian, 2021).

Critically, the spatial narrative in *Little Forest* could be seen as a form of ideological resistance against the urbanization hegemony and global capitalism (Kartika & Jumanto, 2024; Lawrence, 2020). Kramsch (2021) emphasized that language served as a place of ideology, and in this context, spatial deixis idealized a rural lifestyle based on sustainability and community. This finding was confirmed by Ito and Sugiura (2021), who showed that place representation in Japanese rural media was frequently used to criticize the social and ecological disconnectedness brought about by modernization.

In addition, in a recent study by Wang et al. (2024), it was mentioned that the use of place reference in contemporary Japanese culture texts tended to construct "ecological nostalgia", i.e., the longing for the increasingly rare human-nature interrelatedness in the modern world. This further confirmed that *Little Forest*, through its spatial deixis choice, not only built a story world but subtly yet strongly conveyed socio-ecological criticisms. Therefore, the use of language, culture, and ecological perspectives could be understood that place representation in *Little Forest* served the functions of (1) strengthening local cultural identity, (2) building ecological awareness, and (3) offering implicit criticisms of the alienation resulting from modernity.

Furthermore, this cultural place reference domination was not merely descriptive; rather, it was a form of resistance to capitalistic-modern values and reaffirmation of co-existence between human and nature, a value deeply rooted in Japanese culture. Based on the analysis of spatial deixis in *Little Forest*, it was clearly seen that spatial reference choice was not only a location reference; rather, it served as a cultural tool to reaffirm the interrelatedness between human and their environment. In the context of language as a cultural symbol (Kramsch, 1998, 2010), cultural places such as rice fields, villages, and cooperatives were needed as a memory landscape and community identity. Meanwhile, from an ecolinguistics perspective (Stibbe, 2021), this choice represented an ecological narrative that encouraged sustainable life while rejecting the domination of modern urban consumerism values. Moreover, from a critical perspective, Ito and Sugiura (2021) suggested that place representation in this discourse showed resistance to the global capitalistic system that ignored human-nature relations. Therefore, *Little Forest* not only built a rural world but also presented an alternative discourse that offered interrelatedness, sustainability, and community values as a form of subtle yet meaningful cultural-ecological resistance.

4.2. Temporal Deixis Analysis in *Little Forest* Narrative

In Japanese, temporal deixis served not only to refer to time chronologically but also to reflect the speaker's cultural and cognitive experience. As many as 29 temporal deixis data were found (Table 2), and they were divided into four groups with a data distribution of current time being 4 times, specific time being 14 times, repeated time being 7 times, and estimative-duration time being 4 times.

Table 2
Temporal Deixis Analysis Result

Aspect	Finding	Meaning in Theoretical Framework
Current time (13.79%)	Referring to currently occurring events	Kramsch (2009) referred to *immediacy* (emotional closeness) with the surrounding environment. It drew attention to the current natural situation.
Specific time (48.28%)	Referring to certain times such as autumn, daytime, humid night, etc.	Stibbe (2015) related this to *ecological rhythm*— human lives in harmony with the seasonal cycle and natural change. This was dominant, indicating the importance of natural rhythm in the character's life.
Repeated time (24.14%)	Referring to a repeated cycle, such as a month, a season, harvest	As per *ecological temporal narratives* — time as a cycle, rather than linear, supporting a local sustainable lifestyle. (Kramsch, 2009; Stibbe, 2015)

Estimative duration (13.79%)	Uncertain time, such as "around noon" or "1.5-hour travel ".	Marking a flexible, adaptive concept of time to natural conditions. In Japanese culture, this was in line with the "ma" (間) philosophy — appreciating space and time uncertainty (Nakane, 1970)

The analysis of 29 data units showed that temporal deixis in *Little Forest* was dominated by a specific time at 48.28%, followed by repeated time at 24.14%, current time, and estimative duration at 13.79%, respectively. This distribution indicated that temporal deixis represented time as a chronological structure and built a time narrative tightly related to natural rhythm, community, and local Japanese culture.

With 48.28% of utterances containing specific time (such as season, noon, or night) and 24.14% referring to a repeated cycle, this movie shaped a narrative that had its root in natural rhythm rather than following the linear and consumptive modern time logic. Stibbe (2021) emphasized that criticisms of the modern system began by disclosing how language created the "stories-we-live-by" that normalized time and nature exploitation for capitalistic efficiency. In this movie, the rejection of time acceleration and commodification logic was obvious: time was presented as a natural cycle that should be respected and integrated into daily life. Time was presented not in a mechanistic framework (hour, modern calendar) but rather as a part of the seasonal rotation and ecological context: harvest, snow, sky color change, and plant growth. This was consistent with what Stibbe (2021) termed biospheric discourse, i.e., a discourse that strengthened the relationship between humans and the biosphere.

Repeated time deixis (such as planting cycle and annual harvest) implied ecological awareness of natural rhythm as the foundation of social life. In this movie, seasonal repetition was not merely a background; rather, it was a life structure enlivened by the characters. This contradicted the *destructive stories* (destructive narratives) in modern culture that frequently ignored or accelerated the natural cycle for mass production purposes (Stibbe, 2015).

From a critical ecological perspective, time in *Little Forest* was not just a tool to coordinate human activities, but rather, it is a part of life's ecological structure (Dryzek, 2013). Seasonal cycle, weather change, and daily rhythm were constructed as an existential framework rather than an external variable that needed to be controlled. Furthermore, Dryzek (2013) and Plumwood (2007), in critical ecological theory, highlighted the importance of “rethinking temporality”, treating time not as a resource to be exploited but as an ecological network that connected humans to the natural system. This movie's specific and repeated time representation shows how individuals lived in synchronization with ecological rhythm rather than subjugating it.

Meanwhile, the emergence of current time and estimative duration deixis in balance (13.79% respectively) showed the sensitivity to currently occurring natural situations and flexibility in understanding time, which in Japanese culture was reflected in the *ma* concept (Nakane, 1970). Time was not perceived in an absolute manner but rather in a contextual, adaptive fashion to the environmental change. Both deixis also strengthened the idea of flexibility and human adaptation to ecological uncertainty. Time was understood not with mathematical precision but rather concerning the changing natural conditions, supporting the ecological resilience principle (Folke et al., 2016). The use of estimative duration deixis showed the adaptive principle to nature, where time was understood through actual ecological conditions rather than mathematical absolute. Stibbe emphasized that such a language reflected a positive stories-we-live-by, i.e., a narrative that supported ecological sustainability and balance (Stibbe, 2021). This way, the *Little Forest* movie contributed to the critical ecological discourse by building an alternative narrative to time industrialism hegemony: placing seasons, weather change, and local rhythm as the foundation of life while offering a sustainable narrative model based on ecological time consciousness (Kolinjivadi et al., 2020; Stroude, 2022).

In Japan, the relationship between human and nature had a profound root in their cultural value system. Some of these concepts included *Satoyama* (里山): i.e., village landscape in mountain outskirts managed based on the principle of sustainability and mutual respect between human and nature (Takeuchi, 2010); *Mono no aware* (物の哀れ): sensitivity to transience and natural change, especially

seasonal change, which brought aesthetic and emotional awareness of the passing time (Nitobe, 1907), and *Wabi-sabi* (侘寂): appreciation of imperfection and natural change. In *Little Forest*, the depiction of repeated times, such as annual harvest and seasonal change, reflected the *satoyama* values, where human life was harmonized with the surrounding ecosystem without excessive exploitation. The use of temporal deixis such as "秋になると…" ("When the autumn comes...") served not only an informative function but also *revealed respect for the ecological cycle.* Critically, through a high frequency of use of season and time cycle deixis, this movie also subtly criticized the capitalistic time that dominated urban Japanese modern life. On the contrary, this movie suggested an alternative life model based on *local ecological time*, reviving traditional sustainability and ecological awareness values.

5. Discussion

Emphasizing how spatial and temporal deixis are utilized to construct the interactional dynamics of ecolinguistics in the film *Little Forest*, this study finds that emotional experiences of Japanese culture are more distinctly represented by performing local places and cultural elements. These spatial references function as deictic forms that function as bonds between experience, social identity, and the setting of each scene. In addition, the cyclical perception of time acts as a temporal referent, strengthening the argument that the social identity and experiences portrayed in the film are illustrated as flowing in line with nature's rhythm, which is unrestricted by the rush and demands of capitalist modernity. These findings are in agreement with recent studies in the more extensive field of Japanese ecolinguistics (Ito & Sugiura, 2021; Kadafi & Utami, 2021; Kartika & Jumanto, 2024; Lawrence, 2020; Sasaki, 2018). The scriptwriter of *Little Forest* acknowledges that deixis is not only a concrete linguistic mechanism but also a narrative representation of real-world ecological experience. This creates an impression that invites viewers to become more aware of the importance of appreciating the environment and comprehending the diverse and dynamic nature of culture as part of the natural flow of the world.

The use of spatial deixis in the film reflects one of the core values of Japanese culture, the concept of *Furusato* (hometown). This concept calls to mind that every individual has an origin and that the present self would not exist without it. In this context, the origin refers not only to a geographical location but also to the existence of an emotional bond felt when someone senses a connection with cultural values that form identity and provide profound meaning in life. This idea is in accordance with Kramsch's (2010) conception of symbolic geography, which brings attention to the fact that one's life space is not merely physical but also serves as a storage of life memory and socio-cultural identity. These findings also support the conclusions of Kadafi and Utami (2021), who note that modern Japanese media often portray the young generation's identity by integrating local elements as a form of cultural representation. Moreover, the frequent use of specific place names, rather than general spatial markers, reflects an intention and desire to show respect, preserve harmony, and express social values embedded in spatial references as part of the identity of Japanese culture.

On the other side, temporal deixis in *Little Forest* plays a dissimilar role compared to spatial deixis. It tends to represent a linear conception of time, which, in more critical interpretations, is often associated with the overpowering and isolating characteristics of capitalist hegemony. The continual use of the repeated time of temporal deixis in the film underlines that it is more concerned with highlighting seasonal shifts as a representation of the natural cycle of life. By using this identifiable pattern of deixis, the film conveys a Japanese cultural point of view that underscores harmony between the flow of life and nature. This reflects aesthetic principles such as *mono no aware* (sensitivity to evanescence) and *wabi-sabi* (appreciation of imperfection and irregularity). In accordance with this, Izutsu and Izutsu (2016) explain that East Asian people, including Japanese, tend to conceptualize time through "temporal scenery," which blends the views of "moving time" and "moving observer." In this way, *Little Forest* articulates life values that honor the natural rhythms of the world, a form of what Stibbe (2021) calls "positive discourse," which develops an ecological conscience and promotes sustainability within the natural environment.

Even though deixis is often considered merely a grammatical feature, the findings presented in this study show that it plays a more intense role. This study displays that particular patterns of deictic use

can fortify representations of the relationships among ecology, culture, environment, humans, and ideology. The existence of narrative forms by employing the use of spatial and temporal deixis promotes the scientific comprehension that language holds remarkable power in the endeavor of maintaining socio-cultural identity and ecological awareness, whether it is implied or stated directly. Corresponding to this perspective, Saifudin (2019) advocates that research on Japanese deixis must be considered and conducted within its socio-cultural and psychological context, which is closely connected with nature.

In summary, this study insinuates that a story is not only crafted by what is told but also by how it is told, including the use of spatial and temporal deixis. This research is limited to Japanese culture and language, which is profoundly rooted in Eastern traditions. These limitations leave several gaps that could be highlighted in future research. For example, further studies have the potential to scrutinize the corresponding issues within the context of Western cultures or in a more comprehensive comparison of both Eastern and Western cultures. It is also crucial to conduct comparative analyses across different media, not only limited to films but also including other forms of art and literature. In addition, future research could blend multimodal approaches that scrutinize narrative construction more thoroughly. This would enrich scientific understanding in linguistics, particularly regarding how deixis is employed in storytelling to shape the audience's perception and understanding, not only in digital contexts but also in terms of its influence on real-world actions.

Disclosure Statement

The authors claim no conflict of interest.

Funding

The research did not receive any specific grants from funding agencies.

References

Alexander, R., & Stibbe, A. (2014). From the analysis of ecological discourse to the ecological analysis of discourse. *Language Sciences*, *41*, 104–110. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2013.08.011

Brandão, C. (2015). P. Bazeley and K. Jackson, *qualitative data analysis with NVivo* (2nd ed.). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *12*(4), 492–494. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2014.992750

Bühler, K., & Eschbach, A. (2011). *Theory of language: The representational function of language* (D. F. Goodwin, Trans.). John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/z.164

Bulian, G. (2021). Savoring authenticity: Food consumption and nostalgia in Japan. In M. R. Novielli, B. Ruperti, & S. Vesco, *Ca' Foscari Japanese studies* (Vol. 17, p. 67-72). Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari. https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-559-9/009

Cobley, P. (Ed.). (2009). *The Routledge companion to semiotics* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203874158

Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and discourse a resource book for students*. Routledge.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Döring, M. (2002). Rom Harré/Jens Brockmeier/Peter Mühlhäusler: Greenspeak. A study of environmental discourse. *Zeitschrift Für Sprachwissenschaft*, *21*(2), 288-290. https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsw.2002.21.2.288

Dryzek, J. S. (2013). *The politics of the earth: Environmental discourses* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Fill, A., & Mühlhäusler, P. (Eds.). (2001). *The ecolinguistics reader: Language, ecology, and environment*. Continuum.

Fill, A., & Penz, H. (Eds.). (2017). *The Routledge handbook of ecolinguistics* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687391

Fill, A., & Penz, H. (Eds.). (2022). *The Routledge handbook of ecolinguistics* (First issued in paperback). Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Fillmore, C. J. (1997). *Lectures on deixis*. CSLI Publications.

Fløttum, K., & Gjerstad, Ø. (2017). Narratives in climate change discourse. *WIREs Climate Change*, *8*(1), Article e429. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.429

Folke, C., Biggs, R., Norström, A. V., Reyers, B., & Rockström, J. (2016). Social-ecological resilience and biosphere-based sustainability science. *Ecology and Society*, *21*(3), Article art41. https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08748-210341

Gee, J. P. (2014). *An introduction to discourse analysis* (4th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315819679

Hansen, A., & Machin, D. (2013). Researching visual environmental communication. *Environmental Communication*, *7*(2), 151–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2013.785441

Haugen, E. (1972). *The ecology of language*. Stanford University Press.

Heinrich, P. (2012). *The making of monolingual Japan: Language ideology and Japanese modernity*. Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847696588

Indrawan, M., Yabe, M., Nomura, H., & Harrison, R. (2014). Deconstructing satoyama – The socio-ecological landscape in Japan. *Ecological Engineering*, *64*, 77–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoleng.2013.12.038

Inoue, M. (Ed.). (2006). *Vicarious language: Gender and linguistic modernity in Japan*. University of California Press.

Ito, T., & Sugiura, M. (2021). Satoyama landscapes as ecological mosaics of biodiversity: Local knowledge, environmental education, and the future of Japan's rural areas. *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, *63*(5), 14–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2021.1953911

Izutsu, K., & Izutsu, M. N. (2016). Temporal scenery: Experiential bases for deictic concepts of time in East Asian languages. In B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (Ed.), *Human cognitive processing* (Vol. 52, pp. 207–242). John Benjamins Publishing Company. https://doi.org/10.1075/hcp.52.10izu

Kadafi, M., & Utami, S. M. B. (2021). Locality in Makoto Shinkai's Kimi no Na wa: Negotiating Japanese youth identity. *IZUMI*, *10*(1), 21–31. https://doi.org/10.14710/izumi.10.1.21-31

Kartika, D., & Jumanto, J. (2024). Refusal politeness within anime: How the Japanese youngsters learn to refuse. *International Journal of Society, Culture and Language*, *12*(1), 427-440. https://doi.org/10.22034/ijscl.2024.2020706.3353

Kolinjivadi, V., Vela Almeida, D., & Martineau, J. (2020). Can the planet be saved in *Time*? On the temporalities of socionature, the clock and the limits debate. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, *3*(3), 904–926. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619891874

Kramsch, C. J. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. J. (2003). *Language acquisition and language socialization*. Bloomsbury.

Kramsch, C. J. (2010). *The multilingual subject: What foreign language learners say about their experience and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C., & Whiteside, A. (2008). Language ecology in multilingual settings. Towards a theory of symbolic competence. *Applied Linguistics*, *29*(4), 645–671. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amn022

Kravchenko, A. V. (2016). Two views on language ecology and ecolinguistics. *Language Sciences*, *54*, 102–113. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2015.12.002

Kress, G. R., & van Leeuwen, T. (2021). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (3rd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Lakoff, G. (1980). *Metaphors we live by* (XIII ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Law, L., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2019, September 5-7). *Revisiting Halliday's (1990) "New ways of meaning: The challenge to applied linguistics": What has changed and what still needs to be done?* [Poster abstract]. The Conference on Language and Ecology: Towards a Shared Narrative in Interdisciplinary Research, Hong Kong. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26421.52969

Lawrence, L. (2020). The discursive construction of "native" and "non-native" speaker English teacher identities in Japan: Alinguistic ethnographic investigation. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language*, *8*(1), 111–125.

Levine-west, G. (1990). *MLJ* reviews. *The Modern Language Journal*, *74*(2), 221–270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1990.tb02570.x

Levinson, S. C. (2006). Deixis. In L. R. Horn & G. Ward (Eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics* (1st ed., pp. 97–121). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756959.ch5

Levinson, S. C. (2009). *Space in language and cognition explorations in cognitive diversity*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613609

Luft, S. D. (2019). Pragmatics of Japanese: Perspectives on grammar, interaction, and culture. *Japanese Language and Literature*, *53*(1), 123–125. https://doi.org/10.5195/jll.2019.47

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620614

McGee, P. (2019). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Training Language and Culture*, *3*(1), 73–84. https://doi.org/10.29366/2019tlc.3.1.5

Nakane, C. (1970). *Japanese society*. University of California Press.

Nitobe, I. (1907). *Bushido, the soul of Japan*. Teibi Pub. Co. http://archive.org/details/bushidosoulofjap00nitorich

Nöth, W. (Ed.). (1997). *Semiotics of the media: State of the art, projects, and perspectives*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Obana, Y., & Haugh, M. (2023). *Sociopragmatics of Japanese: Theoretical implications* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003056645

Penz, H., & Fill, A. (2022). Ecolinguistics: History, today, and tomorrow. *Journal of World Languages*, *8*(2), 232–253. https://doi.org/10.1515/jwl-2022-0008

Plumwood, V. (2007). *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge.

Pourbakht, M. (2025). Passive design strategies in traditional Japanese architecture: A case study of the Chochikukyo house. *Open Science Journal*, *10*(1), 1-12.

Ren, J. (2020). Analysis of the Japanese Iyashikei films and the culture behind these films. *Proceedings of the 2020 International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange*, *445*, 27-31. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.200709.007

Saifudin, A. (2019). Deiksis bahasa Jepang dalam studi linguistik pragmatik. *Japanese Research on Linguistics, Literature, and Culture*, *2*(1), 16–35. https://doi.org/10.33633/jr.v2i1.3348

Sasaki, L. (2018). Satoyama landscapes in Tokyo. In T. Kikuchi & T. Sugai (Eds.), *Tokyo as a Global City* (Vol. 8, pp. 69–90). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7638-1_5

Sreekandan, N. (2018, June 17). *Little forest: Film review*. INKLINE. https://inklinemedia.org/2018/06/17/little-forest-film-review/

Stibbe, A. (2015). *Ecolinguistics: Laguage, ecology and the stories we live by* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Stibbe, A. (2021). *Ecolinguistics: Language, ecology and the stories we live by* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367855512

Strate, L. (2019). Media ecology an approach to understanding the human condition. *Sustainability*, *1*, 1–28. https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4331-4005-1

Stroude, A. (2022). What if time was not money? Towards a pluriversal understanding of time for sustainable consumption. *Consumption and Society*, *1*(2), 358–374. https://doi.org/10.1332/GHDN1794

Takeuchi, K. (2010). Rebuilding the relationship between people and nature: The Satoyama initiative. *Ecological Research*, *25*(5), 891–897. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11284-010-0745-8

Tanjung, Y., Anggraini Ginting, D., Sabrina Barus, E., & Lubis, F. (2023). Analisis deiksis pada film "Losmen bu broto." *ENGGANG: Jurnal Pendidikan, Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, Dan Budaya*, *3*(2), 173–182. https://doi.org/10.37304/enggang.v3i2.9005

Toyibah, T. (2019, May 13). *An analysis of the main characters in the movie The Great Gatsby*. Institutional Repository of UIN SATU Tulungagung. https://repo.uinsatu.ac.id/11237/

Urata, S., Akao, K. -I., & Washizu, A. (Eds.). (2023). *Sustainable development disciplines for society: Breaking down the 5Ps—People, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships*. Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-5145-9

Wang, Q., Yang, X., Liu, X., & Furuya, K. (2024). Rice terrace experience in Japan: An ode to the beauty of seasonality and nostalgia. *Land*, *13*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.3390/land13010064

Willpower, A. (2024, August 10). *Comparative analysis of "Little forest" movies: Japan vs (South)*. CliffsNotes. https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-notes/22011744

Yule, G. (2008). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Zhu, T. (2023). A study on Japanese healing films from visual, sound, and narrative aspects. *Communications in Humanities Research, 19*(1), 262–269. https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/19/20231258