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ON THE CATEGORY OF VAGUENESS
IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

Vagueness is a widespread phenomenon that sometimes passes unnoticed by the speakers unless there is a deliberate need to be vague. Vague language includes words or phrases that have general meanings and in an imprecise way or deliberately refer to people and things. Vague expressions are discourse markers that add pragmatic tone to an utterance: they are multifunctional in nature and play a vital role in decoding the pragmatic meaning of an utterance. The aim of this article is to show the structural and semantic peculiarities of vague expressions and the intention of being vague in interaction. The research is based on corpus findings, namely BYU-BNC (British National Corpus), COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), GloWbE (Global Web-Based English) and on TalkBank the role of which is to foster fundamental research of human and animal communication.

Key words: *vague expressions, vagueness, avoidance of precision, general extenders, vague category identifiers, vague approximators, placeholder words*

Vagueness is one of the main components of natural language. Vague language use is an increasing trend and a subject of interest not only among linguists but also native and second language learners. Vagueness is often seen as deviation from precision and clarity. However, according to Channell "good" usage involves also clarity and precision and it is a big mistake to assume that vague knowledge is false or it is a defect to be avoided whenever possible /Channell, 1994: 1/. On the contrary, a vague belief has more possibilities of being true than a precise one, because there are more facts that can verify it. According to Peirce, the language system is tolerant of vague language use and indeed has the expectation of its occurrence. Moreover, perfect fluency especially in terms of spoken language can have and produce a wrong effect /Peirce 1902, cited in Channell, 1994: 7/.

Crystal and Davy claim that vocabulary is the most remarkable aspect of informal conversation and refer to the vagueness as imprecision or avoidance of precision. They note that the use of limited syntax and a lot of "general, non-specific" vocabulary are indivisible features of spoken language and therefore quite often vague in nature. Perhaps lack of precision in terms of this word-selection can sometimes cause difficulties. On the one hand, it should be noted that inexplicit references are accepted, on the other hand, though accepted and very common, they

are considered to be vague expressions and cause vagueness to conversations /Crystal & Davy, 1975: 104, 111-114/.

Much attention has been paid to the context by different linguists in the field. Müller suggests formal versus informal context agreeing with Jucker and Ziv /1998/, Anderson /1998/ and labeling discourse markers as a characteristic feature and property of informal context and thus associated with informality. The informal situation and context give rise to the use of a specific vocabulary and have a potential influence on speech behaviour /Müller, 2005: 40-45/. R.A.Goertel calls this specific vocabulary "signals" which help the speaker in leading the interpretive process of the interlocutor as well as promote the listener's understanding, making a particular set of presuppositions. She states that even though discourse markers are categorized due to their "core meaning", each of them implies different shades of meaning, thus having their own unique functions in discourse /Goertel, 2011:15/. The subject of this study is the discourse markers expressing vagueness. The use of discourse markers and their choice indicate the speaker's attitude towards the interlocutor and as Beebe & Waring claim, they add "pragmatic tone" to an utterance /Beebe, Waring 2002, cited in Goertel, 2011: 5/. That is why everything needs to be examined in context.

Vague language use is preferred when
a) the language lacks the proper or exact word for it;
b) the speaker can't remember the exact word – "memory loss";
c) it is vital for the given situation;
d) the speaker avoids precision, as s/he intends to sound approximate and not very certain.

Some of the linguists concentrate on memory loss, linguistic gaps or deliberate choice of words for the purpose of being suitable in that particular context. Lehrer agrees with Crystal and Davy, explaining the use of vagueness related to the suitability of situation. According to him, people communicate even not knowing how the interlocutor uses the language, whether the words are applied similarly or differently and finally what degree of vagueness is being used /Lehrer 1975:920, cited in Channell, 1994: 15/. The communication process is continued when speakers manage to communicate "well enough for their purpose" /Channell, 1994: 15/. Crystal and Davy conclude that the speech is as vague as the speaker wants it to be and if needed s/he can tailor it to the occasion and sound more precise.

There is a freedom of expressing any kind of information (taking into consideration the intimacy of the participants, their age, sex), backchannel signals and silence-fillers. Any utterance (spoken or written) displays features which provide information about the participants' background, the context in which the speech act takes place and the person who the speech act is addressed to. If the context is relevant, informal conversation can smoothly take place, bringing forth all its characteristic features mentioned above /Crystal & Davy, 1975: 111-115/.

The researchers mainly have no doubt about the function of discourse markers in communication process and most of the investigations have been based on native speakers' speech. If we take the researchers' opinions for granted, we should accredit

that these features are important elements of native-speaker's language use. It can be assumed that these are crucial for non-native speakers' language acquisition as well, as the learners' knowledge of this or that particular language is evaluated by their ability of having native-like behaviour. As O'Keffe notes, "Discourse markers have an empowering function; their absence in talk of any individual conversation participant leaves him potentially disempowered and at risk of becoming a second-class participant" /O'Keffe, cited in Goertel, 2011: 12/.

Linguists in the field have discussed the topic from different perspectives applying the term "vague" to various categories and naming them rather differently. As Cotterill suggests "There is relatively little terminological consensus on vagueness" /cited in Cutting, 2007: 198/ and the term vagueness is used to refer to different things /Channell, 1994: 17/.

In the book 'Vague Language' Channell points out that "any social group sharing interests and knowledge employs non-specificity in talking about their shared interests".

She affirms that an expression or a word is vague if
   (a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition,
   (b) it is purposely and unabashedly vague,
   (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty /Channell, 1994: 193/.

Terms defining vague language and vague category markers vary notably. However, based on Channell's (1994), Crystal &Davy's (1975), Andreas H. et al. (2002), Overstreet's (1999), Carter& McCarthy's (2006) distinctions, vague expressions can be represented as follows:
   1. General extenders/ Vague category identifiers
   2. Vague approximators
   3. Vague quantifiers
   4. Vagueness by scalar implicature (Downtoner, Intensifier)
   5. Placeholder words
   6. Adverbs of frequency

In this paper I will concentrate on placeholder words. Placeholder is a type of vague expression that is considered the vaguest among other expressions characterized by this semantic category. Almost all the linguists interested in vague language noted that the most interesting thing about these totally vague words is their spelling that is of a very high uncertainty /Channell, 1994: 157/.

Below is an example from BNC. Here the writer refers to placeholders as nonsense words and presents in some subgroups: *a thing group, a wh-group, a d-group, a g-group* and *a small miscellaneous group*. The example includes all the placeholder words that David Crystal has managed to single out:

a thing group: *thingamabob, thingamabobbit, thingamajig, thingummy, thingummybob, thingy, thingybob*

a wh group: *whatchacallit, whatchacallem, whatchamacallit, whatever, whatsisname, whatsit, whatsits, what not, whosis, whosit, whosits*

a d group: *deeleebob, deeleebobber, diddleebob, diddleydo, diddleything, diddlethingy, dingus, dingdong, dingy, dooda, doodad, doohickey*

a g group: *gadget, geega, gewgaw, gimmick, gizmo, goodie* and **a small miscellaneous group:** *hootenanny (US only), lookit, widget, and oojamaflop.* /BNC-In search of English: a traveler's guide. Crystal David/

According to G. Yule, placeholder words enable the speaker "to refer to an entity or a person without knowing exactly which 'name' would be the best word to use". The reasons for this can be of different origin. Either the speaker doesn't know the appropriate or exact name or just can't access it at the moment of speaking. Moreover, there might be some situations where the speaker knows it but avoids using an offensive or a taboo word /Yule, 1996: 18/.

Channell categorizes placeholder words in three subgroups: those replacing names, replacing item names, performing both functions.

The words *thingy, thingummy* are used to refer to both people and objects, though, they are not considered accepted references to people.

e.g. A: Hello Mr. **Thingy.** You're bugged, you're bugged.
B: Hello. I'm not bugged.
A: You are.
A: I'm not. I'm not bugged. Nothing bugs me, by anything at all, anything bugging me. /BNC-25 conv. rec. by 'Fred2'/

In this example the speaker A is probably teasing his friend and the choice of a placeholder word instead of his name seems a good way of fulfilling a certain pragmatic function.

e.g. A: There are staff toilets and your spirit store.
B: Oh. Yeah, where's **thingy**?
A: Food store is here.
B: Where, where
A: And it's locked. */BNC-24 conv. rec. by 'Barry'/*

Here *thingy* is used to refer to the food store. Perhaps he has forgotten the name but the friend guesses and shows it. The same occurred in the following example. Instead of the name of the object, *thingamajig* is used.

e.g. 1) Can I borrow your **thingamajig**? I don't know what **thingamajig** is. /17 conv. by 'Caroline'/
2) I went to that little shop on the corner, you know the one bought by Miss **Thingambob** when poor old Mr. **Whatshisname** went to Australia or somewhere with his asthma. /'BNC-Hearing loss? A guide to self-help'/

From the context (1) it is clear that someone explains the importance of speech as a tool of communication and criticizes the speaker for not being precise and losing the main word in the mid-stream. In the second example two placeholders are used and that makes the meaning so vague that the interlocutor suggests a less vague variety of the same utterance. According to her, it is better to think about everything previously, before initiating the talk and then say 'I went to *Brown's* corner shop, and the *wholemeal bread* had been sold out.' However, in the example above (2) the speaker failed to find a name for the shop owner, ex-owner and instead of the names, *Miss Thingambob* and *Mr. Whatshisname* came to replace.

Thing is also very common with a preceding noun modifier to describe phenomena that are either new, recent and therefore are difficult to categorize or can be best described deliberately applying vague terms, e.g. Euro *thing*, lucky *thing* and so on.

According to Channell, *thingummy, thingummaying, thingammabob* are interchangeable and identical with *thingy*. The placeholder *thingammabob* is suggested by Channell, but that is rare in use and occurs only once in three corpuses. This of course rises from the spelling uncertainty and consequently makes this category of words difficult to research. One more example, but here, unlike those discussed above, placeholder *thingy* replaces not a noun but a verb. *Thingy* replaces here the verbs *fix* or *do* etc. (connected with the computer).

e.g. If it's her computer though, they might just erm, **thingy** it and change it to suit them. /BNC-17 conv. rec. by 'Albert'/

Placeholder *whatsisname* replaces a name both of a person and an object. Hence, it has its varieties to suit these needs.

Whatsisname - what is his name
Whatsitname - what is its name
Whatsername - what is her name

e.g. 1) Break it off at any point and it redoubles like the monster **whatsitname** in Greek mythology. The Hydra. /COCA-An infinitum: A short story/

2) It was the girl who loved to iron, she'd iron anything. **Whatsername** /COCA-Honored guest/

In the first example *whatsitname* replaces the Hydra – the ancient serpent-like water monster, so the pronoun *it* in *whatsitname* refers to that creature. The choice can be interpreted that either the speaker has forgotten the name of the water monster in Greek mythology or is afraid to make a mistake. In this case, the use of whatsitname gives a rational solution to the problem. In the second example, the speaker has probably forgotten the name of the girl who loved to do ironing and uses *whatsername* as a reference to the *girl*.

In situations in which the speaker cannot access a name, use of a placeholder word may allow her to maintain the pace of the conversation. Here it is visible that

he/she doesn't know the number that`s why replaces it by *whatchacallit* thus maintaining the conversation.

a) "Did they, Windy? Was it really number **whatchacallit** and not the one you want us to shoot next? "- " Number Nineteen, "March said. /COCA-Memorare/

b) A: I think they're covering that **thing** pretty heavily.

   B: What you mean, Euro?

   A: Yeah

/COCA- Jon! Scott, FOX HOST (voice-over): On the Fox News watch/

c) Did you get Old **Whosit**'s paper again? What's he calling it this year?'/GLoWbE-How to have your abstract rejected/

From the last example (c) it can be deduced that the speaker does not seem to be confronted with a word-finding problem, but prefers to refer to that person using a vague marker. The question then rises as to why the speaker uses a vague term instead of the more precise one. A possible answer can be either 1) it was not appropriate to say the name out loud or 2) the speaker wanted to show his indifference or not a very good attitude towards that personality. Moreover, this can be explained by the fact that the use of a vague term sometimes can imply an additional effect that the speaker may have hoped the hearer would access.

Doohickey is defined as a small object whose name you have forgotten or do not know, especially part of a machine. /OALD 2007/

e.g. I especially remember the infamous fountain pen which was still being sold in the needle's gift shop a few years back (and may still be sold): turn it on its side and tip it up, and an elevator-like **doohickey** would rise to the top! /GloWbE- When Seattle Invented the Future/

The speaker remembers the stuff his father used to bring from Seattle. Among them there was a fountain pen. The expression '*elevator-like doohickey'* is rather vague. On the one hand, the speaker uses *doohickey* to refer to the small part of that pen, on the other hand, the word *like* makes the meaning a bit more vague.

Stuff is one of the common vague words and it is mainly used for the formation of general extenders or vague category identifiers. However, depending on the context, stuff can also occur as a placeholder.

e.g. …*whatsername* er *what do you call* them these things what sell curtains **and stuff** like that?- Drapers. /COCA-Zeppelin raids/ (general extender)

Stuff and *thing* function similarly.

e.g. And I said, excuse me, what are you doing? And why you are touching **my stuff**? /COCA-CBS-This morning/

(the second clause is equivalent to *why are you touching my things*)

e.g. TRA: and when (.) when you came to the Pennyslvania later (.) sigh (.) how did you find it (.) how did it compare to the gythio where (.) grew up?

   MOT: big difference jimmy, real big.

TRA: what was the **<u>stuff</u>** that was what was those the **<u>stuff</u>** that to you seemed strange? (TalkBank) (placeholder)

e.g. We're the smart ones I thought. Save that **<u>stuff</u>** for the other team. (GloWbE-The public Option is not symbolic) (placeholder)

In the first example *stuff* occurs as a general extender. The speaker wants to go to the drapers where cloth and curtains are sold. In this sentence there are also two placeholder words used to replace the drapers, as the speaker does not remember the name. However, in the last two examples *stuff* functions as a placeholder.

Evaluating the meaning of the expressions, we can conclude that the pragmatic meaning is more crucial and vital than the semantic meaning. However, the successful use of such expressions demonstrates that collaboration is an essential part of reference, as their meaning depends crucially on their context and on the common ground between interlocutors.

The examination of the sets of expressions used in speech as well as the explanation and interpretation of some naturally occurring conversations brought us to the point where the answer to the question "why do people need to be vague" is more or less vivid. This usage helps to fill in the gaps that are a result of memory loss or when the exact word can't be found depending on various reasons. When the speaker avoids using a person's name or a name of a phenomenon placeholders are used as references and help to maintain the conversation as well as fulfill various communicative functions.

Language system is tolerant of the occurrence of vague language; however, one should be careful not to overload his/her speech as well as avoid using them in formal contexts.

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Ժ. ԱՅՎԱԶՅԱՆ – *Անորոշության կարգի արտահայտումը խոսակցական անգլերենում.* **–** Խոսակցական լեզվի առանցքային բնութագրիչ գծերից մեկը խոսքի անորոշությունն է, որն անգլերենում արտահայտվում է մի շարք լեզվական կառույցների կիրառմամբ: Անորոշ արտահայտությունների դասակարգումն առաջադրելուց հետո սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում են անորոշ արտահայտություն-ներից մեկի՝ այսպես կոչված placeholder-ների կառուցվածքային, իմաստային, ինչպես նաև գործաբանական առանձնահատկությունները: Հոդվածում քննարկվում են նաև հետևյալ հարցերը. ինչու է անհրաժեշտ երբեմն խոսքում լինել անորոշ և խուսափել մշտապես ճշգրիտ տեղեկավություն հաղորդելուց, երբ և ինչ համատեքստում է անորոշ արտահայտությունների կիրառությունն ընդունելի և որոնք են հիմնական գործառույթները:

Բանալի բառեր. անորոշություն, խոսակցական լեզու, անորոշ արտահայտություններ, մոտավոր բառեր, փիլեյսհոլդ(ր)րները (placeholders)

Ж. АЙВАЗЯН – ***О категории неопределенности/неясности в английской разговорной речи.*** **–** В статье рассматривается категория неопределенности в английской разговорной речи. Языковые единицы данной категории играют важную роль в декодировании прагматического значения высказывания. Они употребляются в речи, когда говорящий избегает предоставления конкретной, точной информации или же в момент речи у него возникают трудности, связанные с памятью. К их числу принадлежат идентификаторы категории неопределенно-сти/неясности, так называемые общие распространители, аппроксиматоры, кван-тификаторы, слова-заменители и т.д. Подробно рассмотрен последний класс данных лингвистических единиц (placeholder words), выделены их структурные, морфологические и прагматические характеристики.

Ключевые слова: категория неопределенности/неясности, разговорная речь, общие распространители, аппроксиматоры, квантификаторы, слова-заменители