English and Russian vague category markers in business discourse: Linguistic identity aspects

Elena Malyuga*, Michael McCarthy

RUDN University, Russia

ABSTRACT

Vague category markers (hereafter VCMs), also known as general extenders, are a pervasive phenomenon of spoken discourse. They include expressions such as *and things like that* and *or whatever*. They have been studied in conversational contexts and specialised contexts (e.g. courtroom discourse, radio broadcasts) but spoken business and professional communication has received relatively less attention. Using two corpora, this article addresses: (1) the forms and functions of VCMs in English business talk and in Russian business/professional talk, and (2) the comparability of VCMs across the two datasets. In both corpora, a range of VCMs similar to those found in everyday conversational contexts occur. The functions of VCMs in business/professional data replicate those illustrated in previous research into VCM use, i.e., the projection of fluid, exemplar-based categories which appeal to shared knowledge, hedging, the projection of a shared identity both within and between groups and as shorthand references to different levels of shared knowledge, from internal knowledge shared by the group to general, global knowledge and experience. The efficient functioning of VCMs is evidenced in turn-taking. VCMs in both datasets attach to a wide range of exemplar-types, regardless of syntactic configuration. Although the two datasets could not be perfectly matched, sufficient similarities enable useful comparisons to be made, albeit translatability of VCMS is often complicated by the number of internal variants any VCM may display.

© 2018 The Authors. Published by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the use of Vague Category Markers (VCMs, also known as General Extenders) in business and professional contexts in English and Russian. Both languages are well-researched, and both are blessed with sources of data for the study of business and professional discourse. The two languages, as may be assumed for many other languages, have developed conventions for the conduct in situations such as business meetings, negotiations, professional gatherings and so on. The topic which we wish to address here is: to what extent is vague category marking similar or different in English and Russian business discourse and what implications does such an investigation have for translation and cross-cultural understanding? The topic is essentially a socio-pragmatic one, concerned with the creation and interpretation of meanings in circumscribed contexts. Our focus will be on two sub-themes:

---

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: en_malyuga@hotmail.com (E. Malyuga).

(1) the occurrence of VCMs in English business discourse and their comparability/translatability with regard to Russian;
(2) the relationship between vague category marking and turn-taking in spoken business communication.

These foci are chosen since at the heart of our argument is the contention that vague category marking in discourse involves a joint enterprise between speaker and listener to achieve its pragmatic goals.

We use two corpora of business/professional data in the present article: the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (hereafter CANBEC) and a sub-corpus of the Russian National Corpus (hereafter the RNC), both of which are described in Section 3.

2. Vague category marking

2.1. General outline and definition

Vague category marking refers to the purposeful use of a class of lexico-grammatical strings which make non-explicit references to categories which the speaker/writer assumes the listener/reader will be able to interpret without the need for the sender to give an exhaustive list of possible items in any individual category (or indeed, the sender may not have the requisite knowledge to be able to give explicit references or may hesitate to do so for a variety of reasons). Extract 1 below, from an English business meeting where a new method of processing customer orders is being discussed, suggests that the speaker does not feel the need to elaborate a list of product lines and can assume his interlocutors will understand the potential scope of *and all that sort of thing*:

Extract 1
*Any teams which have ongoing lines like toothpaste **and all that that sort of thing**, they will work on the new way*... (CANBEC)

The string *that sort/kind of thing* (sometimes preceded by *and* and/or *all*) occurs 52 times in the spoken English business data. The core string and its variants represent classic VCMs. Other common English VCMs include *(and) things like that* and *or whatever*.

The normality of the use of VCMs in spoken discourse and their role in the successful progression of speaking turns has been noted by, among others, Channell (1994), Cutting (2007), Pichler and Levey (2010), Sabet and Zhang (2016) and Vaughan et al. (2017). The term we use here, VCM, also occurs in the literature as *extension particle, set marking tag, general extender, generalised list completer, vague tag* and *vague category identifier*, among other labels for the phenomenon (see Dines, 1980; Jefferson, 1990; Dubois, 1992; Channell, 1994; Overstreet, 1999, 2005; Overstreet and Yule, 1997; O'Keeffe, 2004; Cheshire, 2007). A syntactic distinction is often drawn between adjunctive VCMs (those introduced by *and*) and disjunctive VCMs (those introduced by *or*, as in *or whatever*). The distinction comes from the work of Overstreet (1999:3—4), who correlates the two types with distinct pragmatic functions relating to politeness strategies, while Aijmer (2015) suggests that the disjunctive types may offer listeners the possibility of alternative interpretations of referents of the VCM.

For our purposes, we define a VCM as a phrase attached to an item or items seen as an exemplar or exemplars of a category of people, things, states or actions; the VCM extends the exemplar(s) in a non-specific way and typically encodes an assumption that the participants in the discourse will understand what might be included in the category or at least not feel the need to challenge it or demand an elaboration of its meaning. Thus, in extract 1, *toothpaste* is the exemplar chosen to represent the category of products under discussion; the VCM phrase is *and all that sort of thing*, which projects a category that includes similar items. The vagueness of the VCM serves two main purposes: (1) to project an assumption of shared knowledge or common ground — "intersubjectivity" as Overstreet (1999:293) terms it; and (2) to refer to categories which are valid for the participants at the time of utterance without any implications as to the permanence or universality of the category or to its being a closed lexical set (Overstreet, 1999:297; Cheshire, 2007:163).

Vague category marking often encodes what has been termed "instantial hyponymy" (Carter and McCarthy, 1988), i.e., exemplars are (co-)hyponyms of superordinates which are of the moment, which are fluid and open to the negotiation of meaning. However, it is rare in spoken contexts, though not unknown, in circumstances like those in extract 1, for any listener to challenge the VCM. Overwhelmingly, listeners appear, on the face of it, to understand what is to be included (Jucker et al., 2003). Vague category marking is simply heard as a normal, banal practice and it is evident that speakers and writers do it with "audience design" in mind (Bell, 1984, albeit Bell was concerned with matters of style). Unlike the radio audiences in Bell's research, the business and professional contexts studied for the present paper include just two types of recipient: addressees (who could be individuals, or everyone present) and other, ratified recipients who may not be directly addressed, and in business and professional contexts, these two types of recipient are in general assumed to be in the know with regard to the context.

VCMs refer to categories but do so by deliberately de-focusing from available lexicalised categories (e.g. taxonomies such as plants, mammals, vehicles) and creating ad hoc, instantial categories relevant to the needs of the present discourse. The scope of their reference is projected as sufficiently interpretable to the recipient(s) and need have no permanent validity. *Toothpaste and all that that sort of thing* needs only to be valid for the understanding of product lines at the time of speaking among that group of participants and their shared knowledge of what the company manufactures. There is no implication