

Dingsbums und so: Beliefs about German vague language

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Abstract

Research has shown that vague language, which includes vague items (general nouns, general verbs, general extenders, vague clauses, clause final ellipsis and conversational implicature) and vague modifiers (vague quantifiers and other epistemic stance markers), is a feature of many languages, signalling a friendly attitude and modifying face threats. In order for language teachers to teach about vague language, they need to understand the preconceptions of their learners. This paper describes the beliefs of 178 German English language teachers and students. This study has shown that all the participants were aware of German equivalents to the English general nouns, verbs and extenders. Describing German vague language, they mentioned vague non-verbal indicators, vague responses to health enquiries, and vague epistemic stance indicators that indexed explicitly a lack of knowledge. They emphasised that these forms are reserved for family and close friends, and expressing closeness. They believed that they were not appropriate in formal settings, being associated them with a low level of education and youth talk. They also pointed to negative connotations of indifference, and impressions of laziness and incompetence that vague language can create. The paper suggests applications of findings for language educators. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Vague language (VL) features, such as ‘thing’, ‘stuff’, ‘or something’, ‘and all the rest of it’ and ‘sort of’, are prevalent in spoken and written English, especially in everyday informal conversations. They have important social functions, such as creating a relaxed atmosphere, establishing interpersonal rapport and mitigating face threats. Yet VL is popularly believed to be sloppy, woolly and inadequate (Channell, 1994; Jucker et al., 2003; Koester, 2007), and this attitude abounds amongst language educators, as well as course-book and writing-manual authors. English language educators who do wish to teach about VL, because they are concerned that a lack of familiarity with it may deprive learners of opportunities to accomplish their communicative goals (Fraser, 2010) and indeed to boost interpersonal rapport (Cheng, 2007), need to know what preconceptions learners can bring with them about VL from their own languages, since a negative attitude could be a barrier to learning. VL in languages other than English has been investigated in studies of naturally-occurring language, and such studies indicate where native speaker of English (NSE) and non-native speaker of English (NNSE) norms overlap, thus helping learners by identifying areas of potential positive language transfer and warning them of areas where transfer is a risk. However, there is a dearth of research into the beliefs of speakers of other languages about the functions of their VL.

This paper describes part of a study that explores such beliefs, driven by a desire to understand the differences between languages, as regards speakers’ perceptions of vague forms, the functions that they perform and the

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impressions that they create. The paper focuses on the metapragmatic awareness (Verschuieren, 2000) of native speakers of German (NSGs). 178 TESOL and English linguistics educators and English major students were asked

- whether they could find equivalents of English VL in German
- how easy it was for them to translate English VL
- whether they were aware of other forms of VL in German
- what social dimensions they associated with VL in German.

The paper begins with descriptions of English VL and its functions, reviewing literature on variation, so as to establish general points of comparison with German VL, and enable an interpretation of respondents' beliefs about equivalent social dimensions. It then surveys accounts of VL in other languages, including German, to enable a qualitative comparison of this study's findings as regards perceptions about VL with findings from studies of VL actual usage

2. English vague language

English VL comprises vague forms and vague modifiers. These serve textual, epistemic and sociopragmatic functions. Studies have suggested that VL varies according to geographical and social contexts

2.1. English vague forms and vague modifiers

The term 'vague forms' is used to refer to words and expressions which are vague in themselves, that is to say, inherently vague lexical items and grammatical structures. The term 'vague modifiers', on the other hand, is employed to denote expressions that add vagueness to other items, structures or entire utterances.

Vague lexical items include general nouns, general verbs and general extenders, all of which are empty semantically and highly dependent on the context for their meaning. General nouns are maximally generic vague nouns (Andersen, 2010:36) such as 'thing', 'stuff', 'people' and 'place', which top the superordinate hierarchy, and are so empty semantically that they are on the borderline between a lexical item and the personal pronoun, examples being 'That *thing* works very well' and 'they've brought all the *stuff*'. Cutting (2007) distinguishes between standard general nouns 'thing', 'stuff', etc., and colloquial general nouns, which include informal vague lexemes such as 'thingy', 'thingymajig' and 'thingummybob' and general nominal clauses functioning as one lexeme such as 'what-you-call-it', 'whatsisname' and 'what's-her-face'.

General verbs are also empty semantically. This category includes the pro-verb 'do', whose meaning resides in the exophoric context, as in 'I'm not *doing* anything today', and the lexical 'do' verb, which can be contrasted with a contentful expression rendering the same proposition, as in 'You *do* Language Planning don't you?' where 'do' means 'take the course'.

General extenders are phrases such as 'and so on' and 'or something' that occur at the end of a phrase or utterance. This is the most widely researched area of VL, outside studies of vague modifiers. Early studies suggested that they indicate that the preceding exemplars are part of a larger set that it is not necessary to list, as in 'You can put your books *and stuff* in this bag if you want', and that the preceding element is 'an illustrative example of some more general case', as in 'He'll have a drink at a party *an' that*' (Dines, 1980:22). Adjunctive general extenders ('and' + general noun phrase), as in 'and things', 'and stuff' and 'and all the rest of it', are hedges that observe the cooperative maxim of quantity, implying that more could be said. Disjunctive ones ('or' + general noun phrase), as in 'or something (like that)', 'or anything' and 'or whatever', act as hedges that observe the cooperative maxim of quality, implying that what has been said is possibly inaccurate. Since the 1990s, research has focused on the interpersonal social functions of general extenders in interaction, as outlined in the next section.

As regards vague grammatical structures, these occur at clause and utterance level: vague clauses, clause final ellipsis and conversational implicature, which again assume that the hearer or reader (henceforth addressee) can understand by accessing shared knowledge. Vague clauses are those with low semantic content such as 'Are you going to do *what you thought you'd do*?' Clause final ellipses are unfinished ends of utterances as in 'They had the er mental and the ...'. Conversational implicature (Grice, 1975) is vague in that a whole proposition is implied and can be appreciated only by addressees with the relevant background knowledge, as in the ironic 'I really like the teacher very much'.

As far as vague modifiers are concerned, these include vague quantifiers and other epistemic stance markers with a hedging function. Vague quantifiers, generally used as a matter of convenience when more precision is not merited, can be numeric or non-numeric. The numeric ones are vague quantity expressions that modify a number, as in '*about* 30 subjects' and 'We're meeting seven-*ish* or maybe a bit later' (Carter and McCarthy, 2006:204). Non-numeric quantifiers do not accompany numbers, examples being 'She's got *lots of* things to tell you' and '*a number of* samples'. Other vague epistemic modifiers are adjectival or adverbial expressions used to qualify the writers' commitment to the truth value of a proposition (Lakoff, 1972). These include modal adverbs such as 'probably' and 'maybe', pragmatic force modifiers as in

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