



About his friend, how good she is, *and this and that*: General extenders in native Persian and non-native English discourse

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ABSTRACT

The present study sets out to investigate the structures and functions of general extenders (GEs) in native Persian and non-native English discourse. The data include two corpora of informal conversations collected by the participants themselves (circa 20 h). Both native and non-native corpora show that GEs are in the process of becoming more flexible with regard to their position. The Persian corpus was found to contain two unique GEs ('væ væ væ' and 'væ in væ un'), that seemed to be directly transferred to English by the non-native speaker group ('and and and' and 'and this and that'). The data further shows that, unlike in English, Persian GEs are not used to provide an intensifying effect in soliciting agreement. The non-native English corpus does not feature this function either. The findings also indicate that EFL learners do not tend to use the GE 'and stuff' to establish solidarity. Besides, the present study shows how Persian GEs can be used to fulfill the two unique functions of expressing outrage and arousing curiosity. In the former case, which is also found in the non-native English corpus, speakers echo the word they find offensive and add the GE 'jahærçi', and in the latter case, they lengthen the GE 'væinâ'. Finally, it is argued that first language norms influence the use of GEs by non-native speakers.

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1. Introduction

Vague language is an important feature of daily language use and has attracted researchers' attention over the last decade or so (see Cutting, 2007; Zhang, 2011). Yet, there seems to be relatively little consensus on what exactly is meant by the term 'vagueness'. This might be attributed to the fact that "the terms used to refer to vague language are somewhat vague themselves" (Cotterill, 2007:98). Channell (1994:20) categorizes vague language in the following way (see also, Ball and Ariel, 1978; Crystal and Davy, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1986):

- A. Vague nouns, for example *things*, *stuff*;
- B. Vague category identifiers, for example *and stuff (like that)*, or *something*;
- C. Vague approximators, for example *about*, *around*, or *so*.

The focus of this study is on vague category identifiers such as 'væ in væ un' (and this and that) or 'já čī' (or what) in native Persian and 'and such things' or 'or something like that' in non-native English discourse. This group of expressions has been

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variously referred to as *extension particles* (Dubois, 1992), *generalized list completers* (Lerner, 1994), *set markers* (Stenström et al., 2002), *set-marking tags* (Dines, 1980; Winter and Norrby, 2000), and also *referent final tags* (Aijmer, 1985, 2002). In this study, Overstreet's (1999) term *general extender* (GE) has been adopted as it seems to be the preferable one in recent studies. Elaborating on the significance of GEs in conversation, Tagliamonte and Denis (2010), consider them as a robust and vibrant feature of daily language use.

2. Significance of the study

Pragmatic expressions have been examined in some languages other than English (e.g., Aijmer and Simon-Vanderbergen, 2006; Chen and He, 2001; Cuenca, 2008; Cuenca and Marín, 2009; da Silva, 2006; Furman and Özyürek, 2007; Hasund, 2001; Hlavac, 2006; Jucker and Ziv, 1998; Roth-Gordon, 2007; Strauss, 2009), but all-embracing studies of GEs, as a sub-category of pragmatic expressions, have been bound mostly to English (Cheshire, 2007; Overstreet, 1999; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2010). It seems that GEs have been left unexplored in many other languages, including Persian. While there have been some contrastive studies (Graman, 1998; Overstreet, 2005; Terraschke and Holmes, 2007), no attempt has been made to investigate the use of such expressions in the speech of Persian non-native speakers of English. In order to ascertain whether comparable forms of these expressions occur in comparable contexts in the two languages, this study sets out to investigate the structure and function of GEs in Persian (L1) and their possible effects on the English (L2) spoken by non-native speakers in an EFL context. The current study has been undertaken with the following specific questions in mind:

- A. Are the norms of construction used by Persian speakers the same as the ones used by native English speakers?
- B. Which specific category of GEs (*adjunctive* or *disjunctive*) occurs more frequently in both L1 and L2 of Persian EFL learners?
- C. Does any transfer effect take place from L1 into L2 with respect to the norms of construction and grammatical position?
- D. Are specific GEs employed by EFL learners to fulfill the same functions which have been identified in L1 English?

3. Some notes on GEs

GEs are a group of pragmatic expressions that are typically connected to the sentence structure. Compared with other pragmatic expressions, GEs are less flexible in their syntactic position (Overstreet, 1999). As discussed by Terraschke (2007:145), English GEs have the following basic syntactic structure:

- conjunction + (modifier) vague expression (like that)

The following example includes an example of a GE in which both a modifier (*kind of funky*) and *like that* have been inserted:

[1]

Suzanna: yeah and em. hm Ani DiFranco **and kind of funky stuff like that.**
(Terraschke, 2007:145)

GEs are divided into 'adjunctive' (those beginning with *and* in English and with *væ* in Persian) and 'disjunctive' (those beginning with *or* in English and with *jâ* in Persian).

Overstreet (1999) proposed different functions for 'adjunctive' and 'disjunctive' GEs. Along these lines, it has been argued that "these expressions are multifunctional with the context, both linguistic and non-linguistic, helping to constrain the interpretation on particular occasions of use" (Cheshire, 2007:157).

Earlier work on GEs assumed that the main function of such expressions was to implicate a category. Dines (1980:22) was of the opinion that in every case, the function of GEs is "to cue the listener to interpret the preceding element as an illustrative example of some more general case." This suggests that 'pencils and things' in "He bought pencils and things" represents either the lexicalized category 'stationery' or art supplies. Categories with labels such as 'food', 'fruit', or 'stationery' are called lexicalized because they are not usually created spontaneously for use in specialized contexts (Rosch, 1977). A category like "things to use to kill a roach" is, however, ad hoc as it does not have well-established representations in memory and tends "to serve people's goals rather than to represent states of the environment" (Overstreet, 1999:42).

Similarly, Jefferson (1990) proposed that GEs are employed by interactants to complete three-part lists. Jefferson's claim was challenged by Overstreet (1999), who argued that in English evidence was insufficient to claim that participants employ GEs to solve the problem of three-partness. Overstreet's argument was that, for example, in "They wanna kiss and hug and stuff like that," the speaker is not communicating a list of behaviours but is characterizing a kind of behaviour. Overstreet (1999:26) also claimed that GEs do not only occur as the third point in a three-part list since the most common structure identified in her data was of the form '1 item + GE'.

More recent research has been focused on the functions of GEs in general, and *and stuff* (Overstreet, 2005) or *and things* (Cheshire, 2007) in particular, in marking solidarity and rapport. To clarify, consider the following example:

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