Available online at www.sciencedirect.com
SCIENCE DIRECT®
Journal of Pragmatics 35 (2003) 1737–1769
journal of PRAGMATICS
www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Interactive aspects of vagueness in conversation

Andreas H. Jucker[a,*], Sara W. Smith[b], Tanja Lüdge[c]

[a]*Department of English, University of Zurich, Plattenstrasse 47, CH-8032 Zurich, Switzerland*
[b]*California State University, Long Beach, CA, USA*
[c]*Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Germany*

Received 10 February 2000; accepted 17 November 2002

Abstract

Vagueness in reference is often seen as a deplorable deviation from precision and clarity. Using a relevance theoretical framework of analysis, we demonstrate instead that vague expressions may be more effective than precise ones in conveying the intended meaning of an utterance. That is, they may carry more relevant contextual implications than would a precise expression. In introducing entities into a conversation, we found that vague referring expressions often served as a focusing device, helping the addressee determine how much processing effort should be devoted to a given referent. In characterising events and experiences, they may indicate a closer or looser assignment of a characteristic to a conceptual category. For expressing quantities, they may convey the speaker's attitude about the quantity itself, and they may convey assumptions about the speaker's and/or the hearer's beliefs. They may be used to directly express the degree of commitment a speaker makes to a proposition, or they may convey other propositional attitudes such as newsworthiness and personal evaluation more indirectly. Finally, they may serve social functions such as engendering camaraderie and softening implicit criticisms. They may thus be seen as managing conversational implicature. Our analysis is based on a corpus of semi-controlled spoken interactions between California students, who were asked to converse on specific topics, such as movies, sports or opera. Following the categories proposed by Channell (Channell, Joanna. 1994. Vague Language. Oxford University Press, Oxford), we analysed examples of vague additives, i.e., approximators, downtoners, vague category identifiers and shields, and examples of lexical vagueness, i.e., vague quantifying expressions, vague adverbs of frequency, vague adverbs of likelihood, and placeholder words. Such expressions are used regularly in everyday conversations and they rarely lead to detectable misunderstandings; we argue that their success depends on the exploitation of common ground.

Keywords: Conversation; Relevance; Vagueness; Loose talk; Common ground; Attitude; Focus; Softener

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: ahjucker@es.unizh.ch (A.H. Jucker).

0378-2166/03/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00188-1

> When we speak or write, we are rarely very clear, precise, or explicit about what we mean—and perhaps could not be—but are, on the contrary, vague, indirect, and unclear about just what we are committed to. This often appears superficially to be an inadequacy of human language: but only for those who hold a rather crude view of what is maximally efficient in communication. (Stubbs, 1986:1)

1. Introduction[1]

It is commonly assumed that language ideally is precise and that vagueness is a defect to be avoided whenever possible. However, several linguists have criticised this notion for being too plain a view of language. As quoted above, Stubbs proposes that precise language is not necessarily more efficient than vague language. Williamson (1994) describes vagueness as a positive feature of human language:

> Used as a technical term, "vague" is not pejorative. Indeed, vagueness is a desirable feature of natural languages. Vague words often suffice for the purpose in hand, and too much precision can lead to timewasting and inflexibility. (Williamson, 1994: 4869)

Channell (1994: 3) argues a more general point, that "vagueness in language is neither all 'bad' nor all 'good'. What matters is that vague language is used appropriately". It is easy to identify contexts in which it seems more or less appropriate. In achieving the goals of a medical report, a legal contract or an academic paper, a high degree of precision is ordinarily needed, while the same type of precision from a politician in a radio interview or for partners during a casual chat would be counterproductive, in that it might be off-putting and/or misleading.

The ability to vary the precision of utterances and to use them in appropriate contexts is thus part of the speaker's communicative competence, and the interpretation of such expressions is a natural part of language use. It follows that an understanding of the nature and the role of vagueness in language use is critical to an understanding of language itself.

In her seminal book on vagueness, Channell (1994) focuses on linguistic expressions that are—in Sadock's (1977) formulation—"purposely and unabashedly vague" (1994: 20). She provides a comprehensive description of various ways of approximating quantities in English, of various ways of referring vaguely to categories (e.g. with tags such as *or something like that*), and of totally vague words, such as *thingy* or *whatsisname*.

[1] Some of the thoughts of this paper derive from an MA thesis written by the third author under the supervision of the first author (Lüdge, 1998). The paper is part of a larger research project by the first and second author focusing on conversational strategies and in particular on how interactants negotiate their common ground in conversations.

While our paper is indebted to Channell's perceptive analyses, we adopt a different perspective. We want to argue for an interactional approach to the concept of vagueness. Vagueness is not only an inherent feature of natural language but also—and crucially—it is an interactional strategy. Speakers are faced with a number of communicative tasks, and they are vague for strategic reasons. Varying the level of vagueness may help guide the addressee to make the intended representation of entities and events and to draw intended implications from them.

We will focus on four communicative tasks that are part of everyday conversations. First, speakers must find a way to evoke appropriate mental representations of the people, places, and things they want to talk about. For any given entity, there is an unlimited variety of ways to refer to it, and candidate expressions in a language vary in their level of precision of reference. For example, the speaker who wants to talk about an event involving a car repair can describe it in a way that specifies various people involved uniquely and in considerable detail, or she can refer to them in a way that just allows the addressee to identify them in generic terms. Her purposes in referring to each person—how individual and salient she wants each to be—will determine the level of vagueness selected.

Second, speakers try to characterise events and experiences by assigning them to categories (I feel *stupid*, She is my *supervisor*, etc.). In doing so, the speaker may believe that the assignment is or is not a good match, and she may want the addressee to know which is the case. This would help the addressee make a more appropriate interpretation and have the appropriate level of confidence in it.

Third, speakers often want to quantify the amount, frequency, or probability of events and their characteristics. As Moxey and Sanford (1997) have noted, speakers ordinarily use expressions from natural language to quantify even though they are not precise (see also Zhang, 1998). However, these vague expressions may convey different meanings, compared to exact numbers.

Finally, speakers often want to convey propositional attitude along with content. That is, they may want to convey their level of certainty for a claim or their evaluation of a situation. In addition, they may want to convey social-interactional meanings of various kinds.

In each of the contexts described above, we will explore the nature and role of vague expressions. We will build much of our explanation on Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1991). We will also note the role of common ground in the use of vague expressions. We have argued earlier (Smith and Jucker, 1998) that speakers constantly negotiate their common ground, seeking and providing cues as to the partner's beliefs and the current accessibility of beliefs that are relevant to the interpretation of an utterance.

We want to explore the contexts and meanings of vagueness in a discourse type in which vagueness plays an important role, i.e., everyday conversations. Consistent with suggestions about vagueness as quoted above, we will attempt to determine ways in which vague expressions are not just poor but good-enough substitutes for precise expressions, but are preferable to precise expressions because of their greater efficiency (in terms of Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 46–48). In addition, we will attempt to determine ways in which vague expressions might actually carry meanings different

from, and more relevant than, precise expressions, i.e., functions served by vagueness, other than simple efficiency.

As a data base we will use casual interactions between students at California State University in Long Beach. Seven pairs of students (ten females, four males) were asked to participate in a psycholinguistic study designed to identify ways in which interactants negotiate their common ground. Four of the pairs were strangers, while three pairs were friends. Five of the pairs were single-sex groups.

The students were asked to take part in two fifteen-minute sessions one week apart. Within each session, the students were first given five minutes to get to know each other (for strangers) or five minutes to 'catch up with each other' (for friends). They were then asked to talk about topics assigned by the researcher according to a counterbalanced scheme. These topics included familiar topics, such as sports or movies, and less familiar topics, such as opera and karate. Within each session two topics were assigned one at a time, to be discussed for 5 min each. In the following session the students again began with 5 min for free discussion. They were then assigned one topic previously discussed and one new topic. All in all, 14 sessions were recorded lasting 3.5 h. The study was recorded at California State University, Long Beach, and transcribed at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen. Other results of this study have been reported in Jucker and Smith (1998, in press), Smith and Jucker (1998, 2000, 2002) and Smith, Jucker and Müller (2001).

2. A relevance theoretic approach to vagueness

Rather than developing a model focused on vagueness itself, we prefer to place vagueness in a broader theoretical context, in a general model of language use. In their presentation of Relevance Theory, Sperber and Wilson (1991) provide such a model, treating vagueness ("looseness" in their terminology, 1991: 540) as a natural aspect of language use. They argue that "loose uses are non-literal uses" of language (1991: 546). Non-literal uses are contrasted with the generally accepted hypothetical rule of 'literal truthfulness'. This rule is based on the assumption that when making an utterance, a speaker automatically vouches for the truth of her statement. In other words, a hearer expects that what he is told is true unless the contrary is revealed. However, in everyday language there are various exceptions that pose counterexamples. Regarding quotations, for example, it is true that a literal meaning of a proposition is conveyed, but its truth is not asserted. Regarding metaphors, the speaker also does not seem to vouch for the literal truth of her utterance. The speaker seems to have a fairly complex thought in her mind which she wants to convey. To understand the meaning of a metaphor, the hearer is asked to construct a similarly complex thought in his mind. In fact, it seems to be rather untypical for communication that the speaker only wants to inform the hearer about a simple fact. Sperber and Wilson agree that utterances bear a literal truth-conditional meaning, but they doubt that interlocutors always want to communicate this literal meaning. From their point of view, speakers very often only vouch for the truth of *some* propositions contained (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 542).

Moreover, 'loose uses' of language are said to be "based on resemblance relations among representations" (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 546). Generally, an utterance can be said to express a proposition. As such it conveys some state of affairs which constitutes the truth conditions of this proposition. However, utterances are not limited to the representation of a state of affairs. Their meaning can also rely on resemblance relations. Sperber and Wilson argue:

> [g]enerally speaking, an utterance can be used to represent any representation which it resembles in content, whether a public representation such as another utterance, or a mental representation such as a thought. (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 542)

That is, an utterance can be used to represent any other phenomenon which it resembles in some respects. In order to distinguish between these two aspects of representation, namely representation in virtue of truth-conditions and representation in virtue of resemblance relations, Sperber and Wilson call the former 'description' and the latter 'interpretation'. 'Descriptively', an utterance represents the truth-conditions of the proposition. 'Interpretively', an utterance represents its resemblance in content. Vague uses or loose uses of language are said to "involve 'interpretive' rather than 'descriptive' dimensions of language use" (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 546).

'Resemblance' is defined as the similarity of representations concerning their content. The relationship between this resemblance is called 'interpretive resemblance'. 'Interpretive resemblance' is a comparative notion. On the one hand, the degree of resemblance can be very high, e.g. in the case of a direct quotation of another utterance, or it may be very low, e.g. in the case of a summary of someone else's utterance or utterances. The same is true for the resemblance of thoughts. Thus, resemblance is a matter of degree. In each case the hearer is expected to "identify the respects in which the resemblance holds" (Blakemore, 1992: 104). Further, the resemblance relation of propositions changes with the context.

A proposition as such contains a range of analytical implications. In addition, each proposition yields certain contextual implications in a particular context. Two propositions may share a lot of contextual implications in one context, and very little contextual implications in another situation. In other words, two propositions may resemble each other very closely in one context and very loosely in a different one. Two propositions only interpretively resemble each other literally if they share all their contextual and analytical implications. Thus, literalness can be regarded as an exceptional case of interpretive resemblance.

The notion of interpretive resemblance is taken further by Sperber and Wilson. Regarding the intrinsic properties of thoughts, they argue that "there is an even more essential interpretive use of utterances: on a more fundamental level, *every* utterance is used to represent a thought of the speaker's" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 230). From this point of view, an utterance always relies on resemblance relations. This includes the underlying assumption that an utterance can never have the same contextual and analytical implication as the thought entertained by the speaker.

Consequently, every utterance is only an approximation to the very thought the speaker has in mind.

As already mentioned, the hearer cannot expect that the meaning the speaker wants to convey is always a literal one. A literal interpretation is neither always necessary nor always appropriate for successful communication (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 543). Regarding vague uses of language, the speaker entertains only some of the analytical and contextual implications of the proposition. The hearer is expected to construct a subset of analytical and contextual implications as intended by the speaker to achieve shared discourse goals. Indeed, this is a process which is always involved in utterance understanding. It implies the speaker's assumption that the hearer is able to discover the implications she wants to convey. Thus, the choice of the propositional form of an utterance also depends on the speaker's evaluation of the hearer's cognitive abilities as well as on her assumptions about the common ground that she shares with him.[2] The hearer always tries to select a subset of implications which are relevant in a particular context. This selection process is guided by the principle of relevance.

To aid listeners in capturing the intended meaning, speakers may convey not only representational meaning but also procedural meaning (Blakemore, 1992: 150). Vague expressions may convey representational meaning, but they also may be seen as providing processing instructions that guide listeners to the most relevant interpretation of an utterance. That is, they may suggest different implications.

Summing up, within relevance theory, "loose uses are non-literal uses [...]: they are based on resemblance relations among representations and involve interpretive rather than descriptive dimensions of language use" (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 546). A vague utterance is not regarded as 'approximately true'. A vague proposition generally bears a literal truth-conditional meaning. According to Sperber and Wilson, "the truth-conditional relation between propositions and the state of affairs they represent remains unaltered: what varies is how closely the proposition expressed is taken to represent the speaker's thought" (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 546). Vague expressions may guide listeners to find the best match between the utterance and the intended meaning.

3. Analysis

In the analyses below, we will explore ways in which vague expressions guide the listener to an interpretation that best fits the speaker's intentions for the addressee. Vague expressions will thus be seen as conveying procedural meaning, along with representational meaning. We will identify the types of meaning conveyed by vague expressions and the role their meaning plays in conversations. We will organise our analysis around four communicative tasks, as described above.

[2] 'Common ground' refers to the interlocutors' assumptions about their shared background assumptions about the world.

3.1. Representations of people and places

It is an essential task of conversationalists to evoke for their partners mental images of all the things they want to talk about. For any given entity, there are many possible ways to refer to it, and the speaker must choose the one that is most appropriate for the goals and context of the conversation.

Traditional approaches to reference assignment regularly assume that the communication can only be successful if the addressee can uniquely identify each discourse entity referred to by the speaker. But we argue that speakers only aim to individuate discourse entities to a degree that is sufficient for current purposes. How much individuation is needed depends on the situation and the discourse entities involved. In some situations and for some discourse entities it is essential that the addressee can identify the intended referent uniquely. In other cases a vague characterisation may be not only sufficient but preferable. We believe that the most appropriate referring expression is the one that will help the addressee both identify a referent to the right level of individuation and give it the right level of focus or foregrounding. We argue that more precise expressions imply to the listener that more individuation and focus is needed, whereas less precise expressions imply that a referent can remain in the background and that processing resources should be directed to other elements of the situation.

Generally it is of course difficult or even impossible for the analyst to determine on the basis of conversation protocols how precise the mental images are that speaker and addressee entertain of a certain discourse entity. As long as the conversation proceeds smoothly, we may assume that the addressee managed successfully to access appropriate mental images, but we have no way of establishing how close they are to the respective mental images intended by the speaker. On some occasions the mental images, even though entirely wrong, will not disrupt the conversation. The addressee may be able to make sense of the speaker's words even if this is not the sense intended by the speaker. We found that speakers continually varied the vagueness of referring expressions in accord with their current purposes. Consider for example extract (1). Speaker A and speaker B are good friends who have just started their conversation in the recording laboratory. Speaker A asks her friend, speaker B, about her morning. In the narrative that follows, speaker B refers to a number of objects and people, with varying amounts of precision:

(1) A: tell me how your morning was?
B: (HX) @ really well,
really well,
<SV no kidding SV>.
well it comes to my mind it went &
& very, very badly (HX) @@@.
first I went ... to see=,
you know, I got my car,
when I took Tim to school,

...and I realized that .. uhm,
(CLICKING TONGUE) the car was still making that funny noise,
where you point- where you pointed at the hood
...[and you <X were not sure where X> it was coming from],
A: [yeah = yeah sure].
B: and it was the muffler (Hx),
...and I was afraid,
...to drive all the way down here,
.. because I thought,
...it would break down on the freeway.
...(H)
.. so I took it to the guy,
...that always fixes my car,
...and .. he told me,
...that it might be the waterpump,
... .. and that it would be dangerous for me to drive down & here,
A: [<SV that's expensive SV>].
B: [and that he's],
gonna look at it.
<SV yeah SV>.
and so then *they* drove me to =,
Enterprise Rental Car,
...and I rented a car,
so that I could come down here,
and be here at eleven. (24A1i)

First, it is interesting to note that the speaker repeatedly uses the vaguest possible expression, the pronoun *it*, to refer to a variety of entities. She uses it to refer to the noise her car was making, to the source of that noise and then to the car itself. Semantically and syntactically the pronoun is clearly underdetermined. The appropriate referent cannot be established on the basis of syntactic cues (e.g., the nearest explicit noun phrase) or on the basis of semantic features. In these cases, however, the speaker has a very specific referent in mind, and it can be safely assumed that the addressee had no difficulties in creating the appropriate mental images, that is to say to establish unique reference for each occurrence of the pronoun *it*. The suggested referents can be established because they are the only ones that make sense given the context shared by the partners. Reference is therefore assigned pragmatically rather than syntactically or semantically.

The pronoun *they* is a rather different case. Speaker B states that she was taken from the garage to a place where she could rent a car, *they drove me to Enterprise Rental Car*. It is not clear who the pronoun *they* refers to. The speaker presumably has a clear mental image of who drove her, but for the addressee it seems impossible to establish a unique reference. One might even suspect that it is unlikely that she was driven by more than one person. The expression *they* was probably selected in

order to be as generic as possible rather than to convey plurality. A singular personal pronoun *he* or *she* might seem more appropriate, but it would have encoded the sex of the person who drove her, when even this limited amount of information is unwarranted. The person or the persons who drove her do not play any further role in her account of her morning and therefore he, she or they can stay in the background. The construction may be taken as a spoken equivalent of an agent-less passive. In other words, the use of *they* is not intended to identify any particular individual or group. Rather it serves as a device for backgrounding an agent in relation to the action itself and the object of the action. The speaker indicates that the entity does not deserve much attention, thus saving the addressee's processing resources for other parts of the narrative where they are needed more. It is interesting to note the contrast with the reference to the repairman *the guy that always fixes my car*. In the latter case, the speaker provided more individuation and presumably therefore more focus on the person who she sees as playing a more critical and continuing role in the story.

Conversationalists also often refer to place names. At first sight, place names seem to be maximally precise means of identification, and one might think that there is one obvious way to name a place. But again the speaker must select from a variety of expressions with a wide range of precision. In response to the question "Where do you live?" it may be much too specific, just right or not nearly specific enough to say the name of a town "Seal Beach", depending on whether the question is asked by a chance acquaintance on a travel through Europe, by somebody familiar with locations in Southern California or by a police officer in Seal Beach itself.

In the following example the participants have just been asked to talk about travel, and speaker B initiates the topic by asking speaker A where he has been recently. This would seem an obvious opportunity to simply give conventional place names. In fact, he does simply use a name in referring to San Diego, a major city with which his partner is surely familiar. But he has also visited another location recently, which he describes in vague terms as *up north* and *a place where I lived*. Obviously the speaker knows the name, but he apparently suspects his partner would not recognise it, or would recognise it only with some effort.

(2) B: what were the last places you travelled through
A: oh gosh er probably probably San Diego
XXX I've been up north XXX
but you know so er
we passed by a place where I lived,
for a while
(29At6)

We propose first that the speaker has used a vague expression to spare the partner processing effort. Second, we propose that the vague expressions used have more relevant implications than would a precise place name. *A place where I lived* conveys something of the purpose of the trip, whereas a place name would probably not. For

example, we have a better sense of the trip *up north* than we do of the one to *San Diego*.

3.2. Assigning events and experiences to categories

Speakers do not just evoke referents; they also try to characterise events and experiences by assigning them to conceptual categories. In some cases, speakers may believe that a conventional category sufficiently describes the experience. But in other cases speakers may instead be forced to use a category that is limited in its ability to characterise the experience, and they may want to convey a sense of that limitation to the addressee. English provides a number of linguistic devices for doing so. As Channell (1994) notes, speakers may be implicitly vague by using vague expressions, that is to say expressions that have a fuzzy denotation. Or they may flag the vagueness explicitly by using a variety of means such as downtoners, vague category identifiers or placeholder words.

3.2.1. Downtoners

Downtoners are expressions, such as *sort of*, *kind of*, or *a bit*. They have been called 'adaptors' by Prince et al. (1982), and 'downtoners' or 'detensifiers' by Hübler (1983: 68). As Hübler describes it, they are suitable for forming 'understatements' (Hübler, 1983: 68). They introduce vagueness into a proposition or increase the degree of vagueness of an utterance. Prince, Bosk and Frader claim that downtoners indicate "fuzziness within the propositional content" (1982: 85). They indicate that there is a relevant mismatch between the prototype and the item being described.

Within a relevance theoretical approach a downtoner also flags a loose use of language. As discussed above, any utterance is only an approximation to the thought the speaker has in mind. The degree of resemblance between this thought and the utterance varies. A hedge might be used to indicate that the degree of interpretive resemblance is not as close as the hearer might otherwise expect. The truth-conditions of a sentence containing a downtoner remain unchanged. It is the degree of resemblance between the utterance and the speaker's thought that varies. Below, this approach will be applied to some typical examples.

Extract (3) illustrates the use of *kind of* as a hedge. This downtoner is very frequent in our data, being used around one hundred and thirty times.

(3) A: I've been to o=ne and,
I was *kind of*,
I think .. I was *kind of* bored, (13A3o)

Here the students talk about opera, and the speaker describes her experience in going to one. After two false starts, she describes herself as *kind of bored*. The use of *kind of* as a hedge, especially in conjunction with her restarts and her use of *I think,*

suggests that the term *bored* is an inadequate summary of her experience. Perhaps she enjoyed part of the experience but just not all of it, or perhaps she was already tired anyway. In any case, the use of *kind of* indicates that, while 'bored' may be the closest category she can think of, it is an inexact representation of her perspective. The partner is thus warned against drawing implications that are too specific to this concept.

In addition, speaker A's comment can be seen not just as a description of a state of affairs (assertion) but also as an implicit criticism of operas as a genre or of people (such as her partner) who love opera. In Brown and Levinson's (1987) analysis, the use of hedges is seen as a politeness strategy that reduces the force of face-threatening speech acts. In this case, the meaning of *kind of* is pragmatic or rhetorical as well as semantic, in that it softens the speech act of criticism.

Similar to *kind of*, *like* is often used as a hedge in our corpus, and in many cases the two hedges reinforce each other.

(4) I feel *like kind of* stupid, (20A2k)

(5) she was *like kind of like* my supervisor, (12A3i)

Double hedges as in example (4) or even triple hedges as in example (5) emphasise the vagueness of the utterance in which they are embedded. They also serve to soften the rhetorical impact.

Other downtoners seem to play a somewhat different role. One set used frequently in our corpus consists of expressions like *a bit, a little* or *a little bit*. According to Leech and Svartvik, these expressions tone down or decrease the effect of a scale word like *friendly*, *expensive* or *hard* (1975: 101).

(6) A: <SV this is gonna get it is getting *a bit* hard, SV> (11A1ta)

(7) R: the way you communicate is *a little bit* different one, (11B2ta)

(8) B: .. I have to take care of my parents *a little*, (14A1i)

A task described as *a bit* hard is presumably easier than one described simply as *hard*. They thus have analytical meaning. Although they share functions with *sort of* and *almost*, their use is not interchangeable with these expressions in the examples above.

In addition to conveying analytical meaning, the downtoners in examples (6), (7), and (8) convey rhetorical meaning. In each case, the utterance would ordinarily be taken as a complaint or a criticism, which is softened by the downtoner used.

From a relevance-theoretical perspective, downtoners represent a loose use of language. Downtoners indicate that the meaning the speaker wants to convey is not sufficiently covered by an available word.

3.2.2. Vague category identifiers

Another way of flagging concepts as vague is to use vague category identifiers (Channell, 1994: 122). This includes expressions such as *or something like that*, *and stuff* and *or whatever*. Dines (1980: 23) calls them "set marking tags" because, as she describes them, their function is to mark the preceding element as a member of a set. They "cue the listener to interpret the preceding element as an illustrative example of some more general case" (Dines, 1980: 22). Channell views these vague category identifiers as examples of inherent vagueness in that the vagueness of these expressions represents an intrinsic property and cannot be exactly specified even in the discourse context. Their use seems to be highly informal and to be more typical in spoken conversations than in writing. Within our corpus, vague category identifiers are pervasive. They were used nearly three hundred times (see also Ward and Birner 1993; Overstreet 2000; Overstreet and Yule 2002).

The tag expression *and stuff* provides a way for the speaker to indicate that the thought she has in mind is more complex than is being expressed and to appeal to the listener to construct the relevant members of the set evoked. In (9), speaker A is describing an upcoming exam for a class in religion. It would be tough to describe precisely everything that is to be covered in the exam, but the speaker believes the hearer has enough relevant information to identify the needed information on the basis of the expression *the different religions* plus the vague category identifier *and stuff*.

(9) A: and then .. the other .. you know for the final,
it's erm ...(3) the different religions .. *and stuff*.
B: mh hm .. mh.
A: say something [about] different religions and .. psychological ... aspects of it.
B: [yeah].
psychology an religion *and* [*all that stuff*].
A: [all that stuff] yeah.
B: sociology [.. re]ligion,
A: [uh huh].
sounds real great. (301c)

Speaker B becomes increasingly active in indicating that she is indeed able to interpret this expression. First she uses the general acknowledgers *mh hm* and *yeah*. Then she repeats the vague category segment and follows it with an acknowledgement *all that stuff yeah*. Finally, she uses her knowledge of the topic to suggest a relevant member of the set, *sociology*. A's use of the expression *and stuff* invited B to

use her own knowledge to interpret the utterance; B's responses made it clear she was doing just that. Apparently, the procedural direction given by the vague expression served its purpose of identifying relevant content. In addition, we propose that the explicit participation of the listener in identifying relevant material may help create and maintain a bond between conversational partners. Thus the use of an expression that invites the partner's contributions may be preferable, in terms of conversational goals, to one that expresses the speaker's views precisely.

Summing up, vague category identifiers are one form of loose use of language in that they indicate to the hearer that the thought the speaker has in mind is more complex than is directly expressed. Their use indicates that the speaker is thinking of a larger concept that she cannot name, either because she does not know a name or because she cannot recall one at the moment. The vague category identifier asks the hearer to identify that concept based on the member(s) named. This clearly puts much responsibility on the hearer. To be consistent with the principle of relevance, the expression has to yield additional contextual effects which are worth the processing effort. This process is guided by the principle of relevance, and it exploits the common ground between partners.

3.2.3. Placeholder words

Finally, speakers can be so vague as to use expressions that convey no referential content in themselves but that instead invite the listener to infer a referent. In her analysis, Channell (1994: 157) includes terms like *stuff, thing, things*, *what-do-you-call-it* or *whatchmacallit* as examples of vague placeholder words. They are said to express total vagueness (Crystal and Davy, 1975: 112). There would seem to be little use for such expressions, yet they are typical features of conversational language.

According to Yule (1996: 18), they enable the speaker "to refer to an entity or a person without knowing exactly which 'name' would be the best word to use". The speaker may never have known an appropriate name, or she may not be able to access it at the moment of speaking. Channell (1994: 162) also suggests that a speaker who has access to an appropriate name may prefer not to use it in order to avoid using an offensive or a taboo word, being derogatory, being pretentious, or revealing pronunciation problems.

Evaluating the meaning of these terms, it is obvious that the pragmatic meaning is more crucial than the semantic meaning. Semantically these words could only be described very superficially as "placeholder[s] for a noun/name" (Channell, 1994: 162). As discussed by Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986/1992: 112), the successful use of such expressions demonstrates that collaboration is an essential part of reference, as their meaning depends critically on their context and on the common ground between partners.

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. In the example below, the speaker describes a general category, movies about Hispanics, but cannot name the example she has in mind. She appeals to her partner for help.

(10) A: [[[because there's a]]],
there's a [lot] of movies about Hispanic [[XX]],
B: [X] [[yeah]].
A: that family *thing,*
I can't remember.
B: um ..,
My Family?
A: yeah[,] (163m)

In this case, partner B is able to infer which film A is referring to and to give the exact name. Thus the vague expression serves to facilitate a joint reference assignment. In this case, the interactional nature of the referring expression is explicit (cf. Clark, 1996; Smith and Jucker, 1998). The vague expression invites collaboration from the partner.

Speakers may have other purposes in using a vague placeholder. In example (11), the speaker does not seem to be confronted with a word-finding problem, but she refers to the experiment as *that thing*. She probably could have used the more precise term word 'experiment' the first time.

(11) B: I was tripping yesterday when I was signing up for that *thing*
I was thinking class started ((door opens)) at nine thirty,
and I was,
A: for which *thing*?
B: for when I was signing up for the experiment the other day,
A: ah...
B: didn't you sign up for the same time..? (12A3i)

The question then arises as to why the speaker uses a vague term instead of the more precise one. We believe that the use of the vague term implies additional effects that the speaker may have hoped the hearer would access. The speaker might have intended to maintain an informal atmosphere in order to establish more camaraderie with her partner. In addition, she seems to use the term *thing* in a derogatory way to indicate her personal attitude towards such experiments. She was depending on their common assumptions about the world for carrying the desired implications. Of course, any of these additional meanings are not strongly but only weakly communicated by the speaker, which means that it is the hearer who is held responsible for such weak contextual effects.

To summarise, the use of a placeholder word might be motivated by any of several reasons. On the one hand, the speaker might not be able to refer to the intended item by name because she does not know its name or cannot access it. On the other hand, the speaker might know the name but prefer not to use it. A placeholder might be a better way to convey the speaker's attitude towards a situation. Or it

might fulfil social goals, such as to invite collaboration or to establish a bond. However, as we have seen, the use of a placeholder word does carry the risk that the addressee may fail to make the expected interpretation. In such cases, the hearer must decide whether it is worthwhile to request a clarification, as in example (11), or whether a vague interpretation is good enough for the purposes of the conversation. As analysts, of course we do not know in many cases whether the intended interpretation was made. However, we do note that most utterances using vague expressions receive normal grounding (Clark, 1996), with explicit acknowledgements and appropriate continuations. In our protocols, it was extremely rare for addressees to express confusion about a referent.

3.3. Representations of amounts, frequencies, and probabilities

Another recurrent task for speakers is to indicate amounts, frequencies and probabilities of things, events, or their characteristics. Speakers could use formal and precise means for doing so, using the language of measurement and statistics. However, they rarely do so. Sometimes this may be because they do not know the precise amount or frequency themselves. More often, it may be because a more precise figure is unnecessary for current purposes and, further, more precision would result in unwarranted processing effort on the part of the addressee. In addition, the speaker may believe a vague expression would better convey the intended implications. There are several ways in which speakers can indicate that they are knowingly less than precise in indicating amounts or frequencies. They may use expressions that are vague in themselves, or they may qualify expressions that would otherwise be more precise, with the use of approximators such as *about, around,* or *like*.

3.3.1. Vague quantifying expressions

According to Channell, vague quantifying expressions are "always" and "unabashedly" vague (1994: 18). Similarly, Powell describes them as "deliberately and unresolvably vague" (Powell, 1985: 31). They can take distinct forms.

First, there are vague quantifying expressions like *many*, *some* and *few*. Like numbers, they "occupy the determiner slot in a noun phrase" (Channell, 1994: 99). In contrast to numbers, they do not clearly specify the quantity involved. This is also true for a range of phrases which are suitable to refer vaguely to quantities. They can be subdivided into singular and plural quantifiers. On the one hand, the speaker might use a singular quantifier following the pattern 'a _____ of _____' like *a lot of* or *a couple of*. On the other hand, there exists a vast number of generic terms and collective nouns the speaker can use as plural quantifying expressions. They seem to follow the pattern '_____s of _____', e.g. *lots of* or *tons of*.

In Channell's analysis (1994: 99), these expressions "only convey information about the proportion of the full set of items which is intended". But by giving information in relation to a reference point, a vague expression may be more informative than an absolute number would be. For example, as Moxey and Sanford (1997: 211) note, it would be more informative to report that "Most of our students passed an advanced exam" than to report that "Twenty-two of our students passed

an advanced exam'' when the listener has no idea how many students were eligible to take it.

Second, any expression from a set that can be arrayed on a scale can convey information not only about the position of an event on that scale but it can also convey a scalar implicature, that is, an implication based on the part of the scale above it. A 'scalar implicature' can be defined as ''an additional meaning of the negative of any value higher on the scale than the one uttered'' (Yule, 1996: 134). For example, the use of *some* in everyday language (but not in formal logic) conveys the implication ''but not all''. In the created example below, the use of *some* may be more informative in several ways than would an expression stating an exact number.

(12) A: I ate *some* of the chocolates.
B: So what happened to the others?

In a series of clever experiments, Moxey and Sanford (1997) demonstrated several further meanings that can be conveyed by vague quantifiers (in their terms, ''natural language quantifiers''). As a baseline for a set of studies on how these expressions convey different meanings, they asked people to describe pictures consisting of stick figures that contain different proportions of males and females. They found that many expressions can be used to describe a large range of proportions, and there is considerable overlap in the use of expressions. For example, the expression *some* is used to describe anywhere from 25 to 75%. The expressions *many* (25–90%) and *few* (10–25%) can each be used to describe an array with the same proportion, 25%, of a group. Thus the meaning in these expressions must not reside entirely in the proportions they convey but rather in other information that is implied. Moxey and Sanford developed several ways of identifying and demonstrating these additional meanings.

First they demonstrated that these expressions can serve as focusing devices, to convey meaning by focusing the listener on different aspects of a situation. They look at each expression in terms of two sets of events. The reference set is the set being directly referred to (the chocolates eaten by A), and the complementary set is the set not included in the reference but implied by it (those chocolates that by implication were not eaten by A). Different expressions can be selected in order to focus on either the reference set or on the complementary set. For example, research participants were asked to continue sentences such as ''*Many* of the students went to the ballgame. They...'' or ''*Few* of the students went to the ballgame. They...'' Continuations of the segment that used *many* focused on the students who went, while those continuing the passage using *few* focused on those who did not go. If, say, 25% of the students passed the advanced exam, this might legitimately be described in either of the utterances below. But one form would focus attention on those who passed, while the other would focus attention on those who did not.

(13) *Many* of the students passed the advanced exam.
Few of the students passed the advanced exam.

By manipulating the focus, these expressions convey different implications than would an exact number.

Vague expressions can also convey information about the speaker's assumptions in a way that precise numbers do not. If in example (13) the speaker had expected fewer than 25% to pass the exam, she is more likely to say "*Many* of the students. . .", whereas if she expected more than that number to pass, she is more likely to say "*Few* of the students". The use of one expression or another conveys information about the speaker's prior beliefs that would not be conveyed by using an exact number. Further, Moxey and Sanford demonstrate that the use of a vague expression can convey the speaker's belief about the listener's assumptions.

(14) *Quite a few* students in our class passed the exam.
Only a few students in our class passed the exam.

Had the student in the example above said "*Quite a few* students in our class. . .", the hearer would have understood that more are qualified than one would ordinarily expect. Or, had she said "*Only a few* students in our class. . .", the hearer would assume that fewer are qualified than one might expect. This appears to be a subtle difference in terminology, yet the relation of an event to the listener's expectations may be the whole point of the utterance. Again, this is meaning that would not be conveyed by use of a precise number.

Moxey and Sanford express the belief that, while their data did not come from "spontaneous dialog", their research might have "isolated some of the variables which should predict usage in dialog" (Moxey and Sanford, 1997: 226). Our participants did not necessarily use the same forms that Moxey and Sanford studied. Nonetheless, we find that the conceptualisation provided by Moxey and Sanford is especially valuable in analysing examples of vague quantifiers used in our corpus. Their model provides a way of identifying several meanings that are conveyed better by vague quantifiers than by exact numbers.

One vague quantifier used frequently in our corpus is *some*. It would appear to convey very little information, since it can refer to any of a large range of proportions. Nonetheless, we believe that in terms of some goals it can convey much relevant information. Example (15) is typical of its usage.

(15) A: last week e = r,
let me see,
I rent *some* movies.
B: yeah me too.

A: yeah [I I didn't go out]
B: [which what movie]? (14B8m)

Speaker B has just asked her partner whether she has watched any movies lately. The answer *some movies* is vague when obviously, the speaker could have been more precise. The event described is both recent and salient, and the number of movies is easily countable. However, the use of *some* may be more relevant in this context than would be an exact number.

First, the use of *some* may convey the message that the exact number of movies is not relevant as an answer to the question. This impression is supported within the following segment of the conversation. Speaker B is not at all interested in the number of movies, but in the kind of movies she watched. Thus, the vague quantifying expression might well indicate the relative insignificance of the quantity itself (cf. Powell, 1985).

Second, the use of *some* may convey the speaker's belief that the number of movies rented is not especially high or low. If it were, the speaker would have selected an expression high or low on the scale, such as *many* or *a few*. The selection of *some* implies that more extreme numbers are not relevant. Similarly, the expression implies that the number rented fits within the expectations of both the speaker and the listener. Note that the interpretation of what is a high or low number depends on the context. For example, the number represented by *some* for undergraduates may be quite different from the number represented for graduate students. The speaker may assume that the listener will use the context to interpret the number in an appropriate way and that an exact number would carry less useful information.

In addition, the use of *some* in this context implies that the movies rented are the proper focus of attention, not the movies that the speaker was unable to see. In a different context, of course, the speaker may wish the addressee to focus on what is missing rather than what has occurred. ("I haven't gotten to see many movies.")

Of course, other vague expressions may carry more information than does *some* about the size of a quantity. In example (16), speaker B has explained that he has a long drive to campus and thus does not have many friends on campus. Speaker A, who has recently moved into the on-campus dormitories, expresses sympathy and then says:

(16) A: oh you mean I know like
I know every,
I know . . *so many* people now this year, (14A1i)

The expression *so many* is used to describe the number of people he knows on campus. It is not surprising that he does not attempt to give an exact number. In describing the number of friends one has, a speaker is not likely to try to enumerate everyone he knows; this is not the point. Rather, with use of *so many*, he is able to

convey a contrast with his partner's state and also with his previous state. In addition, the use of *so many* allows him to place the focus on the people he does know, not the thousands on campus that he does not know. He is also able to convey the sense that he now has more friends than he himself would have expected and more than others might expect. The exact number is both unreportable and irrelevant. What is relevant is his happpiness with the number of people he knows, i.e., the attitude conveyed.

We believe that the vague quantifiers exemplified above represent loose uses of language, as discussed in Relevance Theory. Moreover, we believe we have demonstrated that a vague quantifier may convey more relevant meaning than would a precise number. For example, it may do a better job at conveying the lack of significance of a quantity itself. It may focus attention on either the set described or on its implied complement. It may also convey assumptions about the speaker's and/or the hearer's expectations (Moxey and Sanford, 1997). Thus, the use of the vague quantifying expression might be maximally relevant in that it may yield more contextual assumptions than a precise number would. Speakers appear to exploit the inherent vagueness of these expressions for particular communicative purposes (Channell, 1994: 97). Vagueness may then be seen as a deliberate function of these quantifying expressions rather than as a defect in them.

The degree of attitudinal meaning might collocate with their increased degree of vagueness. That is, the higher the degree of vagueness of the expression, the more emphasis seems to be put on the interpretive function of the quantifier. On the one hand, expressions like *tons of* or *masses of* might generally be perceived to be more vague than, for example, *many* or *a lot of,* because they seem to involve a higher degree of interpretive resemblance.

3.3.2. Adverbs of frequency

Vague adverbs of frequency share many of the characteristics and functions of vague quantifiers. They convey information about the frequency of events but do not provide either an exact absolute frequency ("this has occurred ten times") or an exact relative frequency ("this occurs 10% of the time"). Again, it is a challenge to explain why so many vague expressions for describing frequency exist in English, why they are selected by speakers, and how listeners are able to interpret them. We will argue that their meaning lies to a large extent in other functions they serve, not just in the information they convey about frequency.

As with vague quantifiers, vague adverbs of frequency may be used to convey the speaker's attitude toward the exact frequency itself. That is, the point of the selection may be that the exact frequency is not in itself important. The listener is then guided to look for other meanings that are more relevant.

In their analysis of vague quantifiers, Moxey and Sanford (1997: 218) suggested that their model also applies to adverbs of frequency. In analyses of examples from our corpus, we will see that this model provides valuable insights into the ways that speakers use these expressions. These expressions may manipulate the focus of an utterance, either onto the referenced set or onto its complementary set. They also convey the speaker's own expectations and, further, may convey the speaker's beliefs about the listener's expectations.

Within the corpus *sometimes* and *usually* appeared most often. According to Channell, this should be natural because these adverbials seem to indicate "plus for frequency" (1994: 116), and people generally tend to talk about things that happen sometimes or more often. Like *some*, the expression *sometimes* is especially vague in that it can cover a wide range of frequencies. As it conveys little information about the frequency itself, we will look for its meaning in other functions it serves.

For example, *sometimes* may be used when the speaker does not have access to exact frequencies but nonetheless wants to make a point based on the recurrence of an event. In the following example, the students digress from discussion of their own travel as speaker A describes the experiences of a friend who is a flight attendant. The friend flies to interesting places but does not necessarily get to sightsee there.

(17) B: uh huh.
A: and then *sometimes* you have to .. just stay there for the night.
and then you have to .. [leave] XXX,
B: [yeah].
A: or *sometimes* if you get there in the morning,
like in the afternoon you have to leave.
you know, (20B6t)

In the situation described, it does not matter whether you have to leave without sightseeing one time out of ten or nine times out of ten; the point is, you have to accept that that may happen. The use of the vague adverb may express the speaker's attitude towards the importance of the frequency itself, that the exact frequency is not important in regard to the point being made.

The expression *usually* also is used to convey information about focus and about expectations more than about exact frequencies. In the example below, the partners are talking about a class assignment. Speaker A says she plans to complete it the next morning, explaining that she *usually* gets to campus early enough to do so.

(18) B: will you have time to do it tomorrow morning?
A: yeah . . my class is at eleven.
I *usually* get in by eight.
B: o=h . . there is NO problem.
. . you're in the=re . . so,
A: I *usually* get here at eight o'clock
B: mhm.
A: so I have time to do that report. (304c)

The speaker may or may not be able to calculate exactly how often she arrives by eight o'clock, but that is not the point. The point is that she gets in often enough

that she can plan on being able to do so when she needs to. The use of the expression *usually* focuses attention on those times she does arrive early and backgrounds those times when she does not. It thus helps convey her confidence that she can complete the report.

Thus, it appears that vague expressions of frequency convey much more than frequency. They are used to manage the listener's focus and to confirm or disconfirm speaker and listener assumptions. Expressions that denote the same range of frequencies can be used to focus attention on either the events described or on their complement. They also can be selected in terms of the speaker's beliefs about the listener's expectations. The use of these expressions conveys quite different information than would a precise number giving an absolute frequency or even a relative frequency.

3.3.3. *Vague adverbs of likelihood*

Adverbs conveying likelihood, such as *probably*, may be used as inherently vague expressions. Their use further confirms the analysis Moxey and Sanford (1997) provided for vague quantifiers. Consider example (19) where the participants talk about opera. Speaker A has said that she likes opera as a social occasion, to be with friends. Speaker B tests the implications of this claim, asking whether she would go by herself to see an opera.

(19) B: really?
would [[would]] you go by yourself to go see an opera?
A: [[XX]]
.. *probably not*.
[@@]
B: [*probably*] *not*?
A. I mean *maybe*,
but *probably* [[*not* you know],] (13A3o)

In reply to B's question, A says she would *probably not* go to an opera by herself. When B reacts with surprise, A softens her statement by using the term *maybe* but then concludes with her original expression, *probably not*. At first it may seem as though she has changed her mind, that the expression *maybe* reflected a different assessment of the likelihood of her going alone. However, we believe that the change in expressions did not change the likelihood assessment but rather changed the focus. The use of *probably not* focused the hearer on the rather large likelihood that she would **not** go alone, while the use of *maybe* focused on the small but non-zero likelihood that she would go alone. Thus the vague expression is more useful than a precise likelihood estimate would be, as it provides a focus on one or the other part of the likelihood scale. In this case, a focus on the negative end makes clear the speaker's intention, while a focus on the positive end provides a strategy for softening its impact. In addition, the use of the expression *probably not* acknowledges that this answer is contrary to the partner's expectation.

In summary, vague expressions of likelihood do not just carry information about the speaker's judged probability of an event. Rather, they appear to be used to manage the listener's focus and the listener's assumptions, so that the listener may strengthen or weaken assumptions appropriately.

3.3.4. Approximators

Approximators are additives used to denote imprecision of quantity. They include expressions such as *about, around* or *like* that usually precede a numerical expression and qualify it. These expressions are variously called 'approximatives' (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1986), 'approximations' (e.g. Channell, 1980), 'approximators' (e.g. Wachtel, 1981; Channell, 1994), 'number approximators' (e.g. Channell, 1985), or 'rounders' (Prince et al., 1982).

Approximators have attracted attention due to the problems they pose for a description within truth-conditional semantics. That is, sentences containing an approximator cannot be said to be either false or true. Lakoff (1973: 467f.) proposes that we solve the problem by adopting fuzzy semantics for approximators. Consequently, a sentence containing an approximator could have variable truth values in fuzzy semantics.

Sadock (1977) argues that Lakoff's account is not sufficient and proposes instead a radical pragmatic account of approximators. His argument is that approximators are sensitive to contextual information that determines the interpretation. Sadock assumes that "the nature of the item that we make an estimation about has an effect on how the estimate is evaluated" (1977: 432). Further, "it is the form of the approximation rather than its content, that is operative in determining the scale by which the defensibility of an approximation is to be judged" (Sadock, 1977: 433). Sadock puts special emphasis on the pragmatic notion of purpose, arguing that "it is the purpose of the estimate that essentially determines how close to the truth it must be to be warranted" (Sadock, 1977: 434). Sadock claims that approximators make a sentence almost 'unfalsifiable'. Their role is to trivialise the semantics of a sentence. Approximators are "purposely" and "unabashedly" inaccurate statements (Sadock, 1977: 434). They can only be accounted for within a pragmatic analysis.

Approximators such as *about* and *around* appear before the item they approximate. They seem to denote a more or less symmetrical interval around the exemplar number. Both approximators seem to contribute to the explicit meaning of an utterance in that the hearer is asked to widen the range of possible values (*about nine* means that values other than exactly nine are included as true). However, as Sadock suggested, this interpretation is pragmatically based in that the hearer must determine the meaning of *about* and *around* on the basis of the context. The expression *about nine* can mean 'eight to ten' in one context, as in students talking about the length of a paper, or '8.99 to 9.01' in another, as in craftsmen describing the length in meters of a beam. In addition, the approximators can add to the interpretive meaning.

In example (20), the speaker is discussing travel and reports that she visited Persia *about* three years ago. The visit was recent and was presumably distinctive enough that she could remember the date if she wanted to.

(20) A: .. I'm from Persia,
so ... I've been there,
visited there *about* three years ago, (18B5t)

In this case, we believe the use of an approximator makes clear the speaker's belief that there is no useful information to be gained in a precise estimate of time over a vague one.

Like can also be used as a number approximator.[3] In fact, within the corpus *like* was used more often as a number approximator than *about* or *around*. While *like* can serve any of several functions, interlocutors do not seem to have problems identifying and understanding when *like* is used as a number approximator. Extract (21) contains a typical example:

(21) A: [OK].
I got your message,
I came home,
I had *like* .. ten minutes, (224c)

In this case, *like* seems to function as a synonym for *about* or *around*. That is, it shows the same structure and also seems to indicate a symmetrical interval around the exemplar number. It also seems to fulfil the same communicative functions. However, the use of *like* can be regarded as highly informal, which may in itself convey social implications.

In cases like the two above, it is important to note that the use of *about* is not necessary in order to create an imprecise interpretation of a number. Imagine the speaker had said *I had ten minutes*. It is possible that she would mean that she had ten minutes exactly, and it is possible that the listener would interpret the utterance that way. But it is much more likely that both partners understand that there is no reason to be that specific and that the description is meant to be approximate. Thus it might at first appear that the use of *about* or *like* in such utterances is pointless. However, the approximator makes the vagueness explicit and thus conveys directly the procedural meaning that an inexact quantity is the best one to use in interpreting the utterance. By using an approximation, the speaker might not only save the hearer some processing resources, but also might save herself processing effort. We have argued that relevance is a matter of degree. It's a trade-off between processing efforts and contextual assumptions. To provide information also involves processing effort on the speaker's side. Thus, the speaker's evaluation of the relevance of an utterance may sometimes also be partly determined by the accessibility of the information she wants to convey. Unless she can perceive considerable benefit to the listener, she may not find the extra processing worth the effort.

[3] For a relevance-theoretical account of *like* in its function as approximator, hedge or quotative, see Jucker and Smith (1998).

Wachtel (1980: 204) notes that utterances involving measurements of time, duration and age as well as round numbers can be seen as 'inherent approximations'. Inherent approximations involve a literal and a loose meaning. Literal and loose uses do not differ in kind, but can be put on a continuous scale (see Fig. 1).

Whether a relatively literal or loose interpretation of an inherent approximation is intended by the speaker has to be inferred by the hearer on the basis of the context and is guided by the principle of relevance. She may or may not have known the exact time herself, but for her current purposes, the approximate amount of time provides the information needed. Speakers are likely to round up or down to conventional figures such as ten. To be more precise would place the focus on the time itself and would thus imply that the exact time (e.g. 12 min) has relevant implications. In such cases, the ability to determine whether an exact interpretation is needed would depend on the common beliefs held by the partners about the situation under discussion.

These examples support the assumption that number approximators are not only suitable to introduce vagueness into an otherwise precise statement, but that they also explicate and increase the looseness of inherent approximations. The use of *like* as a number approximator seems to be especially suitable to make the loose use of 'inherent approximations' explicit. Similar to *about* and *around, like* seems to contribute to the explicit content of utterances. It guides the hearer towards the intended interpretation of the speaker and indicates to him that a loose use of language is involved. As with *about* and *around, like* "indicates that an expression does not encode an exact amount but only an approximation to what might be the exact amount" (Jucker and Smith, 1998: 185). The hearer is expected to discover the intended meaning of the speaker on the basis of relevance. With the use of an approximator, however, the approximation is made explicit and has additional conversational effects.

In Channell's system, the term 'partial specifiers' is used to refer to a special type of number approximator. As number approximators, they also serve the speaker's intention to indicate that the modified quantity is not exact, or at least does not have to be exact. However, they differ from the number approximators discussed so far as they do not seem to mark a symmetrical interval around the exemplar number as do *around, about* or *like*. On the one hand, there exist partial specifiers denote an upper limit for quantities, such as *almost* and *or less*. Others, such as *at least, more than* and *over* specify a lower limit. The use of these terms depends on the hearer's ability to identify a reference point and to perceive the described situation in terms of its relation to that reference point.

In example (22), two friends plan an upcoming birthday party. Speaker A mentions a friend who has been invited, and the partners discuss with enthusiasm how

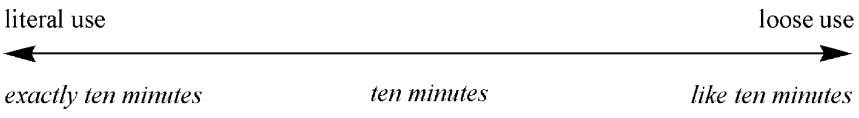

Fig. 1.

much fun she is. Speaker A then describes her as *almost forty* and follows up with the exact age, *thirty eight*.

(22) A: ... would you think she's **almost** forty,
B: huh uh.
A: she's thirty-eight.
B: Jesus. (22A1c)

In this case, it is clear that the speaker knows the exact age, yet she chooses to describe the age in vague terms, *almost forty*. We would argue that in this context, the vague expression *almost forty* conveys the relevant information more directly than does the exact expression *thirty-eight*. Forty is an age laden with symbolic and predominantly negative meaning in American culture. Thus to describe a person as *almost forty* is to explicitly connect that person's age with a culturally significant reference point. The implications from this are clearer than those that would be drawn from the age itself. It is interesting to note that when the exact age is specified, it is given as a verification of the vague expression rather than as a correction of it.

To summarise, utterances that involve approximators are understood as loose uses of language. The hearer is asked **not** to process the utterance in the most literal sense, as it does not seem to describe exactly the thought the speaker intends to express. In some cases, the speaker is uncertain apparently because she does not know the exact quantity or has forgotten it. Remaining vague about a certain quantity enables her to maintain fluency while remaining less committed towards the correctness of the number stated. Or the speaker might deliberately remain vague if the exact data would not present any relevant extra information for the hearer. Thus, vague expressions can help to make conversational contributions more economical, and hence more relevant. Finally, vague expressions may carry additional implications such as the relation of the event to recognised reference points and evaluative meanings.

3.4. Propositional attitudes

Finally, speakers convey to each other their propositional attitude, or stance toward what is being asserted. Stubbs (1986: 15) argues that "all utterances express not only content, but also the speaker's attitude towards the content".

First, speakers indicate in various ways their degree of commitment toward a proposition being expressed. Vague expressions are themselves an explicit conventional device for conveying a lack of commitment. One way of doing this is to use a so-called 'shield', which can be further subdivided into 'plausibility shields' and 'attribution shields' (Prince et al., 1982: 89). Within this paper we will only be concerned with plausibility shields. This category includes several types of hedges. First of all, there exists a range of parenthetical phrases like *I think*, *I believe* or *I guess*,

which are known variously as 'parenthetical' verbs (Hübler, 1983: 137), 'private' verbs (Stubbs, 1986: 18) or 'psychological' verbs (Blakemore, 1992: 98). In addition, there exists a group of adverbs which also reduce speaker commitment, such as *presumably*, *probably* and *possibly* (Fraser, 1980: 348). Adverbs such as *probably* can be used as additions to otherwise precise statements or they may serve as inherently vague lexical items. Finally, different kinds of modal verbs, e.g. *might*, *would* and *could*, can indicate lack of certainty. The present analysis will be restricted to parenthetical verbs and certain adverbs.

Following Stubbs (1986), parenthetical verbs can be regarded as markers of detachment, enabling the speaker to separate her point of view from the propositional content of her utterance. Sentences containing 'private' verbs, e.g. *think*, *believe*, and *expect* can either convey modal meaning or psychological meaning (Stubbs, 1986: 18f.). They can either be used to release the speaker from total commitment to the proposition conveyed or they can be used to convey "a fully committed statement about the speaker's personal beliefs" (Stubbs, 1986: 18). That is, 'private' verbs can be interpreted as denoting "tentative assertion" or representing "internal psychological states" (Stubbs, 1986: 18). Which meaning is primarily intended by the speaker has to be inferred on the basis of the context. Stubbs suggests that "one rule of interpretation is that if the proposition is not empirically verifiable, then the utterance will be given a psychological interpretation" (Stubbs, 1986: 18).

Within the corpus, the interlocutors almost exclusively use the parenthetical verbs *I think* and *I guess*. The following example is taken from the beginning of a conversation between two strangers as they were trying to get to know each other. Stubbs's test suggests that a modal meaning of the parenthetical verb is intended in this extract.

(23) B: my my sister is seventeen.
A: ... yeah.
B: she'll be seventeen,
.. *I think*.
A: @@.
B: no she'll be sixteen ... XX,
A: mhm.
B: *I think so*. (19A4s)

Since the age of the speaker's sister is empirically verifiable, we can conclude that the utterance involves a modal meaning, namely that *she'll probably be seventeen*. The speaker's uncertainty about the age of her sister is indicated not only by *I think* and *I think so*, but also by the fact that she corrects herself twice.

Several adverbs also convey the speaker's uncertainty towards the proposition stated. The adverb *probably* is used to indicate any of several types of uncertainty in an utterance. In each of the examples below, there is a different source of uncertainty.

(24) A: no not yet.
... I em .. plan on seeing it *probably* this weekend (15B5m)
(25) A: I haven't seen been to the movies since *probably* .. May (15B7m)
(26) A: but ... I haven't been like well .. I've been like XX
I *probably* don't think it's fun any more. (15B8s)

In example (24), the speaker refers to a potential activity in the future. There is some uncertainty as to whether he will see the movie and even more uncertainty as to when. Some of the uncertainty is inherent in its placement in the future and some may come from an uncertain commitment on the part of the speaker. In example (25), the speaker is describing his past activities. There is no inherent uncertainty—he has or has not been to the movies since May. But his memory is not certain. While not wanting to take the time to try to remember exactly when he last went to a movie, he wants to make explicit his uncertainty about the exact date and perhaps also the irrelevance of the exact date. In example (26), the speaker has said earlier that he enjoyed going to football games in the past when he knew someone on the team. Now he is trying to explain why he does not go anymore. The use of *probably* signals uncertainty about the explanation provided. In addition, it may serve as a politeness strategy. Earlier the speaker had said that the game is boring unless someone he knows gets the ball. The use of *probably* may soften any implicit criticism of the game or of people who enjoy it.

To summarise, shields help convey the speaker's commitment to a proposition. From a relevance-theoretical perspective, these vague additives can be said to put a procedural constraint on the hearer's interpretation process. That is, they help guide the hearer towards the intended interpretation. In addition, we find that other propositional attitudes can be conveyed indirectly by vague expressions. In the examples given above, we find that speakers can also convey their perspective on the newsworthiness of a proposition and their evaluation of its desirability.

As noted above, vague expressions of quantity may convey the newsworthiness of a proposition, that is, how expected or unexpected it is. Uses of *some* or *sometimes*, as in the examples below (also numbers 15 and 17 above), seem designed not to give specific information about frequency but rather to indicate that the events are expected. In the first case, the frequency is what anyone in that context would consider normal. In the second case, the situation is as the participants have come to expect.

(15) A: last week e = r,
let me see,
I rent *some* movies.
B: yeah me too.
A: yeah [I I didn't go out].
B: [which what movie]?

(17) B: uh huh.
A: and then *sometimes* you have to .. just stay there for the night.
and then you have to .. [leave] XXX,
B: [yeah].
A: or *sometimes* if you get there in the morning,
like in the afternoon you have to leave.
you know, (20B6t)

In contrast, other expressions serve to indicate that a situation is unexpected or newsworthy. The use of *so many* and *probably not* in the examples below do not give precise numbers but rather seem designed to warn the listener that the number is different from what one might expect.

(16) A: oh you mean I know like
I know every,
I know . . *so many* people now this year,

(19) B: really?
would [[would]] you go by yourself to go see an opera?
A: [[XX]]
.. *probably not*.
[@@]
B: [*probably*]*L not*?
A. I mean *maybe*,
but *probably* [[*not* you know],]

Speakers also convey their evaluation of a situation through their use of vague expressions. In the examples below, the speaker changes the evaluative strength of a statement by using a vague additive.

(6) A: <SV this is gonna get it is getting *a bit* hard, SV>

(7) R: the way you communicate is *a little bit* different one,

(8) B: .. I have to take care of my parents *a little*,

In each of these cases, the basic assertion is negative in tone, and the vague expression seems intended to soften the impact.

On the other hand, a vague expression may introduce a negative evaluation into an otherwise neutral statement. In the example below, we believe the speaker uses the vague expression *thing* as a deliberate strategy for expressing her negative view of the experiment in which she participated.

(11) B: I was tripping yesterday when I was signing up for that *thing*
I was thinking class started ((door opens)) at nine thirty,
and I was,
A: for which *thing*?
B: for when I was signing up for the experiment the other day,
A: ah...
B: didn't you sign up for the same time..?

In summary, speakers may use vague expressions to help convey their evaluation of a situation. In the examples we analysed, the vague expressions might soften a negative evaluation or introduce a negative tone.

4. Conclusion

Vague expressions are pervasive in everyday conversations. They occur in a variety of contexts, and they appear to serve a variety of functions.

First, there seem to be several reasons for the use of vague expressions. The most obvious one is uncertainty at the time of speaking. Sometimes speakers lack information about a given quantity, quality or identity. They therefore cannot be more precise even if they want to. Vague utterances allow speakers to maintain fluency when they cannot access information at the point where it is needed in the conversation. In some cases, speakers may have information potentially available, but they cannot access it in a timely way. They may then decide that the processing cost of accessing it, and the cost to fluency, are not warranted in terms of any benefits to be gained by precision. However, speakers may choose vague expressions even when they could have stated their utterances more precisely. A vague utterance may be more efficient in the sense that it yields the same contextual assumptions for lower processing costs. Even more interesting from our point of view are cases in which a vague expression may convey a different meaning from that conveyed by the use of a precise expression, a meaning that is more relevant for the purposes of the conversation. In relevance-theoretic terms, the vaguely formulated utterance may provide access to more relevant contextual assumptions for the hearer.

Vague expressions appear to be especially important in managing conversational implicature. First, they may serve as focusing devices, directing the hearer's attention to the most relevant information. They may guide the listener in interpreting the

goodness of fit of a characteristic to a conceptual category. In addition, they may place descriptions on a scale and thus provide a reference point that may be especially relevant for drawing inferences.

In expressing quantities, vague expressions provide information about the significance of the quantity and may provide a reference point in terms of a scale. They set the observed quantity in relation to the presumed speaker and listener expectations.

Vague expressions may also convey several aspects of propositional attitude. They serve as a major means for conveying different levels of certainty regarding the propositional content of an utterance. In addition, they may convey the newsworthiness or expectedness of a statement, or they may help convey evaluative meaning. Finally, vague expressions may serve various social functions. They may serve as politeness strategies, softening implicit complaints and criticisms. They also provide a way of establishing a social bond. The relevance-theoretical account of vagueness seems to provide a unitary account of the various forms of vague expressions. They all designate loose uses of language. As such they mark a discrepancy between an utterance and a thought the speaker has in mind. The marker indicates to the hearer that he should not process the utterance in the most literal sense. That is, the utterance will achieve optimal relevance if it is not interpreted literally by the hearer.

Vague additives ordinarily convey procedural rather than conceptual meaning. They do not tell the hearer something about the real world, but rather give him processing instructions for the optimally relevant interpretation of the utterance.

Thus, the vague expression is seen in our analysis as the most relevant one the speaker could have chosen in a particular context to convey the intended meaning. Of course a vague expression may require more processing effort on the part of the hearer. In formulating a vague expression, the speaker relies on her assumption about the hearer's cognitive abilities as well as her assumption about their shared common ground. The speaker assumes the hearer is able to access the contextual assumptions intended by the speaker. These premises do not guarantee that communication succeeds. Certainly one might expect that the risk of misunderstandings is higher in vague uses of language than in more precise statements. However, within the corpus apparent misunderstandings were rare. This seems to provide evidence for the claim that interlocutors generally do not have problems in understanding vagueness. They are apparently able to find an interpretation which they consider good enough for the purposes of the conversation.

In conclusion, vague expressions appear to serve a variety of functions in conversations. According to our analysis of examples from our corpus, they are not just a poor substitute for a precise expression. Rather, they often convey meaning that is different from, and more relevant than a precise expression would. That is, they help guide the hearer towards the best interpretation of the speaker's intention.

Appendix

Transcription conventions based on du Bois (1991).

UNITS		
	Intonation unit	{*carriage return*}
	Truncated intonation unit	–
	Truncated word	-
SPEAKERS		
	Speech overlap	[ ]
TRANSITIONAL CONTINUITY		
	Final	.
	Continuing	,
	Appeal	?
LENGTHENING		
	Lengthening	=
PAUSE		
	Long	...(N)
	Medium	...
	Short	..
	Latching	(0)
VOCAL NOISES		
	Vocal noises	( )
	Inhalation	(H)
	Exhalation	(Hx)
	Glottal stop	%
	Laughter	@
QUALITY		
	Laugh quality	< @ @ >
	Quotation quality	< Q Q >
	Sotto voce	< SV SV >
	Loud	< L L >
	Multiple quality features	< Y < Z Z > Y >
TRANSCRIBER'S PERSPECTIVE		
	Researcher's comment	(( ))
	Uncertain hearing	< X X >
	Indecipherable syllable	X

References

Blakemore, Diana, 1992. Understanding Utterances. An Introduction to Pragmatics. Blackwell, Oxford.

Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen C., 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Channell, Joanna, 1980. More on approximations: a reply to Wachtel. Journal of Pragmatics 4, 461–476.

Channell, Joanna, 1985. Vagueness as a conversational strategy. Nottingham Linguistic Circular 14, 3–24.

Channell, Joanna, 1994. Vague Language. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Clark, Herbert H., Wilkes-Gibbs, Deanna, 1986. Referring as a collaborative process. In: Clark, Herbert H. (Ed.), Arenas of Language Use. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 107–143.

Clark, Herbert H., 1996. Using language. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Crystal, David, Davy, Derek, 1975. Advanced Conversational English. Longman, London.

Dines, Elizabeth R., 1980. Variation in discourse-"and stuff like that". Language in Society 9, 13–31.

Du Bois, John W., 1991. Transcription design principles for spoken discourse research. Pragmatics 1 (1), 71–106.

Fraser, Bruce, 1980. Conversational mitigation. Journal of Pragmatics 4 (4), 341–350.
Hübler, Axel, 1983. Understatements and Hedges in English. John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
Jucker, Andreas H., Smith, Sara W., 1998. "And people just you know like 'wow'"-Discourse markers as negotiating strategies. In: Jucker, Andreas H., Ziv, Yael (Eds.), Discourse Markers: Descriptions and Theory. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 171–201.
Jucker, Andreas H., Smith, Sara W., in press. "He hired who?": problems in reference assignments in conversations. In: Karin Aijmer (Ed.), Proceedings of the conference of the International Association of Dialogue Analysis. Göteborg, 19–21 April 2001. Niemeyer, Tübingen.
Lakoff, George, 1973. Hedges: a study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts. Journal of Philosophical Logic 2, 458–508.
Lüdge, Tanja, 1998. Vagueness in the Discourse of California Students. MA thesis, Justus Liebig University, Giessen.
Moxey, Linda M., Sanford, Anthony J., 1997. Choosing the right quantifier. Usage in the context of communication. In: Givon, T. (Ed.), Conversation: Cognitive, Communicative, and Social Perspectives. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 207–231.
Overstreet, Maryann, 2000. Whales, Candlelight, and Stuff Like That. General Extenders in English Discourse. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Overstreet, Maryann, Yule, George, 2002. The metapragmatics of *and everything*. Journal of Pragmatics 34, 785–794.
Powell, Mava Jo, 1985. Purposive vagueness: an evaluative dimension of vague quantifying expressions. Journal of Linguistics 21 (1), 31–50.
Prince, E., Bosk, C., Frader, J., 1982. On hedging in physician—physician discourse. In: di Pietro, J. (Ed.), Linguistics and the Professions. Ablex, Norwood, New Jersey, pp. 83–97.
Sadock, Jerrold M., 1977. Truth and approximations. Berkeley Linguistic Society Papers 3, 430–439.
Smith, Sara W., Jucker, Andreas H., 1998. Interactive aspects of reference assignment in conversations. Pragmatics & Cognition. Special issue on The Concept of Reference in the Cognitive Sciences 6 (1/2), 153–187.
Smith, Sara W., Jucker, Andreas H., 2000. *Actually* and other markers of an apparent discrepancy between propositional attitudes of conversational partners. In: Andersen, Gisle, Fretheim, Thorstein (Eds.), Pragmatic Markers and Propositional Attitude. (Pragmatics & Beyond New Series 79). Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, pp. 207–237.
Smith, Sara W., Jucker, Andreas H., 2002. Discourse markers as turns: evidence for the role of inter-subjectivity in interactional sequences. In: Fetzer, Anita, Meierkord, Christiane (Eds.), Rethinking Sequentiality. Linguistics Meets Conversational Interaction. (Pragmatics & Beyond New Series 103). John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadephia, pp. 151–178.
Smith, Sara W., Jucker, Andreas H., Müller, Simone, 2001. "Some artist guy": the role of salience and common ground in the formulation of referring expressions in conversational narratives. In: Enikö, Németh T. (Ed.), Pragmatics in 2000: Selected Papers from the 7th International Pragmatics Conference, Vol 2. International Pragmatics Association, Antwerp, pp. 528–542.
Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1991. Loose talk. In: Davis, Steven (Ed.), Pragmatics. A Reader. Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 540–549.
Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 1995. Relevance. Communication and Cognition, second ed. Blackwell, Oxford.
Stubbs, Michael, 1986. A matter of prolonged fieldwork: notes towards a modal grammar of English. Applied Linguistics 7 (1), 1–25.
Wachtel, Tom, 1980. Pragmatic approximations. Journal of Pragmatics 4 (3), 201–211.
Wachtel, Tom, 1981. Distinguishing between approximations. Journal of Pragmatics 5, 311–322.
Ward, Gregory, Birner, Betty, 1993. The semantics and pragmatics of *and everything*. Journal of Pragmatics 19, 205–214.
Wierzbicka, Anna, 1986. Precision in vagueness: the semantics of English approximatives. Journal of Pragmatics 10, 597–614.
Williamson, Timothy, 1994. Vagueness. In: Asher, R., Simpson, J. (Eds.), The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics. Pergamon Press, Oxford, pp. 4869–4871.

Yule, George, 1996. Pragmatics. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Zhang, Qiao, 1998. Fuzziness–vagueness–generality–ambiguity. Journal of Pragmatics 29, 13–31.

Andreas H. Jucker is Professor of English linguistics at the University of Zurich. Recent publications include *Current Issues in Relevance Theory* (1998, co-edited with Villy Rouchota), *Discourse markers. Descriptions and Theory* (1998, co-edited with Yael Ziv) and *Historical Dialogue Analysis* (1999, co-edited with Gerd Fritz and Franz Lebsanft), *History of English and English Historical Linguistics* (2000) and *Diachronic Perspectives on Address Term Systems* (2002, co-edited with Irma Taavitsainen). He is the editor of the *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* (with Irma Taavitsainen) and the editor of the *Pragmatics and Beyond New Series* (Benjamins). Current research interests include the analysis of discourse, cognitive pragmatics (relevance theory) and historical pragmatics as well as the grammar and the history of English.

Sara W. Smith is Professor with a joint appointment in Psychology and Linguistics at California State University, Long Beach. Her recent research has explored ways in which common ground is established and exploited in everyday conversations, including attention to cognitive processes involved. Three recent papers have focused on the role of discourse markers in negotiating common ground (Jucker and Smith, 1998; Smith and Jucker 2000, 2002). Other recent papers dealt with interactive strategies used in establishing reference (Smith and Jucker, 1998; Smith et al., 2001).

Tanja Lüdge is a graduate of the Justus Liebig University, Giessen. Her main research interests include cognitive pragmatics, conversation analysis and vagueness. Currently she is employed as a research executive in an international market research agency.