

## Vague Language

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## Your conversations

Let's check what happened  
in your "conversational life"!

(This was your assignment)

## Let's tell a joke!

Some jokes... a dirty one...

A woman goes to her doctor and tells him that she can't get any from her husband. So he gives her some pills and says "they are experimental pills, put two into his coffee and see what happens".

So she does and the next morning come back and says "the sex was great what if I use ten?"

And the doctor replied "they are experimental pills so try it and see what happens".

So the next day she comes back and says "the sex was better, can I put the whole bottle in and see what happens?"

The next morning a little boy comes in and says, "my mother's dead, my sister's pregnant, my arse hurts like hell and my father is sitting in the corner saying "here kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty."

## Let's tell a joke!

...and a mean one!

A blonde and a brunette are on opposite sides  
of a river. The brunette wants to get across.

She yells across to the blonde, "Hey, how  
do I get to the other side?"

The blonde shakes her head and yells back  
- "People like you really piss me off. You  
ARE on the other side!"

## Transcribing jokes

right (.) three men sat in a pub (.) and er sat there having a quiet drink (.) and in walks this really drunken old man (.) and he staggers in and he's all over the place he's knocking drinks over (.) he's er standing on people's feet and (.) um all the rest of it and um he walks over to the bar this old man (.) and he orders a pint of lager (.) he er gets his pint (.) and downs it fast as he can in one (.) and then he staggers over to these three men (.) these three men are looking at each other nudging each other (.) right what does he want (.) and ur (.) this man walks over he says (.) I've had yer mam I've had yer mam and one of the men says (.) piss off! so (.) this this old man he staggers away and he goes to the bar and he orders another drink (.) another pint of lager and downs this even faster (.) he staggers back over to these three men (.) and he says I've had your mam I've put cream on her body and I've licked it off (.) guy stands up again he says look go away (.) so er this old man staggers back to the bar (.) all over the place he orders another pint (.) this one downs even faster and he comes and again again he comes back over to these three men (.) he says I've had your mam I've put cream on her body I've done things to her you wouldn't understand (.) well they've had enough so (.) one of the men stands up he says look dad you're drunk go home.

## Activity

Rewrite the previous transcript of a  
joke and answer the following  
questions:

- What features did you leave out?
- Why were they present in the spoken version?

### Features of spoken English to be found in the transcription:

- Pauses and voiced pauses
- No sentences
- Heavy use of and
- Frequent repetition
- Discourse markers
- Ellipsis
- Vague language
- Dialectal elements

## Vague Language

This joke gives us the opportunity to talk about vague language.

Examples in the text...

right ( ) three men sat in a pub ( ) and er sat there having a quiet drink ( ) and in walks this really drunken odd man ( ) and he staggers in and he's all over the place he's knocking drinks over ( ) he's er standing on people's feet and ( ) um all the rest of it and um he walks over to the bar this old man ( ) and he orders a pint of lager ( ) he er gets his pint ( ) and downs it fast as he can in one ( ) and then he staggers over to these three men ( ) these three men are looking at each other nudging each other ( ) right what does he want ( ) and ur ( ) this man walks over he says ( ) I've had yer mam I've had yer mam and one of the men says ( ) piss off so ( ) this this old man he staggers away and he goes to the bar and he orders another drink ( ) another pint of lager and downs this even faster ( ) he staggers back over to these three men ( ) and he says I've had your mam I've put cream on her body and I've licked it off ( ) guy stands up again he says look go away ( ) so er this old man staggers back to the bar ( ) all over the place he orders another pint ( ) this one downs even faster and he comes and again again he comes back over to these three men ( ) he says I've had your mam I've put cream on her body I've done things to her you wouldn't understand ( ) well they've had enough so ( ) one of the men stands up he says look dad you're drunk go home.

## Some examples in *About a Boy*

p.54

'I don't even know what you do,' Suzie said, when they were settled into the car. Megan was in the baby beside her; Will was in the back with Marcus, the weird kid, who was humming tunelessly.

'Nothing.'

'Oh.'

He usually made something up, but he had made too much up already over the last few days... if he added a fictitious job to the list, not only would he begin to lose track, he'd be offering Suzie nothing real at all.

'Well, what did you do before?'

'Nothing.'

'You've never worked?'

'I've done the odd day here and there, but...'

'Oh. Well, that's...'

She trailed off, and Will knew why. Not having a job ever, that's... nothing. There was nothing to say about it at all, not immediately, anyway.

## From the movie

Suzie: So, what do you do?

Will: Me?

(There were too many lies to keep track of so I told the truth.)

Nothing.

Suzie: Well, before then.

Will: What do you mean, before I did nothing?

Suzie: Yeah.

Will: I did nothing.

Suzie: You've never worked?

Will: I've done the odd day here and there, but, no. Crazy, isn't it?

Suzie: It's...

Will: Brilliant.

## Some other examples

See handout A

## Vague Language

Vague language is not totally accurate or clear. Although some people think this is "bad" English, all native English speakers use vague language when they are unable or unwilling to give accurate information, or they think it is either unnecessary or socially inappropriate to do so.

## Vague language and numbers

A good example of vague language is rounding up numbers when telling the time.

26 minutes past 2 becomes:

- It's *about* half past two.
- It's *almost* half past two.
- It's half two-*ish*.
- It's *nearly* half past two.

## Vague Language and Politeness

Often, speakers use vague language not because they do not have accurate information, but because they feel it is *more polite* to make a *less definite* statement.

*That is wrong*  
becomes:

*I'm not sure that's completely correct.*

## Vague Language and Politeness

As short definite statements sometimes sound too assertive to native English speakers, they often add extra vague language to a sentence.

This extra language has *no extra meaning*, it is just a *social softener*.

## Turntaking and structure

The use of vague language differs from language to language and is an important cultural consideration when interacting in a foreign language.

Native English speakers, for example, can find Germans direct because German uses little vague language. On the other hand, for Germans, native English speakers can sound indecisive, inaccurate and lacking authority.

## Vague Language and Lists

Sometimes a speaker might start a list of some kind and then cannot remember the rest of the list or does not think the other items are important enough to mention.

In this case one uses *LIST COMPLETERS*.

## Vague Language and Lists

I typed some letters, reports *and other things like that*.

You have to ask a doctor or a lawyer *or someone like that*.

List completers are very common and use words such as *things* and *stuff*.

## Vague Language and Lists

Here are some more *list completers*:

- and stuff like that
- and things / stuff
- or something like that
- or stuff like that
- or what / where / whoever

## Vague Language and Names

When a speaker does not know or cannot remember the name of something or someone he uses a *placeholder*.

I need a *thingummy* for the slide projector.

I gave it to *whatsisname/whatsisface* in the accounts department.

## Vague Language and Names

Grammatically these simply replace the name of the person or object that the speaker cannot remember and never change their form.

Other place holders include:

- Whatsername/whatserface (for a woman)
- Whatsit
- Thingy
- thingummyjig

## Vague Language and Quantities

Vague language is very common with numbers when expressing quantity, frequency or the time.

Low numbers are often substituted by phrases such as *a couple of / a few*, whereas larger numbers are rounded up with *about / around* or replaced with *lots of / loads of*.

## Vague Language and Quantities

Examples:

Should we say *around* three or four o'clock?

It cost *around* 20 pounds *or so*.

It's *about* a million.

The computer caused *loads / lots of* problems.

## Vague Language and Quantities

With vague language, *a couple* does not necessarily mean *two*, it could mean up to three or even four. When people do not want to give accurate numbers they can use the following:

- There were about 30 *odd / or so* people at the meeting.
- He's not that old. I'd say he's about 30-*ish*.
- There were *a lot of / lots of / loads of* problems.
- I've been to Prague *a couple of / a few* times.
- I think we need *about / around* 30 (*or so*).

## Hands-on work

Identify the cases of vague language in the dialogue in handout B.