Vague language as a means of avoiding controversy

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Vague language describes the use of linguistic items including grammar and particularly lexis to modify and make the meaning of a communication less precise and less clear. While scientific and much academic language prides itself on rigour, precision and clarity, vague language, or VL, as it is known, is a linguistic device used in politics, reporting and everyday conversation to avoid over-declaratory statements and assertions and to build or protect relationships. This paper analyses the various definitions and theories of vague language and examines its use in the English language in discourse management and politeness in gender relations, politics, culture and news reporting. It examines the ways in which vague language is used to convey subtle meanings and identifies it as a huge area of ongoing linguistic research.

KEYWORDS: *vague language, pragmatics, corpus-based language, politeness, inexplicit language, discourse genre, discourse analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper considers research that has been done into the phenomenon of vague language (VL). This phenomenon is undoubtedly as old as language itself but it has recently come to the attention of scholars because there has been growing dissatisfaction with other approaches and terminologies which have been used in the past to describe and analyse various kinds of meaning in language. In fact, one of the major issues when considering this topic is the confusion of different terms and approaches that underpin the whole field of semantics in general, and the phenomenon of vague language in particular.

For the purposes of this paper, the approach that is taken is to review the main theories on vague language that were advanced before the middle of the twentieth century. This provides some theoretical groundwork and clarifies the evolution of ideas in this area and the emergence of today's focus on vague language. This is followed by a series of thematic sections which focus on relatively recent scholarship (post 1990) and empirical studies to illustrate how and why vague language is commonly used today. A broad range of contexts is cited, to give an overview of vague language forms and functions in the world today and different investigation methods are critiqued. Finally, it must be recognised that it would be impossible to cover every possible angle in the space available, and so the aim in this literature is to outline and analyse some of the most fundamental theories involved in this topic and

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then, by way of illustration, discuss how vague language has been studied in action in a broad range of realistic situations. This is why the focus of the main body of the work is on empirical studies. The discussion considers several theoretical and practical implications of the most recent work on vague language and the conclusion sums up the main findings and identifies areas where further research is still needed.

2. VAGUE LANGUAGE THEORY

2.1 The problem of definition

Somewhat paradoxically, the term 'vague language' is itself a rather broad one, and there are different ways of defining it. It is often assumed that vagueness in language is something negative, or in other words *'a deplorable deviation from precision and clarity'* (Jucker et al., 2003, p. 1737). It is certainly true that there are some instances, such as writing up scientific experiments for example, where precision and clarity are necessary. The negative associations of vagueness could be ascribed to the influence of Western philosophy and logic that are concerned with

defining truth (Kenney & Smith, 2010). A positivist view of the world emphasises accuracy, clarity and definiteness and this is a feature of most discourses in science and technology. Most human language takes place in much less rigorous settings, however, and a certain amount of vagueness is normal and acceptable in everyday life, or even highly prized in areas where creativity has a prominent role to play, such as in the arts and literature.

An important introductory study of vague language was published by Channell in 1994, and this book suggests that vague language should be defined as language which is *'purposely and unabashedly vague'* (Channell, 1994, p. 20). This definition is somewhat tautological, however, and although this work is widely regarded as an important starting point, it is by no means accepted as a final authority on what vague language is and how it should be defined and studied.

An alternative definition is suggested by Drave (2001) as *'that which modifies a linguistic item, phrase or utterance to make its meaning less precise'* (Drave, 2001, p. 25). The latter definition is preferable, because a person may sometimes be aware that they are using vague language and they may have some idea about why they are doing so but they might also sometimes be unaware of the vagueness in their language and there may be no conscious purpose behind it. Even this second

definition is still quite broad, since the term that which does not specify exactly which part of speech or linguistic element is used to make something less precise. Macaulay (2005) shows that vagueness can be indicated by words and body language.

Words would include lexis, phraseology, the use of a question rather than a statement and intonation, voice tone and pitch. Body language includes expressions in the eyes or a shrug of the shoulders or a wave of the hand. This is not a perfect definition, but it is an acceptable starting point, and the one that is used to underpin the research presented in this paper.

For reasons connected to these problems of definition vague language is also difficult to categorise in any one academic discipline or methodological approach. It involves areas of linguistics such as semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, but also touches on psychology and cognition and language processing as well (Cutting, 2007). Theoretical and applied linguistics and rhetorical analysis can be used to study it but methods such as discourse analysis are also very useful for teasing out the context-specific aspects of vague language. It can be studied bottom up, on the basis of actual language usage, or top down, on the basis of the deep structure of language or semantic and discourse rules. In short, vague language is a very large area of study, and there is

a vast wealth of scholarly material that is quite difficult to sort into any logical order.

2.2 Early theories on vagueness in language
One of the earliest studies on vagueness was that of Peirce (1902), who stated that, *'a proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition'* (Peirce, 1902, p. 748).

This rather dense description is quite difficult to decipher and wrapped up in philosophical ideas regarding logical inferences. Later scholars in linguistics have taken this as a starting point to look more closely at the language that is used to convey vagueness, as a way of understanding what it means.

This line of thinking started off the debate on the extent to which vagueness is present in language, and the question of how vague language can or should be defined and used. A key contribution was made by Grice on the meanings and intentions that lie behind a speaker's words. The somewhat contentious term 'implicature' was coined by Grice (1989) to signify the whole range of meanings that are contained in language, but not explicitly stated. Even more contentious was Grice's suggestion that human conversation

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always follows a set of norms, which he calls maxims, which are supposedly designed to create cooperation between speakers.

This work was very influential, but there have been many debates about how appropriate these maxims are and considerable work has been done to refine and also challenge this early work (Neale, 1992; Carston, 2005).

What is called the Gricean approach has been modified by Horn (2005) to acknowledge the importance of the speaker's intended meaning, but also take account of the addressee's contribution in deciding which meanings are relevant and can be contributed to the conversation. This creates a bridge between the study of meaning (semantics) and the study of function (pragmatics) in the context of cooperative dialogue between speaker and addressee. Both the speaker and addressee have a role to play in the creating of vagueness and dealing with its effects in language. So, it cannot be assumed that the speaker defines the extent of vagueness that is contained in any expression or type of language use.

The field of pragmatics is also a very broad area and one which is quite difficult to define (Levinson, 1983). This field focuses on the functions of language use and the meanings that are constructed by language users in social settings. An understanding of pragmatics requires consideration of both explicit and implicit meanings and, perhaps most significantly of all, the context in which communication takes place. Many kinds of vagueness relate directly to the context.

For example, Crystal and Davy (1975) explain that the use of vague terms for numbers and quantities such as *bags of* and *about 30* are characteristic of informal conversations that take place in relaxed situations. Speakers who know each other well can interpret vague words like *stuff* and *gear* very accurately because of the shared knowledge that they have about each other's life and habits. The friendly and informal context makes such vague language an entirely natural and expected part of a conversation.

On the other hand, there are some occasions, for example in a court of law, where precision is the norm, and vague language may be interpreted as evasiveness, deception or even guilt (Cotterill, 2007). A witness giving evidence who uses vague language will cause confusion and exasperation in a setting which is designed to eliminate all possible doubt and establish the truth of an event

or a situation which in turn will form the basis of some moral or legal judgement with potentially very serious consequences. In a conversation between friends, on the other hand, vagueness is commonly used, and generally welcomed as a demonstration of trust and familiarity. This insight is very important when discussing vague language, because it shows that the same grammatical or lexical feature can have very different implied meanings in different contexts.

2.3 Vague language as a politeness strategy in spoken conversation

Following on from Gricean theory and pragmatics, there has been considerable research into the use of vague language as a way of being polite. It has been linked with the idea of maintaining harmony and cooperation within a social group, avoiding any threat to the face of another member of that group (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The idea here is that precise language gives too much information or information that is not welcome or wanted by the addressee. So, speakers who follow the Gricean norm of cooperation in dialogue avoid anything too explicit and resort to vague language instead. Everyone has been in a situation where they have been asked a direct question and have chosen to give a non-committal and vague answer simply because they wish to avoid the consequences of giving a full and accurate answer, whether this be in the context of expressing opinions about someone's choice of

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clothing or the taste of a meal that has just been cooked by someone present in the room. Precision and accuracy are generally laudable concepts but in these specific social contexts they can be offensive because they threaten the standing of an individual in the group and could hurt their feelings.

There are also certain advantages in the use of fuzzy concepts and vague boundaries, because they extend the range of options open to a speaker, offering a chance to express many grades of truth and many different attitudes towards propositions without the speaker having to be pinned down to just one position (Lakoff, 1972). The metaphor of the slingshot is used by Zhang (2011) to describe the elasticity that is inherent in vague language *'stretching on a continuum of*

polarities, between soft or tough, firm or flexible, cooperative or uncooperative' (Zhang, 2011, p. 571). Some people like to make statements that they can later interpret in different ways, as for example in the case of politicians who may have one message for one group of people (e.g. supporters) and another message for a different group (for example critics).

3. VAGUE LANGUAGE AS A DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT DEVICE

21st century linguistic research has taken these ideas further and examined how vagueness functions in spoken conversations to manage the cooperation between speakers. According to Jucker et al. (2003), vague expressions in everyday conversations *'may carry more relevant contextual implications than would a precise expression'* (Jucker et al., 2003, p. 1737), and the following common functions of such language were identified: to serve as a focusing device, helping the addressee determine how much processing effort to devote to a given referent; to show looser assignment of a characteristic to a conceptual category; to express a speaker's attitude towards a quantity, or take account of the speaker's assumptions about the addressee's beliefs; to express a speaker's degree of commitment to a proposition; to engender camaraderie or soften implicit criticisms.

What is noticeable about this list is the wide range of subtle meanings that can be conveyed through vague language, and the fact that these functions can overlap and be used individually or in a merged way with several operating at the same time. It is therefore quite tricky to work out which functions are being intended by the speaker and which are being picked up or inserted by the addressee at any one time.

One study found that vague category markers such as *and that sort of thing, and everything, and stuff,* and *all the rest of it* were used by learners of English differently than native speakers of English, and called for more research into the way both categories of speaker process these instances of vague language and decode what they are referring to (Evison et al., 2007). There may be a gap between intention and reception, and this could be quite critical for learners of a second language.

Another study compared the use of placeholder words such as *thing, thingy, stuff, thingummybob, thingybob* and *whatsit* by British adults and teenagers and found that these were not used more frequently by teenagers than adults but range of contexts in teenage use was wider than by adults (Palacios Martinez & Paloma, 2015). The authors draw the important conclusion stating that *'these lexical items show properties typical of pragmatic markers, since they help in the organisation of discourse, they are sometimes used*

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as devices to hold or cede the floor and they also function interpersonally by promoting cooperation between the participants in the conversation' (Palacios Martinez & Paloma, 2015, p. 425).

The reason for wide and varied use of vague language by teenagers may well be connected to group dynamics since *'for these subjects it is important to belong to a closed group and community in order to reaffirm themselves, and this use of language clearly helps them in that direction'* (Palacios Martinez, 2011, p. 119).

This line of investigation confirms earlier research by Ariel (2002) and Ball and Ariel (1978) into the use of vague language to create a privileged in-group which communicates their own restricted meanings between themselves to help them bond together. Interestingly, this line of research also raises the possibility that vague language can be used to exclude people from the group, for example, by using a vague expression instead of a person's name, or omitting details that the group knows, but the outsider does not. According to

Overstreet and Yule (1997), instances of vague language in conversation is neither sloppy nor rude but is used in both informal conversations between people who know each other well, and in semi-formal contexts such as telephone conversations between strangers, or broadcasts over television and radio to build relationships because *'they represent a kind of implicit communication whereby speakers indicate an assumption of shared experience and hence closeness or common ground'* (Overstreet & Yule, 1997, p. 256). This closeness does not have to exist in reality, but it can be an aspiration, or an expectation that the vagueness helps to turn in to a reality.

4. VAGUE LANGUAGE IN GENDER, CULTURE, POLITICS AND MEDIA

4.1 Vague language in gender

It has been suggested in some studies that vagueness is more commonly used by women due to the stereotypical roles that men and women are expected to play in most human societies. Men are generally expected to be bold and definite, for example, while women are expected to be timid and vague in deference to the supposed superiority of the male. This cliché is changing rapidly, especially with the importance of movements such as ME TOO and other initiatives for change. Scholars in this field have pointed out that the patriarchal bias in most societies dictates such unfair prejudices, and have highlighted the

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way in which both gender and politeness are socially constructed, rather than absolute norms (Mills, 2003). In the days before tape recorders and computers, it was difficult to counter such theories, especially since men dominated the research sector until the middle of the twentieth century. More recently, however, the involvement of feminists in research, and the availability of new technologies have allowed much more rigorous and evidence-based testing of these ideas.

So far, however, when these theories have been tested against actual data, the results have been far from conclusive. Holmes (1988) analysed the use of *sort of* in the speech of men and women in New Zealand, for example, and found that it was used as *'a device facilitating the smooth flow of the discourse, providing the speaker with verbal planning time [... and] as an imprecision or approximation signal (epistemic modal meaning) and as an informality or solidarity marker (affective meaning)'* (Holmes, 1988, p. 85). This study did not find much difference between women's and men's use of *sort of* but noted that *'in semi-formal*

contexts it was addressed more to women than men' (Holmes, 1988, p. 85). In another study, Holmes (1995) highlighted the different standards of behaviour that are expected of men and of women, such as for example the supposedly caring and nurturing role of women and their lower status in society, which encourages them to use vague formulation in an effort to support others and avoid conflicts where they might stand to lose more than men.

The evolving study of language and gender increasingly challenges any easy equation of gender with language use and suggests instead that complex interactions between gender, register and relationships and expectations between speakers and addressees are at work. Moreover, in contemporary societies where binary distinctions of gender are outdated, and complexity is more appropriate as a model than male/female contrasts, the whole field of language and gender has to be approached in a different way (Talbot, 2010). Variety and complexity are now features of the way language and gender are viewed, with much more leeway for choices to be made to suit different contexts.

4.2 Vague language and culture

Studies of intercultural communication have revealed that people in all cultures use vague language from time to time, but there are some differences between linguistic and cultural groups

(Alkhatnai, 2017). A typical method that is used to explore this and many other types of variation in language is corpus linguistics (McEnery et al., 2006). This simply means the use of collected data, usually transcribed from audio or video recordings of naturally occurring conversations, to identify, categorise and analyse instances of the linguistic phenomenon that is being studied, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

4.3 Vague language in English language learning

Another area that is worthy of further investigation is that of English language pedagogy, both for those learning to speak, listen, read and write in English as their native language and for those adults and children learning English as a second or foreign language. It is relatively easy to learn the formulaic expanders and tags that indicate vagueness in language but the use of these features of discourse in a natural way with no failures of communication is quite a sophisticated skill. The asymmetry between native speakers and teenage or adult learners of a second language means that the use of vague language always carries some risk of misinterpretation or pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983; Drew, 1991).

One study based in Hong Kong compared the forms and functions of vague language used by a) native English speakers and b) native Cantonese speakers and found that although both groups used a similar range of vague language types,

native English speakers used vague language more than native Cantonese speakers and that the native English speakers displayed a greater tendency to use vague language more *'for affective and interpersonal purposes'* (Drave, 2001, p. 25). Using a close analysis of the word *stuff*, Drave explored the epistemic (propositional) and affective meta-functions of the degree of specificity in the discourse and noted that *'it is very difficult to determine which of the functions (or motives) is in evidence for any single VL [= vague language] item, but this list of functions is nevertheless a necessary, preliminary heuristic for approaching the study of VL'* (Drave, 2001, p. 27).

These methodological difficulties are due partly to the lack of consensus on how to define and categorise vague language and partly to the practical challenge of understanding what meanings are actually or potentially encoded into or interpreted out of any individual instance of vague language. Each conversation relies on a whole raft of contextual factors, including the personalities and past history of the speakers, as well as various details such as the time, place, topic and purpose of the conversation.

Some rather different results were found in a more recent, comparative study of British and Taiwanese students' use of three types of vague expressions: a) vague categories, b) approximations and c) hedging (Lin, 2013). This study found substantial differences in the

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frequency of use of these categories and in the way in which they were used. It seems that more research, ideally across different cultural groupings, will be needed to explore this issue of vague language usage by different cultural groups.

4.4 Vague language in politics

In addition to these studies of vague language use, mainly in informal spoken contexts, there has been recent interest in more formal situations and written texts. An interesting investigation into a corpus of Parliamentary debate texts from the EU identified a list of general extenders that were commonly used by native English speakers and non-native English speakers alike, and then subsequently published in written form. Cucchi (2007) provides a number of examples:

and/or [something/anything/everything] (like that)
(and/or) X stuff (like that/X)
and (all) (of) that
(all) [this/that/these/those] kind(s)/sort(s) of X
(or) whatever

and so on (and so forth)
et cetera (et cetera) (etc.)
Xs like that
and all the rest of it
and this that and the other (Cucchi, 2007, p. 5).

The placeholder *X* in these examples refers to the subject matter that the speaker is talking about, usually a noun or noun phrase. The term *general extender* is used in preference to other terminology such as *set marking tags* (Dines, 1980, p. 23) which has previously been used to signify the way speakers cue the listener to see an example as an illustration of more a general case. In this study of vague language in European Union transcripts Cucchi (2007) concluded that both native and non-native speakers of English use these general extenders for similar purposes, such as iconicity, where the speakers want to suggest that much more could be said. He also concluded by far the most common forms were *and so on* and *et cetera*. Interestingly, there was a difference between categories used by speakers in that native speakers of English preferred *and so on* while non-native speakers of English preferred the Latinate form *et cetera*. Greater command of a language may mean that a speaker has more choices available, but these general extenders are a very common part of formal language in political contexts. The examples show vague language is not only a feature of informal speech. It clearly has a role to play in formal contexts as well.

4.5 Vague language in news reporting

'Hedging' according to Milanović and Milanović (2010) is a way of making a general statement to avoid commitment to one point of view and to show balance. As such it is another example of vague language, frequently used in journalism.

One empirical study on economics-related news reporting at the time of the world financial crisis in 2008 found that *'hedges are extensively used to limit commitment to what is proposed, instantaneously offering error avoidance'* (Milanović & Milanović, 2010, p. 128). Economists discussing crisis situations understand that their work may be controversial and it may cause worry and stress to readers. So, they exercise caution to mitigate these negative reactions by moderating their writing style with hedges. An example of such writing is cited as follows: *'Nouriel Roubini, the famously glum economist who predicted the financial crisis, said that while the recession in the United States **may** well be over at the end of the year, another dip was still **possible** next year'* (Milanović & Milanović, 2010, p. 125).

This example shows the use of the modal verb *may* to cast doubt on the likelihood of the economist's predicted course of events ever happening and the use of the adjective *possible* to qualify another of his predictions. The tension between having an obligation to explain emerging

trends and thus predict the future and at the same to avoid making mistakes or upsetting people is the reason why the economist resorts to vagueness techniques.

Another study, based on intercultural reporting of English language news in China, noted that in both languages news items regularly violated all of the Gricean maxims mentioned above and the authors of news stories used vague language in a variety of ways and for a range of different purposes, mostly related to the creation of artistic effect or the management of reader understanding and emotions. The aim was to make readers think about the news while avoiding extreme or offensive statements that might upset them (Pan, 2012). Here, too, is a demonstration of vague language being used in relatively formal, written texts for a variety of purposes.

Further topics could be added to the list discussed above, such as the use of vague language in healthcare (Adolphs et al., 2007) or any number of other settings but space is limited

5. DISCUSSION

It is clear that vague language is relevant to both formal and informal registers, and it is both context-governed and culture-dependent (Zhang, 2011). This is fundamental to understanding how vague language must be investigated – using primary data gathering methods that capture more

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than just grammatical and lexical items, but also include data about the speakers/writers and the target and actual audiences in their respective contexts, and ideally with a multi-disciplinary focus and range of methods. There is no single correct way of researching this topic and incorporating multiple theories and approaches offers the best opportunity to produce reliable findings and formulate new theories.

One of the most interesting aspects of vague language is the way in which speakers and addressees co-construct meaning in communication and the space that vague language leaves for both speaker and addressee to insert their own interpretations. An understanding of the many and various ways in which vague language can be used highlights the complexity of spoken and written genres and underlines the fact that vague language is in fact a very sophisticated feature that is not used randomly, or just out of laziness or inattention, but in fact serves some very

sophisticated purposes both at the level of semantics and at the level of discourse management (Wierzbicka, 1986).

The proliferation of different media in the contemporary world, and their associated genres such as discussion boards, blogs, home-made texts and videos and all kinds of social media suggests that the traditional boundary between spoken and written language is being blurred. This raises interesting questions about the potential forms and purposes of vague language today. Also, some new constraints such as the character limit in text messaging and Twitter impose very strict limits on the amount of explicit meaning that can be conveyed in a single utterance, and there is now a growing range of conventions, such as abbreviations, creative uses of punctuation and additional visual items such as emoji and moving gif images that can be used in digital communication. More research is needed to investigate these new dimensions and the role that vague language plays in digitally enabled communication.

Finally, all the empirical studies mentioned above struggle to use the unwieldy range of existing terminology around vagueness and language and there seems to be a need for some kind of definitive categorisation that could be used for comparison purposes across studies in different countries, contexts and themes. One article by

Zhang (1998) has sparked renewed debates over this point and his proposal of four terms *generality, vagueness, fuzziness* and *ambiguity* might be a helpful starting point for building consensus in arriving at a common categorisation of examples. The concept of fuzziness, with its recognition that some expressions do not have clear-cut referential boundaries, is an important innovation in this field that is worthy of more research.

Generality, vagueness and ambiguity can be resolved with knowledge of the details surrounding language use but no amount of background knowledge about the speakers and the context can pin down deliberately fuzzy language. The human condition is open-ended and uncertain, and so it is entirely appropriate that there are dimensions of vagueness in language that cannot be fully determined. There may be psychological reasons why language that is fuzzy is used when perfectly clear alternatives exist and are readily available and indeed some of the most influential texts in the world today, such as sacred religious texts, myths, poetry and ideological treatises, would be wonderful sources for a closer study of fuzziness and other types of vague language and their ongoing impact on both individual and collective human consciousness.

6. CONCLUSION

The evidence reviewed above demonstrates that vague language is a huge topic and one which is likely to be the subject of research for many years to come. Wherever and whenever vague language is used, it provides an astonishing variety of options for varying the subtle meanings that can be exchanged in all kinds of discourse genres and contexts. Far from being a negative feature of language it is a very great strength and scholars are still exploring the potential that lies within it for subtle variations in its use.

The implications of this growing body of work on vague language are immense. There are practical applications, such as, for example, in teaching advanced literacy skills and the creation and interpretation of a huge range of different text types. There is scope for new theory formation in the analysis of digitally enabled language use and plenty of ongoing discussion about the extent to which previous terms and theories still apply to this type of language.

Above all, studying vague language as it is actually being used today, by politicians or diplomats, in news bulletins and in conversations with friends, colleagues and strangers, helps us to understand human psychology and the process of forming and maintaining group identity and coherence. Mastering the skill of the appropriate use of vague language is a fundamental prerequisite for peaceful and harmonious social interaction, even in the face of different perspectives and conflicting views of the world.

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