ОБУЧЕНИЕ ЛЕКСИЧЕСКИМ СРЕДСТВАМ ВЫРАЖЕНИЯ НЕОПРЕДЕЛЕННОСТИ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена лексическим средствам выражения неопределенности в английском языке. Неопределенность является универсальной категорией, которая свойственна как устной, так и письменной речи носителей английского языка, в особенности, их спонтанной разговорной речи. В статье рассматриваются типы лексических средств выражения неопределенности, их функции, а также особенности употребления подобных средств. Методисты и авторы учебных материалов неоднозначно относятся к вопросу о включении подобных лексических средств в программу обучения английскому языку как иностранному. Автор показывает, что необходимо повышать осведомленность обучающихся о лексических средствах выражения неопределенности, поскольку они помогают обучающимся изъясняться на иностранном языке в условиях нехватки лексических средств, а также делают речь более естественной.

Ключевые слова: неопределенность, категория неопределенности, лексические средства выражения неопределенности, преподавание английского языка как иностранного.

VAGUE EXPRESSIONS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Research article

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Abstract

The subject of the research is vague language in English. Vagueness is a universal category that characterises both spoken and written discourse of native speakers of English, in particular, their spontaneous informal speech. The author scrutinises various types of vague language, their features and functions, as well as limitations of their use. TEFL methodologists and course material developers question the necessity of including vague language in language curricula. The author maintains that vague language may help language learners to express ideas by closing a vocabulary gap, and that it makes their speech more natural and similar to that of native speakers of English. It may thus be beneficial to raise learners' awareness of vague language and encourage them to use it in their productive speech.

Keywords: vagueness, vague language, vague expressions, placeholders, set markers, approximators, teaching English as a foreign language, TEFL.

Introduction

Vague language has been a subject of linguistic research since late 1990s. Once thought of as undesirable and best avoided, it is now viewed as an indispensable feature of natural language. Being vague or imprecise allows a language user to convey ideas without coming across as 'inappropriately pedantic' [17, P. 55] and is now considered perfectly acceptable in many linguistic contexts.

This paper purports to ascertain whether English language learners may benefit from acquiring vague language and using it in their productive speech, and whether methodologists and teachers of English as a second language should include vague expressions in the curricula.

In written or spoken language, **vagueness** is a form of unclarity, specifically, one that applies to the boundaries of things [1], [13], [14]. Some lexemes are inherently vague, such as the adjectives *tall* or *old*. There are no clear boundaries that define these attributes, and a person could not say with any degree of certainty whether one who stands 168 cm in height is *tall*, or whether a 63-year-old person is *old*, both being borderline cases of these features.

Together with homonymy and polysemy, vagueness is a case of meaning variation, which Murphy defines as an ability of a word to have more than one interpretation [11, P. 83]. Vagueness, however, is to be distinguished from another form of linguistic unclarity, ambiguity, which could be defined as possession of two or more meanings, no matter whether vague or precise [13, P. 2].

Vague language is by definition highly context-determined. Vague lexemes have an imprecise, indeterminate, or general sense, and can be applied to a variety or objects. Raffman argues that the competent use of a vague word is characterised by arbitrary divergences among competent speakers' applications of the word [13, P. XII].

Vague expressions are generally classified according to their function. For instance, **placeholders** are defined as vague expressions employed when people cannot remember the name of a person or thing [6, P. 164]. Such words have little or no semantic meaning and should be interpreted pragmatically. Examples of placeholders include *thing*, *thingy/thingie, thingummy,*

thingummyjig, thingummybob, whatsisname, whatnot, whosit and *whatsit*. The major function of placeholders is substituting for nouns a language user does not know or has forgotten, or does not want to use for certain reasons, such as to avoid offensive or taboo words, to avoid being derogatory or pretentious, or to avoid pronunciation problems [6, P. 162].

Vague expressions whose main function is to mark an element as a member of a certain set, or an illustrative example of a general case, are referred to by various researchers as **set markers** [15] (a term preferred in this paper), **vague category identifiers** [6], or **general extenders** [12]. According to Channel, such sets consist of two components: an 'examplar' and a 'tag', and 'designate concrete or abstract categories by conjunction or disjunction' [6, P. 143]. For instance, in the expressions '*And he's gone off to Warwick University to do maths and stuff*' [3] '*math*' serves as an examplar of academic subjects studied at university, and '*and stuff*' serves as a tag.

Set markers occur in clause-final position and have the basic form of 'conjunction + noun' phrase. They fall into two categories: those beginning with 'and' (*and stuff (like that), and things like that, and all, and the like, and whatnot, and such, and you name it, and so on, and so forth, and everything*), which Overstreet calls "adjunctive general extenders", and those beginning with 'or' (*or something, or anything, or whatever, or what have you*), which she calls "disjunctive general extenders" [12, P. 3].

Similarly to other types of vague language, set markers help to maintain a social relationship on the basis of shared knowledge and experience. Although set markers are found in both spoken and written contexts, the frequency of these forms appears to be highest in informal, spoken conversation among familiars, where they communicate that there is no need to be more explicit, since they both parties involved know the object referred to [15, P. 99-100], [12, P. 6]. They may also mark an attitude toward the message expressed, or toward the hearer. The function of a set marker on a particular occasion is therefore strongly determined by the context of occurrence and the type of utterance in which it occurs, such as an invitation, suggestion, offer, or assertion [12, P. 11-12].

Approximators are a type of vague expressions that allow a language user to provide an estimate instead of producing an exact number, amount, size etc. They include numerical approximators (*about, approximately, ... or so (as in 'a hundred or so guest*s'), non-numerical approximators of quantity (e.g. *lots of, a bit of, a few, some*), and partial specifiers such as at *least, more than, under, over*. Approximators allow a language user to be less precise when s/he either does not know the exact quantity, or simply chooses not to name it.

Numerical approximators can precede or follow a numeral. Examples of approximators in pre-nominal position include the informal expressions *around, about, roughly, up to*, and more formal ones *approximately, in the region of, as many as*. Approximators in the post-nominal position include such patterns as 'number+odd' (as in '*seventy odd people attended*'), 'number+head noun+or so' (as in '*three hours or so*'), 'number+or+number' (*ten or twelve*), a very informal pattern 'number+suffix -ish' (*work till flourish*), and a more formal one 'number+head noun+or thereabouts' (as in '*thirty hours assistance or thereabouts*') [4].

Even though vague language is widely used in a variety of contexts, until recently methodologists concerned with teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) did not include such expressions in course materials. One reason for this is that vague language is often considered a feature of a language user's poor writing skills. Straus, for example, regards using concrete rather than vague language to be the most valid rule of effective writing [16, P. 14]. Writers are advised to as precise as possible when dealing with facts or figures and avoid vague expressions of any kind [2, P. 66].

Another reason why TEFL writers have mostly overlooked vague language is that its use is often limited, for instance, by the age of the speaker. After research based on data from the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT) Stenstrom notices that teenagers use such expressions as *loads of, kind of, and and stuff* (*like that*) more often than adults do. Other expressions, such as *a load of, and crap, and junk like this, at most, or a whole range of things, the whole lot* occur exclusively in teenagers' talk. By contrast, such expressions *or what have you, or whoever* and *and so forth* occur only in the adult speech [15, P. 88-90].

Moreover, using vague expressions in certain contexts may be considered impolite or disrespectful. When such utterances as *whatever/whenever/whoever* or *stuff* are used in response to a direct question, asked by someone who is senior to a speaker, such as a parent or a teacher, they may sound insolent, sullen or discourteous. For example, if a parent's question '*What did you do at school today?*' receives a teenager's reply '*Stuff*', the retort might be interpreted as a teenager's unwillingness to have a conversation with the parent.

In spite of these limitations of vague language, since mid-1990s a number of methodology writers have maintained that it may be highly beneficial to raise students' awareness of vague expressions. For example, Carter and McCarthy in their coursebook 'Exploring Spoken English' train students to notice a variety of vague expressions, such as set markers, and explain their function [5, P. 60]. Coursebooks like this one set an aim of sensitizing students to vague language and help them to understand its features, without actually training them to produce it themselves. To be more aware of vague expressions, students may learn to locate vague words in a text, substitute them for words that are more precise, and take notice of the changes the text undergoes as a result.

However, among TEFL writers there are many advocates of teaching students to employ vague expressions in their own speech, as well as passively recognise them in a text. Vague language is now featured in some modern coursebooks, such as Dellar's and Hocking's Outcomes (Upper-Intermediate level) and Dellar's and Walkley's 'Outcomes' (Advanced level), both of which devote whole sections to introducing and practising a variety of vague expressions [8, P. 89], [9, P. 86].

Thornbury, Slade and Lawry argue that placeholders like *stuff, thing/thingie* are extremely useful for language learners, especially at lower levels. Such expressions are highly productive and can substitute for almost any lexeme learners do not know or remember; hence, they can close the vocabulary gap and allow a speaker to convey useful, and sometimes vital, information [17, P. 55], [10, P. XVI]. Thornbury and Slade maintain that if language users had to use only precise language at all times, they would be able to assert very little with any degree of confidence [17, P. 54]. In unpracticed, natural speech,

spontaneity calls for a certain degree of vagueness, for example, substitution of specific lexical items by placeholders such as *thingy*, or using fillers like *sort of* to fill pauses.

Vague language has an indisputable attraction for learners of English because it allows them to compensate for gaps in their lexical knowledge, which is a useful production strategy [17, P. 56]. Cutting believes that students should be taught to use vague expressions at early stages of their language education to make it possible to describe difficult entities before they have learnt the specialist vocabulary [7, P. 238]. She feels it is best to follow the 'learning-by-doing philosophy', because by trying to produce vague language themselves students can fully internalize the forms and social functions [7, P. 240].

Teachers can implement a variety of language activities encouraging learners to use vague language in their speech; for instance, controlled exercises aimed at training students to remove content from words and leave 'less contentful' (i.e. vague) words in their place, thereby speaking more informally. Learners could then practise using vague expressions under less controlled conditions, talking in pairs or groups, perhaps with a list of vague expressions that they should try to work into the dialogue at hand [7, P. 238].

For example, students may receive a task to describe an object they see in the classroom without naming it, so that their partner will guess what object is meant. For this, the teacher should provide a variety of objects whose purpose s/he is sure students know even though their names are unfamiliar, such as kitchen utensils or gardening tools. Students then will be motivated to use such phrases as '*This thing is probably used for…*', '*This is a sort of…*', '*It's a kind of…*', '*It's used for …, or something like that*', "*It's around 20cm in length*", thus working in vague expressions in their explanations.

However, students should be warned not to overgeneralize and employ vague expressing in registers where they would not be thought appropriate [17, P. 56]. Students should be aware that in academic writing, for instance, it is advised to be as precise as possible. When a writer has at their disposal the means of giving exact figures, it is preferable to do so. Only when providing precise data is unnecessary or irrelevant for the purpose of the argument, or when the writer is uncertain about some of their findings, may the author be justified in using vague language.

Conclusion

Overall, English language learners should be aware of the role of vague language in sustaining relationships based on shared knowledge and communicating informally, conveying information about a speaker's attitude towards their partner or the subject of conversation, expressing politeness or solidarity.

Learners should be conscious that mastering vague language may allow them to communicate in English more effectively, and their speech may resemble that of native speakers more closely as a result. Employing vague expressions allows learners to speak more naturally in the informal settings, thus conforming the social conventions, and be accepted more easily in the language community.

Teachers of English as a second language should raise learners' awareness of vague language, but it should be a matter of a learner's personal choice whether to use vague language actively in their productive speech.

Конфликт интересов	**Conflict of Interest**
Не указан.	None declared.

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