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ON VAGUENESS IN AUTHENTIC ENGLISH CONVERSATION

1 Non-Observance of Grice's Category of Manner

Grice (1969.27) explains the functioning of the category of Manner within the Cooperative Principle by means of the supermaxim *"Be perspicuous"*, the first two maxims of which are related to **obscurity of expression** and **ambiguity**. According to Grice, obscurity and ambiguity should be avoided by the speaker: "I expect a partner to make it clear what contribution he is making and to execute his performance with reasonable dispatch" (1969.27).

A closer study of authentic English conversation, however, shows that instances of the non-observance of the above-mentioned maxims in spoken language tend to be rather frequent. Intentionally, sometimes also unintentionally, the speaker uses vague expressions to generate conversational implicatures. Lyons (1995.xvi) tackles the role of a linguist in the interpretation of this phenomenon: "Semanticists, more than most, must train themselves to identify and to control the ambiguities, the vagueness and the indeterminacy of everyday language".

Vagueness as a manifestation of semantic indeterminacy is related to the obscurity of word meaning. It has to be distinguished from **ambiguity**, since ambiguity indicates **distinctly different meanings**, e.g. *I was near the bank yesterday.*

In the word *bank* different meanings can be activated depending on the context of the situation:
1) a business organisation which performs services connected with money,
2) land along the side of a river,
3) a pile or ridge of earth, mud, snow (according to *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*)

In pragmatic terms, **vagueness** has to be treated differently from **indirectness, impersonality, attenuation** and **accentuation**. The latter notions are manifestations of semantic indeterminacy at the discourse level, namely that of **utterance meaning.**

Vagueness vs. precision is a semantic distinction within **a word, or a word combination.** It is very common, however, that vague words, e.g. **potential adverbs** *perhaps, probably, maybe* or *possibly* enter discourse structures used for discourse tactics such as indirectness, impersonality and attenuation.

Example 1 declarative question
they're probably teaching elsewhere (S.1.5 781)
Example 2 a modest guess
particularly (I think) you probably like the sort of clothes I like anyway

The affinity between the patterns of semantic indeterminacy at the discourse level on the one hand and vagueness as semantic indeterminacy inherent in the word alone on the other hand lies in their functional similarity, i.e. the manifestation of **intentional illocutionary opacity in spoken discourse.**

Collins English Dictionary defines the entry *vague* as "not explicit, imprecise". This explanation indicates that **vagueness** is connected with **implicitness.**

Crystal and Davy (1969.102-116) mention "**inexplicitness**", "**randomness of the subject-matter**", "**a general lack of planning**" resulting in "**a lack of precision in matters of word-selection**".

Thus both the subject-matter, i.e. vague content as well as the vague rendering of the message, i.e. formal vagueness contribute to the **a high degree of illocutionary opacity in spoken language.** Not only is a certain amount of vagueness in language allowed, it is even expected, since its manifestation is in harmony with the requirements of **accessibility, acceptability and negotiability** of the meaning conveyed.

2 Vagueness as Speaker's Intention

Intentional use of **conventional** vagueness occurs for reasons of

(1) **self-defence and self-protection**, expressing a lack of commitment, detachment and depersonalisation;

Example 3
*I mean the fact that you you study **a thing** doesn't mean to say you can't also feel it* (S.1.6. 387-389)

(2) **negative politeness** due to which not telling the whole truth is more acceptable, especially in certain sensitive situations;

Example 4
you know it's always tiring at Christmas time making decorations and all this sort of nonsense and things you know (S.1.7. 9-11)

(3) **informality and atmosphere of chatty character**, since vagueness modifies the meaning by making it more accessible;

Example 5
I mean probably just something I can get lost inside of you know a landscape or something (S.1.8. 460-462)

(4) **persuasive use of language** linked with figures in conversation which are usually presented as approximations.

Example 6

*he's going through I think far as I remember three countries **or might be more than three I I think it's three** and in one of them he's giving fourteen lectures* (S.1.6. 714-720)

Halliday (1990.79-80) mentions "**lexical sparsity**" and "**lower lexical density**" in spoken language as compared with the written language. Spoken language tends to be more "blurred" as far as the speaker's lexical choice is concerned. This feature can be justified both by the speaker's difficulties in finding a suitable expression in impromptu speech as well as by the hearer's difficulties in receiving a message "overloaded" with meaning, which would make its deciphering a strenuous task. The process of interaction could be marred by the preponderance of factual information. Therefore vagueness in conversation is in full harmony with the need for **negotiating meaning**.

3 Genre Specification of Telephone Conversation

Telephone conversation as a specific genre of authentic spontaneous conversation differs from face-to-face conversation in several aspects. The crucial difference is that of a different, i.e. **split setting**, i.e. the physical distance between the participants and the absence of paralinguistic features in their interaction, with the exception of voice quality and voice intensity.

Crystal and Davy (1969.121) argue that "...while the range of markers is considerably diminished in telephone conversation... the *kind* of marker which occurs (with the one distinction of the pausal system) is essentially the same... telephone conversation and other conversation are different only in degree and... the former can most realistically be seen as a sub-province of the more general notion."

My hypothesis is based on the assumption that the lack of personal contact in telephone conversation results in a relatively high degree of **tentativeness** reflected in the content and form of the message. Attempts at creating an informal, relaxed and chatty atmosphere, alongside the manifestations of uncertainty, hesitation and lack of mutual knowledge give rise to frequent occurrences of vague meanings.

4 Material under Investigation

Vagueness as a manifestation of semantic indeterminacy has been analysed in **24 telephone conversations** recorded and transcribed in texts S.8.1 and S.8.3 of the complete version of the **London-Lund Corpus**. The total extent of the analysed material is 10,000 words.

The text S.8.3 consists of 13 telephone conversations "between business associates". The majority of speakers are females. In my interpretation of vague-

ness in the text S.8.3 the criterion of **the speaker's meaning** based on Chan-
nell's (1994.194) classification of vagueness has been applied.

The text S.8.1 comprising 11 telephone conversations has been analysed with
regard to **vagueness in different speech acts** (means-end analysis). 31 in-
stances of vague utterances have been associated with **the type of the speech
act** according to the particular context.

5 Pragmatic Aspects of Vagueness

Table I
Illocutionary Force and Vagueness

Speaker's Meaning	Frequency
sufficient information	13
withholding information	1
persuasive language	7
lexical gaps	1
lack of information	7
displacement	1
self-protection	7
power and politeness	10
informality	3
Total	**50**

In my material under investigation vagueness most frequently conveys **suffi-
cient information, persuasion, lack of information, self-protection** and **po-
liteness.**

In my view, the range of illocutionary forces which can be manifested
through vagueness in discourse justifies the distinction between **referential** and
affective uses of vagueness.

5.1 Referential Uses of Vagueness

Referential vagueness reflects a lower amount of factual information which is
found sufficient to cover the communicative intention in the given discourse.
Different shades of meaning expressed in vague terms can be subdivided in the
following way:

(1) **giving the right amount of information**, for more information would be
    redundant;

Example 7

he's coming for two or three weeks at the time of the conference
(S.8.3. 345-346)

(2) **lexical gaps** covering notions which are difficult to identify or attempts at generalisations;

Example 8

and you know damp proofing and new wooden floors and staircases and various things like that (S.8.3. 46-50)

(3) **lack of specific information** due to which the speaker shows uncertainty in making a judgement;

Example 9

I'm not sure who I I don't really know (S.8.3. 2)

(4) **displacement** through which the speaker makes predictions and assumptions rather than assertions;

Example 10

now a letter of intent presumably means it means there's a letter to say that they do intend to let you have the money (S.8.3. 576-578)

5. 2 Affective Uses of Vagueness

Affective vagueness is a manifestation of speaker's attitudes and standpoints in the exchange of views. Among the variety of aspects identified in my material under investigation let me mention

(1) **withholding information** since the speaker does not want to criticise openly;

Example 11

I mean it's he's not likely to sort of work anything out (S.8.3. 214)

(2) **using language persuasively** when the speaker stresses his/her point;

Example 12

does he want me to come for the day I probably will anyway actually
(S.8.3. 505-506)

(3) **self-protection** when the speaker gives vague arguments in his favour;

Example 13

well I I could probably get it done (S.8.3. 923)

I paid my own some time ago and sort of you know put it out of mind I just recall it being something like you know round about three fifty or something like that (S.8.3. 367-372)

(4) **power and politeness** generating informal politeness devoid of imposition and resolution;

Example 14

perhaps you could give me a ring back (S.8.3. 379)

we to our great shame we didn't seem to know the answer and we thought perhaps you might (S.8.3. 312-314)

(5) **informality and atmosphere** in which vagueness contributes to a relaxed manner of the interlocutors.

Example 15
you you put your thing in (S.8.3. 914)

In Channell's classification (1994.194) **women's language** is considered to be a category in which vagueness becomes overtly manifested. In my present analysis gender as an aspect of study has not been included. I take the view that the category of women's language is too broad. This aspect could only be studied and verified in more extensive research.

I agree with Ullmann (1962.118) that the definition and explanation of vagueness is an attempt of "obscurum per obscurius": "If one looks more closely at this vagueness one soon discovers that the term is itself rather vague and ambiguous: the condition it refers to is not a uniform feature but has many aspects and may result from a variety of causes. Some of them are inherent in the very nature of language, whereas others come into play only in special circumstances."

Vagueness can be closely connected with **informal politeness**. The tendency to **"approximate"** meanings in informal conversation is linked with openness and an inviting atmosphere in which the speaker does not want to act "in the know", or at least he/she does not want to sound too informative. Thus a symmetrical approach in the distribution of information reflecting the symmetry in power distribution, which is characteristic of informally polite speech behaviour, can be achieved through vagueness.

6 Semantic Aspects of Vagueness

Pragmatic aspects of vagueness used intentionally have to be explained alongside the semantic aspects determining vagueness. Ullmann (1962.118-140) ascribes semantic vagueness to four factors which operate in the language system:

(1) **Generic character of words**: "Except for proper names and a small number of common nouns referring to unique objects, words denote, not single items but classes of things or events bound together by some common element"(1962.118).

In pragmatic terms, **generalisation of meaning** in authentic conversation supports the sense of **mutuality** and **shared knowledge**.

Ullmann (1957.93) maintains that **vagueness is associated with openness**: "Nor is the sense delimited by any clear-cut demarcation-lines, except in the case of scientific concepts; it is essentially 'open', asking for supplementation..." At the same time the openness of vague meanings supports their negotiability in discourse. Hoffmannová (1994.219-235) mentions such values of vague words as openness, plurality and relativity.

(2) **Meaning is never homogeneous**: "...even the simplest and the most monolithic have a number of different facets depending on the context and situation in which they are used, and also on the personality of the speaker using them" (1962.124).

In Ullmann (1957.93) the difference between a decontextualized and contextualized meaning is explained: "...the gap between the virtual sense in the language system and the actualised sense of speech-contexts widens considerably." **Shades of meaning** in authentic conversation are frequently context-sensitive. It means that they can be expressed vaguely, for the final disambiguation is provided by the context.

(3) **The lack of clear-cut boundaries in the linguistic world**: "Even in our physical environment we are often faced with phenomena which merge into one another and which we have to divide up, as best as we can, into discrete units" (1962.125). **Fuzziness** and **clustering** with regard to both structure and meaning are typical features of spoken discourse.

(4) **Lack of familiarity with the things they (words) stand for**: "This is of course a highly variable factor, dependent on the general knowledge and the special interests of each individual" (1962.127). In authentic conversation new phenomena are usually introduced without being clearly formulated and specified.

7 Speech Act Types and Vagueness

My working hypothesis is based on the observation that there is a tendency to use vague language in speech acts such as **informal apologies, requests, inquiries** as well as **self-defensive remarks**.

Table II
Vagueness and Speech Act Types

Means-End	Speech Act Type	Frequency
politeness	apology	2
politeness	request	6
approximation	statement	5
uncertainty	statement	10
uncertainty	inquiry	2
self-protection	statement	3
informality	statement	3
Total		31

Apologies and **requests** in which informal politeness among equals is conveyed by means of vague expressions sound fairly acceptable.

Example 16
this means I am sort of on your tail (S.8.1 14)   apology
is that I mean that's near enough is it (S.8.1 773) request

what sort of time (S.8.1 777)   polite inquiry lacking imposition

Approximation resulting in persuasion is connected with **an intentional lack of precision**, mostly with regard to figures, measurements etc., which can be easily interpreted by the hearer, exercising a positive influence on his/her understanding.

Example 17
not more than a week (S.1.8 167)
*and there are you know **many others*** (S.1.8 597-598)

Uncertainty is also frequently manifested in vague messages. Simultaneously, it may be a means of expressing **indirect inquiries**. Uncertainty is frequently linked with **repetition** which reinforces the dubitative overtones of vague statements.

Example 18
*I believe it's **something to do with** speech therapy I presume it's **something to do with** speech therapy indirectly and also to do with **apparently** the proposed speech therapy degree course* (S.8.1 753-756)
if you can make it about three o'clock (S.8.1 780)

Self-protection and self-defence expressed vaguely underline mitigation, detachment and a lack of obligation of both parties involved in conversation.

Example 19
*and we're still **nowhere nearer*** (S.8.1 21)   mitigation
*which was done **sort of** on the spot* (S.8.1 133)   detachment

Informality and chattiness are required in telephone conversations since they create a relaxed atmosphere of solidarity; vagueness complies with these requirements.

Example 20
*everybody **seems** to be advising us to buy **something** now* (S.8.1 1090)
*and we've got added problems of of furniture in storage **and various things*** (S.8.1 1095-1096)
*and they they do **a half-way thing** between the idea of a flat and a house* (S. 8.1 1270-1271)

8 Conclusions

From the pragmatic viewpoint, vagueness in conversation is a feature which is intentional and desirable in the process of interaction. A high degree of lexical density in face-to-face conversation would not be acceptable for the hearer. At the same time it is advantageous for both the speaker and the hearer to process indeterminate patterns and vague words due to the **openness of interpretation** they yield

From the semantic point of view, vagueness is inherent in the structure of natural languages. The notion of vagueness can be justified by the generic character of words, fuzziness and clustering in the linguistic manifestation of the extralinguistic reality, lack of familiarity of the speaker with the phenomena the words represent etc.

The functioning of vagueness in authentic face-to-face English conversation can be adequately explained through the **semantics-pragmatics interface**. The distinction between **referential and affective uses of vagueness** is justified both by Channell's classification and the interpretation of vague meanings in the analysed texts taken from the London-Lund Corpus. Frequent use of vagueness is motivated also by **informal politeness**.

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