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Vagueness

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8. VAGUENESS

8.1 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) specifies 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* three different meanings can be activated depending on the context of the situation (according to *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*), namely

- (1) a business organization which performs services connected with money;
- (2) land along the side of a river;
- (3) a pile or ridge of earth, mud, snow.

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

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

Example 84: declarative question

they're probably teaching elsewhere (S.1.5.781)

Example 85: 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 discourse level on the one hand and vagueness as semantic indeterminacy inherent in the word alone on the other 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 the subject-matter, i.e. vague content as well as the vague rendering of the message, i.e. formal vagueness contribute to the 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.

8.2 Vagueness as Speaker’s Intention

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

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

Example 86:

I mean the fact that 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 87:

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 88:

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 89:

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**.

8.3 Telephone Conversation as a Conversation Genre

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 **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 uncertainty, hesitation and lack of mutual knowledge give rise to frequent occurrences of vague meanings.

Vagueness as a manifestation of semantic indeterminacy was 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. Text S.8.3 consists of 13 telephone conversations “between business associates”. The majority of speakers are females.

The interpretation of vagueness in text S.8.3 is an application of the criterion of **the speaker's meaning** based on Channell's classification (1994.194).

In view of means-ends analysis, text S.8.1, comprising 11 telephone conversations, has been analysed with regard to vagueness in different speech acts. Vague utterances have been associated with **the type of the speech act** according to the particular context in which they occur.

8.4 Pragmatic and Semantic Aspects of Vagueness

In the material under investigation vagueness most frequently conveys **sufficient information, persuasion, lack of information, self-protection and politeness.**

Table 8: 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 view, the range of illocutionary forces which can be manifested through vagueness in discourse justifies the distinction between **referential** and **affective** uses of vagueness.

8.4.1 Referential Uses of Vagueness

Referential vagueness reflects a lower amount of factual information which is considered sufficient to cover the communicative intention in the particular discourse. Shades of meaning expressed vaguely can be classified into four categories:

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

Example 90:

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 generalizations;

Example 91:

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 92:

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 93:

*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)

8.4.2 Affective Uses of Vagueness

Vagueness as a carrier of emotion is linked with the expression of speaker's attitudes and standpoints in the exchange of views. Among the variety of aspects identified in my material under investigation I distinguish the following reasons for using vague language:

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

Example 94:

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 95:

*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 96:

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 97:

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 the relaxed manner of the interlocutors.

Example 98:

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 stressed. 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 at "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.

8.5 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). As Lyons puts it, “The denotation (if not the sense) of natural-kind expressions, it has been argued, is inherently indeterminate”.

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 conversation new phenomena are usually introduced without being clearly formulated and specified.

8.6 Speech Act Types and Vagueness

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

Table 9: Speech Act Types and Vagueness

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 99:

<i>this means I am sort of on your tail</i> (S.8.1.14)	apology
<i>is that I mean that's near enough is it</i> (S.8.1.773)	request
<i>what sort of time</i> (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 100:

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 101:

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 the conversation.

Example 102:

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, because they create a relaxed atmosphere of solidarity; vagueness complies with these requirements.

Example 103:

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)

8.7 Vagueness as a Discourse Tactic

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. In other words, it is advantageous for both the speaker and the hearer to process indeterminate patterns and vague words due to the **openness of interpretation** they provide.

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, as well as the lack of familiarity of the speaker with the phenomena the words represent.

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 analyzed texts taken from the London-Lund Corpus. Frequent use of vagueness is motivated also by **informal politeness**.