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JARMILA TÁRNYIKOVÁ

ENGLISH PLACEHOLDERS AS MANIFESTATIONS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE: THEIR ROLE IN SOCIAL INTERACTION

Abstract

The present paper is a sketch of a larger project focusing on overt manifestations of vague language (as understood and classified by Channell 1994) and on communicative strategies underlying both intentional and unintentional vagueness in our everyday encounters. Vagueness is not approached here as a deviation from expected precision and clarity but as a relevant contribution to naturalness and the informal tenor of our everyday talks. The focus is on relatively peripheral, yet communicatively relevant means of vague language, i.e. placeholders (PHs), with restriction to Noun PHs, such as *Mr Thingy*, *John Whatsisname*, *whatchamacallit* or *whatsit*, their forms, functions and distribution in British and American English, as emergent from Mark Davies' BYU suite corpora. Within the theoretical framework of a functional and systemic grammar, the PHs are approached here as systemic parts of vague language network, as pro-forms referring to yet-to-be-specified referents, delayed due to word-formulating difficulties, which are caused by temporarily forgotten, difficult-to-pronounce, or deliberately withhold naming units. In the analytical part, two types of relations will be activated to taxonomize the results: the paradigmatic relation of alternations (*Thingy/Whatsisname/So and so*), and the syntagmatic relation of co-occurrence. These will be used to project the PHs into the surrounding contexts in order to verify the following research tasks: Do the PHs represent a close set or are they open to innovations? Are the corpus data sufficient for grasping the spectrum of strategies underlying PHs use? Are there significant differences between the British and American usage? Unlike studies primarily focusing on the "therapeutic" effect of PHs (i.e. a self-repair), this paper, taking into consideration contextual settings of the analyzed corpus data, enriches the existing taxonomies by no less important "diplomatic" use of PHs, in which the PHs are used as a "bluff", a diplomatic withdrawal of the referent. Having quantified and qualified the two basic uses of PHs, i.e. therapeutic and diplomatic, the author identifies five communicative strategies prototypically associated with the use of PHs in general and nominal PHs in particular. All are associated with Goff-

man's (1955) notion of facework and its elaboration in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and hence their presence in discourse is pragmatically motivated.¹

Keywords

Vagueness; network of vague language; communicatively regulative units of language use; placeholders; corpus-based analysis; facework

1. Introduction

The locus of vague language manifestations is the informal spoken mode and its partial simulation in published writing (e.g. the language of fiction). After my proposal of a network of vague language in previous studies, and after mapping vague reference to notional categories, such as *a film or whatnot*, *syntax and suchlike* (Tárnyiková 2009) and vague reference to non-numerical quantity, as in *bags of people*, *oceans of energy*, *a pinch of good luck* (Tárnyiková 2010), I focus in this study on a relatively peripheral but communicatively relevant means of vague language manifestations treated under various labels (see below) but preferably referred to here as *placeholders* (PHs). These can be exemplified by such expressions as *Mr. Thingy*; *Norman Thingummy*; *Thingymabob*; *John What-sisname*; *Dr. So and so*; *whatchmacallit*; *whatsit*; *gadget*; *gadgetry*; *gimmick*; *gizmo*; *widget*, and many more.

Placeholders are mostly used as pro-forms for persons and objects, less frequently for events (e.g. They might just (pause) erm *thingy* it and change it to suit them.), or locations (*the back of beyond*; *Nowheresville*), when the speaker has to cope with word-finding or word-formulating problems; memory deficit, when the words are on the tip of the speaker's tongue but beyond linguistic reach; but also if the speaker wants to intentionally suppress particular naming units for various communicative reasons, mostly associated with Goffman's (1955) notion of *face* and the strategies in *facework*, i.e. not to lose one's own face and not to threaten the face of the other. Facework refers to a metaphoric *face*, i.e. an interpersonal skill strategy, dynamically created through the communicative moves of interlocutors. (See also the elaboration of Goffman's conception in Brown and Levinson (1987) and in recent face-oriented communicative theories, such as Face-Negotiating Theory, focusing on how different cultures can cope with conflict managing.)

In this respect PHs can "provide an extra resource to keep the hearer informed about our word retrieval problems" [BYU-BNC HGH W_non_ac_soc_science].

The following random samples will illustrate the contextualization of some of the PHs in the BYU-BNC corpus, on which our analysis is mostly based (for details see the section on Data resources below).

- (1) (...) the general synod of the church of *whatsit* and the archbishop of *thingummybob* are sitting there over their muesli and cornflakes...
[BYU-BNC HUV S_brdcast_discussion]
- (2) Some things are very complicated (unclear) Alison. You've got to (pause) *thingybob* all through everything. [BYU-BNC KCF S_conv]
- (3) You don't even know who (laughing) it is! – The *whatchamacallit* one?
[BYU-BNC KP5 S_conv]
- (4) Sorry to bother you, but Mr *so-and-so* er number seven is there a flat upstairs? [BYU-BNC KNC S_speech_unspecified]
- (5) Listen, I can remember this fellow *whatsisname* as clear as you.
[BYU-BNC HRA W_fict_prose]
- (6) Some of the super models like Linda *Whatsersname* have actually dyed their hair red. [BYU-BNC CDH W_pop_lore]
- (7) If it's her computer though, they might just (pause) erm, *thingy* it and change it to suit them. [BYU-BNC KB1 S_conv]

The main sources of inspiration for my research were Channell's monograph (1994) on *Vague language*; the collection of papers entitled *Vague language explored* (Cutting 2007), with a discussion of various interdisciplinary perspectives such as vagueness and genre, psychology of vagueness and cross-cultural vagueness; and Jucker, Smith and Lüdge's (2003) study on *Interactive aspects of vagueness in conversation*, using a theoretical framework based on the theory of relevance to demonstrate that vague expressions are not deplorable deviations from precision and can carry more relevant context-sensitive implications than precise expressions. In search for placeholders as a subtype of vague reference, I found inspiring the collection of papers edited by Nino Amirdze, Boyd H. Davis, and Margaret Maclagan (2010) *Fillers, Pauses and Placeholders*, with an invaluable introduction by Barbara Fox.

1.1 Narrowing the scope

As a pre-requisite to the analysis proper, narrowed in this paper to nominal placeholders (N-PHs), i.e. pro-forms used as substitutes for nominal elements of the utterance (subjects, objects, pre- or post-modifiers, such as *the whatsit phase*; *a church of whatsit*), I first enumerate the diversity of terms used to reflect various roles of PHs in interaction, then advocate the preference of a catch-all term placeholder over such labels as tongue-tippers, or mouth-fillers, and survey formal and functional properties of the selected N-PHs. Emergent from the corpus-based

results are also frequent communicative strategies associated with the use of N-PHs in well-defined contexts.

In the analytical part of data processing, two axes will be activated to taxonomize the frequency-based results: the vertical axis of alternations (*Thingy/Whatsisname/So and so...*), and the horizontal axis of co-occurrence, projecting N-PHs into the surrounding context with the aim to identify contextual clues disambiguating the spectrum of possible communicative functions that can be overtly signalled by the N-PHs.

The analysis of corpus data enabled me to respond to such questions as what the status of PHs is within the system of language; whether PHs offer more than just a holding place for a delayed referent; how they can contribute to the socio-linguistic notion of face and the strategy of facework; and whether the proposed analysis can shift our knowledge in this field of research a step further. These will be addressed with various degrees of urgency at appropriate places in the sections below.

The theoretical framework within which the topic is considered is that of a functional and systemic grammar.

2. Characterizing placeholders – a general overview

It would sound too optimistic to presuppose that a relatively rare (and hence peripheral) topic of linguistic research, such as placeholders, might be approached in a consistent way, with a similar matrix of parameters taken into consideration. Each of the studies I have consulted amplified those properties of the PHs that were relevant to a given researcher's goal and the perspective of his/her projection. The side effect of heterogeneous approaches, however, is that they enable researchers to benefit from a whole spectrum of opinions and increase their sensitivity to data processing in the future.

Below is a brief survey of some of the characteristics of PHs, initiated with one that has transparent wording but whose content is rather simplistic, perhaps as a consequence of the potential addressee in mind, i.e. an internet user searching for basic information on a given topic. It states:

Placeholder names are words that can refer to objects or people whose names are temporarily forgotten, irrelevant, or unknown in the context in which they are being discussed.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Placeholder_name, accessed November 20, 2018)

To a linguist familiar with authentic corpus data, it is obvious that there are at least two important points missing in the above characteristics:

- first, the fact that PHs do not refer only to people and non-human entities but also to events (*I don't I don't whatsername for all.*), or attributes (premodifiers or postmodifiers of nouns, as exemplified in 1.1.);
- second, the characteristics above, focusing rather on PHs as a self-repair remedy to speech disfluency (i.e. a “therapeutic” strategy), excludes numerous communicative situations in which the speaker deliberately withholds the information about personal identity, or opts for the strategy of sharing the identification of the delayed referent with the addressee (i.e. a “diplomatic” strategy, as in A: *Take the whatsit.* – B: *What whatsit, you mean the virginity testing?*).

The preference for therapeutic rather than diplomatic interpretation of the role of PHs in discourse also emerges from the characteristics by Barbara Fox (Amiridze et al. 2010: 1):

When speakers in a conversation experience difficulty remembering a word, they may engage in a search of that word. One of the key sets of practices that speakers engage in when searching for a word is delay of that word, that is, a delay of what has been projected to come next by the lexico-semantic-syntax of the utterance-so-far, in its active context. (Fox 2010: 1)

In her view, the delay of the searched for referent can have more specific functions:

(...) rather than simply delaying the next word due, they carry appropriate nominal or verbal morphology thus supplying the addressee with some interpretative clues to the lexico-semantic-syntax of the utterance-so-far, in its activity context... Languages typologically offer a range of devices for accomplishing that delay. (Fox 2010: 1)

Close to Fox's view is also Podlesskaya's (2010: 11) characteristics of PHs (in her conception called *hesitation markers*) as “preparatory substitutes for a delayed constituent”.

2.1 Placeholders and ‘pseudo’-placeholders?

Having considered the contextual settings of the selected corpus samples, I reached the conclusion that though the therapeutic (self-repair) contribution of PHs to the fluency of discourse prevails, the number of counterexamples, in which the PH is intentionally used to withhold the identity of the proper referents (with no delayed referent introduced afterwards), is relatively high. With this in mind, I decided to extend the characteristics of PHs by approaching them from two perspectives; i.e. as

- (a) pro-forms referring to yet-to-be-specified referents which are delayed due to word-finding and word-formulating problems; temporarily forgotten or difficult-to-pronounce naming units; and
- (b) pseudo pro-forms used as a camouflage for intentional withholding of the identity of the referent or sweeping something under the carpet, with no delayed constituent (referent) specified afterwards (unless the addressee takes over the role of identifying the missing referent by him-/herself).

Within the polarity of these two perspectives there hover slightly modified varieties to be discussed in the section on Data processing.

3. Systemic approach to placeholders

The aim of the data-based quantitative and qualitative analysis is to support my working hypothesis that PHs, though peripheral within the system of vague language (compared to vague reference to quantity or notional categories, referred to above), have their systemic place within a vague language network (see Figure 1 below), and as such have to be approached as integrated parts of our talking habits and in no case thrown under the carpet. The following network of vague language has been inspired by Halliday's idea of the architecture of language, by his top-down procedure, and his proposed network of taxonomies and scales of delicacy (Halliday, M.A.K. 2003, Halliday, M.A.K. and J.J. Webster 2009).

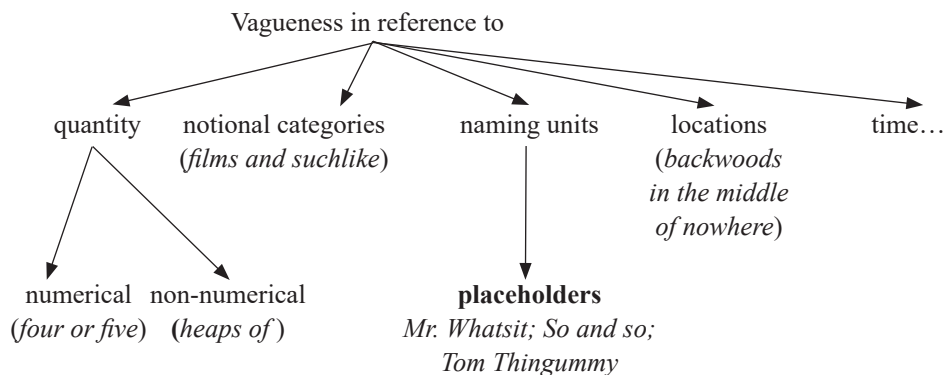


Figure 1. Network of vague language

3.1 Terminological note

As can be expected, different conceptions give rise to a whole spectrum of terms used to refer to placeholders, with some of them giving evidence of a rather nar-

rowed perspective of approach. Thus, e.g., *placeholder name* is a term which *a priori* excludes verbal PHs (cf. Oh, what a tangled web we *whatsis*, don't we? [BYU BNC W_fict_prose]), or locations in time (Luke's Parish Church in Charlton, let's say at 2 o'clock on the *whatsit* of May. [BYU BNC H9Y W_bibliography]); *tongue-tippers* as a term explicate just one of the possible reasons why PHs are used, i.e., when the words are on the tip of one's tongue but beyond linguistic reach; *mouth-fillers* are close to tongue-tippers in their function but sound more colloquial and too vague for a term; *hesitation markers* are too general, since the term can subsume not only PHs but also discourse markers (oh, well) or conventional sound stretches, e.g. *ehm*, *err*, used as fillers. Similarly, the label *Loose usage of language* (Jucker et al. 2003; Sperber and Wilson 1995) can hardly activate the function of "holding a place".

Having considered both, the technicality of the term and its appropriate notional load, I opted for the simple term *placeholder*, as a reflection of my understanding of the status of placeholders in the system of language (cf. Figure 1 above).

3.2 Status of placeholders

Within the centre-periphery scale of language devices, placeholders are *peripheral*, yet functionally relevant *communicatively-regulative* units of language (as opposed to communicatively-constitutive units), and as such, are not rule-governed but rather *principle-controlled* in nature, with the principles understood here as Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, extended by Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle and its maxims.

Pragmatically, PHs *violate the maxim of Quantity*: they never give enough explicit information and create implicatures.

In text processing, PHs mostly operate as pro-forms, cataphorically referring to yet-to-be-specified referents (e.g. *Have you seen the whatsit, the envelope I mean?*). In this respect they are welcome contributions to both text coherence and text cohesion.

As a by-product, PHs also contribute to a change in information structure (packaging) of the utterance: they hold the position of the delayed referent, postpone it and thus contribute to its rhematisation (cf. the end-focus principle of text shaping).

3.3 Word-formative processes and a whimsical spelling

Emergent from our data are two main word-formative processes applied in shaping the PHs: one is based on *squeezing* and the consequent reduction of the underlying structure; the other, operating in the opposite way, *extends* the original base of the PH for various context-retrievable reasons, such as to achieve a higher degree of expressivity, or to lengthen the period of delay for which the PH "holds the place" before the speakers overcome their retrieval problem and word-formulating or word-pronouncing difficulties. Here are examples of both:

- a. Squeezing
 What you may call it > *whatchamacallit*
 What is it > *whatsit*
 What is his name? > *whatsisname*, and
- b. Extension
 thingy > thingummy > thingummyjig; thingumbob > thingumabob

An analogous process of extension can be traced in the system of pronominal placeholders in Czech. Thus, e.g. the pronoun *ten*, comparable in its deictic function to the English *this*, can be extended into *tendle* > *tendleten* > *tendlecten* > *tendlencten*.

Many of the PHs are of uncertain spelling because of their main distribution in spoken discourse (Enfield 2003). This disqualifies many of them from their occurrence in corpus data. Typical in our samples were the following variations in spelling:

1. Fused (compact) forms (cf. the consequence of the above-mentioned process of squeezing), reminding us of lexicalized underlying utterances, as in:
whathacallit, whathacallem, whatchamacallit, whatsisname, whatsit, whosis, whosit.
2. Vowel alternation and/or consonant gemination (cf. the above-mentioned word-formative process of extension):
thingummy, thingammy; thingumbob thingumabob, thingumabob, thingamajig, thingummjig.
3. Hyphenated chains
What-d'ya-call-it, What-d'you-call-him/her, Thing'em-bob, What's-his-name, What's-her-name, You-know-who, So-and-so.
4. Non-hyphenated chains
What d'ye call him; So and so.

The alternation between initial capital and small letters in PHs is partly due to the distinction between those PHs referring to proper Names (*Lord Whatsit*) and those referring to common names (*the boy with the whatsit round his head*), though even here the alternation can be whimsical, cf. *Dave whatsit* vs. *Angela Whatsit*; *Henry Whatsisname* vs. *Kevin whatsisname* in the BYU-BNC data.

If the PH is preceded by a form of address, the initial capital letter is almost predictable, cf. *Miss Whatsit*, *Mrs Whatsit* (BYU-BNC).

(We, however, have to take into consideration the fact that in the corpora, there are mostly transcripts of spoken utterances. The same reservations hold

true for alternations between hyphenised/non-hyphenised PHs, as in *So-and-so/so and so*.)

Put simply, in dealing with PHs we have to be prepared for heterogeneous devices serving heterogeneous functions, with various context-retrievable degrees of attitudinal markedness (*Mr So and so* vs. *Mrs Walking Encyclopaedia*). The latter example indicates the partial nearness of placeholders and nicknames, sharing the role of *holding place* but being endowed with different degrees of semantic indeterminacy.

4. Data processing

4.1. Data resources

The following sources have been consulted to obtain the matrix of placeholders analysed in the present study: four components of Mark Davies's BYU suite corpora: corpus.byu.edu: *The British National Corpus* (BYU-BNC); *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (BYU-COCA); *The Movie Corpus* and *The TV Corpus* (the latter two only for occasional references in Table 1); Glosbe.com – used for cross-language comparison; dictionaries³ (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998); *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, New Edition (1990); Fronek's (1998) *English-Czech/Czech English Dictionary*; Fronek's (2000) *Velký česko-anglický slovník*; *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, third edition online; see References).

Part of the data verification is based on native-speakers' responses (with the subjects recruited from academic teachers who do not specialize in linguistics).

4.2 Nominal placeholders

In looking for nominal placeholders, I began with Joanna Channell's (1994: 157–164) samples, i.e. *thingy*, *thingummy*, *thingummyjig*, *thingummabob*, *whatsisname (called)*, *whatsername (called)*, to which some more items from corpus samples were added together with those contained in the consulted dictionaries (see Data resources above). My addition included *So and so*, *whatsit*, *whosit*, and *whatchamacallit*.

Emergent from the corpora were also samples of placeholders of specific utility objects (*widget*, *gadget*, *gizmo*, and *gimmick*) used in electronics and engineering. These, however, are not in the focus of our attention in the present study.

Since the focus in this paper is on nominal placeholders (N-PHs), we will introduce their frequency-based survey first. Table 1 below explicitly shows different preferences in alternative choices in the British and American varieties of English, with some of the N-PHs typical of one variety and absent or almost absent in the other. The list of the first eight N-PHs is arranged according to preferences in British English (BYU-BNC). The BYU-COCA survey of American

English should illustrate the possible socio-cultural differences across languages as a pre-requisite to a systemic cross-language comparison in the future.

(Two additional results based on the suit of the BYU-EDU corpora, i.e. the TV Corpus and the Movie Corpus, give evidence of the situation in forms, functions and distribution of the N-PHs in contemporary data, but have to be approached with reservations, since they are based on many varieties of English. Even here, however, the highest frequency of the first three identified in the BYU-BNC and BYU-COCA has been confirmed.)

Table 1. Frequency-based survey of N-PHs (accessed March 17, 2019)

Placeholders	BYU-BNC	BYU-COCA	TV Corpus	Movie Corpus
<i>thingy</i>	131	81	1203	393
<i>so and so/so-and-so</i>	113	317	219	363
<i>whatsit</i>	71	25	101	34
<i>whatsername</i>	49	13	3	12
<i>whatsisname</i>	13	9	7	8
<i>thingummy</i>	8	8	17	7
<i>Whatchamacallit</i>	4	0	0	0
WHOSIT	1	3	1	9

A brief comment to Table 1: obvious from the frequency survey is a significant difference between the first three N-PHs in both the British and American varieties of English – and the rest. Interestingly, both the varieties tend to prioritize the same N-PHs, i.e. *thingy*, *so and so*, and *whatsit*, though in different frequency-based ordering. The differences between the two varieties prompt that though the repertory of PHs is comparable, different socio-cultural settings of the respective language communities can have different preferences.

In 4.4. below I will pay attention to the British English first three, i.e. *THINGY*, *SO AND SO*, and *WHATSIT* and consider their context-retrievable functions in discourse. First, however, the criteria of analysis have to be clarified.

4.3 Criteria for data processing: activation of two axes

In processing the corpus data, I have activated two axes into which to project the selected items: the *vertical (paradigmatic) axis of alternations*, and the *horizontal (syntagmatic) axis of co-occurrence*.

In activating the *vertical* axis (see Table 1 above), I have mapped the potential alternative choices within the PHs; i.e. a spectrum of devices enumerated in section 4.2. Emergent from the list are partial restrictions in alternative choices due to the morpho-syntactic properties signalled by some of the N-PHs. Thus, e.g. *whatchamacallem* predicts plurality of the delayed referent, *whatsername* predicts feminine genre (vs. *whatsisname* or *whatsitname*), while e.g. *so-and-so*

can refer to persons, things and events regardless of their morpho-syntactic properties. *Thingy* rather surprisingly is frequent with personal referents, though the base *thing*, as a Noun, primarily refers to inanimate items, cf.:

(8) Hello, Mr *thingy*. You're bugged, you're bugged. [BYU-BNC KC4 S_conv]

(9) Well *thingy* has her baby in A-er er April. [BYU-BNC KCX S_conv]

This, however is not surprising if we recollect the situation with vague reference to notional categories (Tárnyiková 2009), in which *thing* can be used as a tag activating the notional category of animate subjects, as e.g. in the title of the book *All about Cuckoos and Robins and other Things*, in which the tag *things* is used to activate the category of birds.

The distinction of *whosit* or *whatsit*, though evoking animate and inanimate referents respectively, is mostly neutralized in the BYU-BNC data in favour of *whatsit*, flexibly used to refer to persons (Mr *Whatsit*, *Dave Whatsit's* ideal woman); objects (the boy with the *whatsit* round his head); or events (Oh, what a tangled web we *whatsit*, don't we?).

In activating the *horizontal axis of co-occurrence*, I was looking for contextual support for various reasons why speakers use PHs in general and N-PHs in particular, and how the PHs – as pro-forms and at the same time signals of delayed constituents – are compensated for in the 'yet-to-be-completed' part of the utterance (i.e. in the right periphery of the PH, in the presupposed sequence (placeholder + constituent proper).

Though primarily focusing on lexical support and its semantic prompts, I have also taken into consideration various vague additives, such as non-lexical vocables (*err*, *erm*, *hmm*.), false starts, repeated syllables, slips of tongue and other fillers typical of the situation when the speaker is not sure what to say or how to say what s/he wants to say but still wants to be engaged in interaction.

Below are a couple of examples illustrating some contextual hints either preceding the occurrence of N-PHs, or following them – or sandwiching them on both sides. In other words, the distribution of the supportive contextual hints is in the left-periphery of the N-PH, in the right periphery, or in both.

Examples (10–13) will illustrate the cases with the presence of signals of false starts (Ex.10), false starts with a hesitation vocable (*er* in Ex. 11), pause and hesitation vocable (in Ex. 12), or the N-PH sandwiched in a hesitation marker (*erm*) and a pause, as in (Ex. 13), or a combination of false starts and hesitation marker, followed by hesitation marker, a pause and hesitation vocables (Ex. 14) These samples, however, were randomly selected, so that many other configurations could be expected to emerge.

(10) They re- re- re- *thingy* re-furbish. They renovate. Renovate. That's good refurbishment, renovate, good. [BYU-BNC JJS S_classroom]

- (11) Then I rang th-er, the *thingy*, the bell to get the bus to stop. [BYU-BNC KBC S_conv]
- (12) If it's her computer though, they might just (pause) erm, thingy it and change it to suit them, [BYU-BNC KB1 S_conv]
- (13) ...if she's gone up home she's getting a lift off erm *thingummy* (pause) Doris. [BYU-BNC]
- (14) ...but I'll, I'll get er *whatsit* off to you, the er (pause) tt er Beatles Monthly which I've got. [BYU-BNC KDW S_conv]

The presence of various communicatively-regulative features in (10–14) is a good guide to the core role of PHs in general, and N-PHs in particular, i.e. to signal word-formulating problems and the delay of the intended referent. This role, as mentioned above, will be referred to here as the *therapeutic use of PHs*.

In addressing the question of how the N-PHs are compensated for by the delayed referent in the utterance, I was faced with the following situations:

- a. The speaker identifies the delayed referent (pre-signalled by the PH) by himself/herself, i.e. as a self-repair. (Ex. 15).
- b. The speaker tries to approximate the proper referent, indicating the willingness to compensate for it, but the delayed referent remains beyond his linguistic reach (Ex. 16).
- c. The speaker approximates the referent but it is the hearer who brings the word-formulation problems to a successful end (Ex. 17); yet sometimes, as the context prompt, with criticism, cf. Ex. 18);
- d. The speaker is not capable of specifying the referent, expects the addressee to fill in the gap, and when the addressee does so, the speaker only confirms the right choice. (Ex. 19).

The following samples will illustrate the above-mentioned situations:

- (15) Yeah. And somebody said, you know what, *so and so* deserves it, *Col-lin Firth* deserves it instead of you... [BYU-COCA 2015 SPOK NBC Today Show]
- (16) Er it's *whatsit* it's some er *Norwegian thing*... [BYU-BNC KR2 S_conv]
- (17) ...you can use er (sneeze) *whatsit*? It's not the *dipstick* it's the *whatsit*? – Joystick. The joystick. (laugh)

- (18) Be logical, like your detective character... Norman *Thingummy*. – “Nathan Latimer,” Melissa corrected frostily. [BYU-BNC HNJ W_fict_prose]
- (19) The girl, the beauty, Anthea *Whatsit*. – “Warburton.” – Yes, her. [BYU-BNC FET W_fict_prose]

Up to now, we have focused on the ‘therapeutic’ effect of PHs and – inspired by the recent theories (Amiridze et al. 2010) – considered it to be the core function of PHs, presupposing some peripheral functions of a less important status. The corpus data, however, significantly contributed to a change in my taxonomy, since no less important than the ‘therapeutic’ function was the *diplomatic use*, i.e. the intentional suppression of the referent and its withholding from the information structure. The reasons can be attributed to the socio-linguistic notion of facework, namely the self-protective strategy not to lose one’s own face, e.g. by a socially inappropriate disclosure or leak of information about someone’s identity (Ex. 20). Another socio-linguistic factor might be the signalling of an in-group sharing of the identity with the addressee (Exs. 21, 22).

- (20) ... nobody is allowed to write about that. *So-and-so* will not be reprinted until we say so. [BYU-BNC G1A W_fict_prose]
- (21) Sunday press party, rather fun. Wonder if old *so-and-so* will turn up? [BYU-BNC FEE W_fict_prose]
- (22) What rabbi? Not that syrupy old *Whatsisname* you told me about at the beginning... [BYU-BNC HGN W_fict_prose]

Having surveyed and illustrated the two basic uses of PHs, i.e. therapeutic and diplomatic, we could offer the following survey of five communicative strategies prototypically associated with the use of PHs in general and the nominal placeholders (N-PHs) in particular:

- a. To minimize risk and avoid interpersonal trouble (facework > self-protective behaviour and thread-avoidance strategy).
- b. To refer to objects whose names escaped the speaker or are on the top of his/her tongue but beyond linguistic reach (cf. tongue-tippers).
- c. To deliberately withhold information.
- d. To indicate shared social spaces (in-groupness; cf. *So-and-so*) and exclude those who are not part of the grouping.

4.4 Relating the strategies to the three most frequent N-PHs

When relating the above-mentioned strategies to the three most frequent English N-PHs, i.e. THINGY, WHATSIT and SO-AND-SO, we can tentatively state that THINGY is preferably used for the *therapeutic face-protecting strategy*, SO-AND-SO for a *diplomatic withdrawal of the referent*, and WHATSIT (as the most flexible of them, with a broad spectrum of reference) *can be utilized to manifest both, the therapeutic and diplomatic strategies*. To disambiguate this duality, we have to activate in data processing the horizontal axis of co-occurrence and prioritize the interpretation that is appropriate to a given contextual setting (with context interpreted as an interplay of its verbal, situational and pragmatic manifestations).

5. Concluding remarks

The analysis has proved that placeholders in general and Nominal placeholders (N-PHs) in particular are integrated parts of our talking habits (both idiosyncratic and in-group), endowed with a whole spectrum of context retrievable functions associated with the socio-linguistic concept of face.

Though more attention so far has been paid to the ‘therapeutic’ aspect of PHs (as self-repair), with only sporadic excursions to other possibilities, the corpus data show that the ‘diplomacy’ of sharing the responsibility for identifying the delayed referent or withdrawing the referent (so that no delayed constituent occurs in the utterance), are communicative manoeuvres that have to be taken into consideration as well. It was the aim of this study to approach placeholders in a systemic way and use authentic language data to widen the spectrum of their context-retrievable functions manifesting a spectrum of underlying communicative strategies.

The analysis of corpus data, based on the activation of paradigmatic relation of alternation and the syntagmatic relation of co-occurrence of PHs with other constituents of the utterance, proved to be a reliable basis for context-sensitive interpretation of emergent communicative strategies and the dual, i.e. therapeutic and diplomatic usage of PHs in current communicative situations. The differences between British and American varieties of English were not so much in the repertoire of PHs but rather the frequency of their occurrence – and consequently in the hierarchy of their culture-bound preferences. In order to achieve more “delicate” findings about the role of English placeholders in informal encounters, my prospect for the future is to apply the same methodology in the English-Czech interface, with English as the source language and Czech as the target language, having in mind that in both the compared communities languages reflect socio-cultural priorities and values.

As Channell (1994: 3) puts it, “vagueness in language is neither all ‘bad’ nor all ‘good’. What matters is that vague language is used appropriately”.

Notes

- ¹ This is an extended and revised version of the paper read at the 51st Annual Conference of the Societas Linguistica Europaea held in Tallinn in 2018.
- ² The whimsical nature of spelling with these spoken language devices made me use small capitals to neutralize the variation of small and capital initial letters in those situations where there is no direct reference to authentic corpus data.
- ³ Dictionary entries for PHs are rare and if they happen to occur, they can hardly be taken as safe guides. Thus, e. g. *whatsit* is described in Longman (1990) dictionary p. 1198 as “*n* *infinl* a small object, such as small piece of machinery, whose proper name one cannot remember: *I can't unfasten the whatsit; will you try?*”, while the corpus data give evidence of its use in reference to objects, people, events and locations.

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