‘Doing More Stuff – Where’s It Going?’: Exploring Vague Language Further

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Chapter overview

In this chapter, I describe my model of VL and focus on the social dimensions, discussing my studies on the influence of the function, depth of relationship and gender. Next, I point to several areas that still require investigation, my aim being to inspire others to research, and I also summarize suggestions made by contributors in this volume. The chapter then explores, in depth, applications of findings about VL. I outline ideas that abound in the literature, add my own ideas vis-à-vis TEFL, and again I summarize suggestions made by contributors to the volume.

Social dimensions of vague language

My model of vague language

I first developed my model of VL from a study of the in-group code used by an academic discourse community of applied linguistics students in the University of Edinburgh (Cutting 2000). This was a longitudinal study looking at changes over a year. My model consists of lexical, grammatical, clausal and utterance-level features which are heavily context-dependent, and whose meaning is clear only to speakers who share the background context.

The lexical features are metonymical proper nouns, superordinate nouns and general nouns and verbs. My choice of metonymical proper nouns was influenced by Brown and Levinson (1987), who include jargon and local terminology in their description of in-group codes, and Swales (1990, p. 32), who mentions technical terms as part of his definition of the academic discourse community code. In my model, metonymical proper
nouns refer not to the person or entity named but to an unnamed entity. Thus ‘How’s your Chomsky?’ refers not to the man himself but to a ‘project on Chomsky’, and the question ‘Are you going to stylistics?’ asks not about the field but about the stylistics lecture, just as ‘Has anybody done their syntax?’ asks about preparation for the syntax workshop.

I include superordinate nouns, guided by Halliday and Hasan (1976) and by Ullman’s (1962) description of generic words, such as ‘bird’, referring to classes of entities. My own definition of the superordinate noun, in this context, is that which refers to a specific member within a general category by using the general category label rather than indicating which of the category members it is. Thus, students say, ‘How’s the project?’, ‘the paper’s due in next Friday’ and ‘What about the article?’; there are many projects, papers and articles that speakers could be referring to, but the hearers know which one it is, because they share the background knowledge.

My choice of general nouns and verbs was guided by Crystal and Davy’s (1975) dummy nouns expressing total vagueness (‘thing’) and Channell’s (1994) vague ‘placeholder’ words (‘thingy’ and ‘whatsisname’). General nouns, such as ‘stuff’, ‘event’ and ‘people’, are on the borderline between a lexical item and the personal pronoun, just as general ‘do’ verbs are on the borderline between the lexical verb and the substitute (Halliday and Hasan 1976, pp. 274–81). It is this that makes them relatively empty semantically. Conversely, they are heavily laden pragmatically. The general nouns in my model are ones that are not lexically cohesive and they refer to a specific entity known by speaker and hearer (unlike many of the cases of VL mentioned in this book, in which the referent is itself vague or unknown). Examples in my data are ‘So I typed that thing up again after you’d gone’, ‘I haven’t given you your thing back’ and ‘I haven’t got the thingymajig’, in which there is no lexical and grammatical cohesion in the preceding co-text. The category general verb includes pro-verbs ‘do’ in non-anaphoric contexts, as in ‘What’re you doing?’ (in which there is a very limited range of expected possible answers), and lexical ‘do’ verbs which could actually be substituted by a semantically transparent verb meaning the same, as in ‘I haven’t done any Chomsky’ (‘done’ meaning ‘revised’), ‘You do Language Planning don’t you?’ (‘do’ meaning ‘take the course’) and ‘I’ve done all the people’ (‘done’ meaning ‘made notes on’). Again, only in-group members sharing the background knowledge would have access to the exact meaning of these lexical items.

The vague features I am calling ‘grammatical’ are a particular type of referential ones: non-anaphoric demonstrative pronouns and adverbs,