

**GENDER ASPECTS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE USE: FORMAL AND
INFORMAL CONTEXTS**

by

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DECLARATION

Student number: **3289-126-1**

I declare that **GENDER ASPECTS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE USE: FORMAL AND INFORMAL CONTEXTS** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

SIGNATURE
(Mrs N A Boakye)

DATE

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ABSTRACT

Following recently increased interest in research on gender, the thesis seeks to supplement current research by investigating language and gender. Specifically, it explores the influence of gender on the use of vague expressions within the formal context of departmental meetings. Respondents' perceptions of vague language use in the form of responses to a questionnaire were also collected and analysed.

The study revealed gender differences as regards vague language use. Women used more vague expressions than their male colleagues. Males and females displayed preferences for certain vague expressions – an indication of gender construction. For instance, the men used more vague additives, whereas the females made use of more hedges in their utterances. An attempt is made to explain these preferences in terms of the *difference* and *dominance* theories. It was also found that the generally formal context of meetings operated informally within these academic contexts. The explanations for the informality found in academic meetings are related to the degree of distance in relationships, and the frequency of interaction among colleagues.

Responses to the questionnaire revealed differences in vague language use as regards male and females on certain items. This revealed a probable indication of gender construction. For instance, whereas the males were more sensitive to context in terms of vague language use, the females were less sensitive to the contextual use of vague language. The difference in male and female sensitivity to context is explained within a constant and fixed female adherence to informality. Politeness, however, did not emerge as a prominent feature, as neither males nor females in this group considered politeness as a major function of vague language use.

While the investigation was held within the context of academic meetings, these gender attributes, preferences and or differences may be operating in other contexts. The research therefore serves as a point of departure for further studies on gender and vague language use.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

The past decade has seen a re-awakening of interest in the ways in which gender impacts on many aspects of language use. A number of studies have been conducted to investigate the differences in male and female language use. For example, research has demonstrated that women use more polite forms than men do. Also, according to Labov (1972), women lead in most language shift. This contradicts Appalraju's (1999) findings that males in Murchison pioneered a language shift from monolingualism to bilingualism. Labov (1972) and Trudgill's (1975) studies have shown that women produce linguistic forms closer to standard language, and use forms of higher prestige than men. Bramley (1997) investigated the use of avoidance strategies by male and female politicians in answering interview questions and found that women avoid answering questions less, while Ige and de Kadt (2002:147,159) indicate that women's and men's language serves as an important factor in the construction of their identities, and is used to maintain relations of power.

One area that has received very little attention with regard to language studies is the area of vagueness. In other words, this language feature has been largely un-researched, especially in the area of sociolinguistics. Although Channell (1994), Peires (1997), and others have conducted studies on vague language, none has investigated the relationship between vague language and gender. Also, as with metaphors, most speakers of English are not particularly aware of the frequency of vague language use until it is pointed out to them, or appears inappropriate. Moreover, as Channell (1994:05) states, "vagueness is present in a great deal of language use", and therefore forms part of our everyday language. Hence the influence of social factors such as gender on the use of vague language should be investigated. It is for this reason that I have decided to study gender aspects of vague language use at the University of Transkei¹ (now Walter Sisulu University).

¹ The University of Transkei merged with other institutions to become the new Walter Sisulu University. However, as the study was undertaken before the merger, the previous name will be used.

1.1 Background

The fact that vague language ‘is part of our taken for granted world’ (Channell 1994: 04), and the fact that its interpretation varies, together with the paucity of information, have aroused my interest in the subject and led to a number of questions: for example, what exactly is vague language? Do perceptions and interpretations of vague language differ across cultures, age, class, and, especially, *gender*? Although the variables of age, class, culture and gender have been known to influence linguistic behaviour, one wonders if the same applies to vague language use. Other questions that emerge are: do men and women use vague language differently in formal and informal contexts? Whether women use vague expressions more frequently as ‘face-saving’ devices according to their gender socialisation? What types of vague language do men and women employ? Do women use vague language more frequently and for what purposes? Lastly, do men use vague expressions less frequently, and is this mostly for withholding information, as would be expected from their assertiveness and patriarchal role in society? Answers to these questions will be sought for in the study.

For the purposes of the study, vague language is defined as language that is inexact (e.g. ‘maybe’) indistinct (e.g. ‘some’) or that displays several potential meanings. The last option borders on ambiguity (i.e. words and sentences having more than one meaning or having two or more interpretations). All three dimensions (i.e. inexact, indistinct, several possibilities) will be considered under the category of vagueness in this study.

1.2 Research Aims

In view of the arguments by Cameron (1996), Bing and Bergval (1996), that language and gender research should move beyond broad pronouncements as to how women and men behave linguistically, and towards detailed investigations of actual behaviour in specific contexts, the study aims to explore the use of vague language by males and females in a specific context. Specifically, it aims to show how men and women use vague language in the formal context of academic meetings, and how they perceive the use of vague language in formal and informal contexts.

In analysing the use of vague language in the context of academic meetings, I consider the rate of vague language use, the type of such expressions, and the functions for which this kind of language is used. The assumption is that politeness would be a prominent reason for female use of vague language, as many researchers have linked politeness to women's language. Politeness, in saving 'face', as Brown and Levinson (1987:61) explain, is involved in any form of communication. Since communication establishes interpersonal relationships, our choice of words is determined by our consideration of 'face'. The assumption and expectation, then, is that vague expressions would be used as a form of politeness strategy in order to save the addressee's face.

1.3 Delimitations

As mentioned earlier, the study is limited to the formal context of academic meetings at the University of Transkei. A formal context is defined as a situation in which language use is structured, closer to written language in form, where the use of slang and colloquial language is not permitted, and which conforms to specific rules. In a formal context, turns are requested and overlappings are few. On the other hand an informal context (e.g. conversations) is a situation in which language use is unstructured, which allows for colloquial and slang language and does not conform to specific rules. The floor is captured by individuals and overlappings are common. The study limits the definition of vague language to that given in paragraph 1.1. In other words, vague language constitutes expressions that are inexact, indistinct or that have several possible meanings. The study does not offer a comprehensive and detailed semantic analysis of vague language. Neither does it deal with all aspects of gender issues, but focuses on the sociolinguistic aspect of vague language so as to determine its relation to gender in an academic environment. Although the researcher is aware of the debates surrounding gender studies and gender identities, including the dichotomy issue, this is not the focus of the study and is overlooked, but could be taken up in further and more comprehensive research into vague language and gender.

1.4 Significance of the study

Vague language use spans the range from the domestic home environment to the working and educational environment and even to the classroom. The study provides more insight into the use of vague language and, it is hoped, will lead to a better understanding of vague language in communication. The interpretation of vague expressions in communication is influenced by many factors, and can lead to misunderstanding and even communication breakdown. An insight into the influence of gender on vague language use, could allow for more tolerance in communication and prevent unnecessary domestic conflicts and misunderstandings owing to misinterpretation. Research by Coates (1988, 1993), Cameron (1992) and Tannen (1986) has indicated that misunderstandings between males and females in communication are usually the results of their different orientation as regards language use. The results of this study and the suggested explanations are intended to sensitise men and women to vague language use and possibly assist them in understanding each other better. Besides, the results will help confirm or reject the view that females use language to entrench their subordinate social roles (Lakoff 1975: 19).

Secondly, the study focuses on gender aspects of vague language use, with the hope of contributing to existing knowledge on gender and language issues, as well as pioneering research into vague language and gender. Thirdly, by exploring the gender aspects of vague language use within formal academic meetings, the study hopes to shed more light on males and females' use of such language in this particular context.

The findings of the study could also be beneficial in the school environment. Educators may include vague language use in their teaching programmes in order to draw learners' attention to the differing interpretations. This awareness, it is hoped, will aid in the interpretation of language and, consequently, foster learning.

Finally, in its analysis of the rate, choice, and functions of vague language, the study hopes to provide further information on language and gender and augment research data in this area.

1.5 Methodology

The main research question is whether females use more vague terms and expressions than men, and in what context(s). Other questions that need to be answered are: what types of vague expressions are used mostly by men and what types are used mostly by women? What functions are vague expressions employed for? Could a predominant use of vague language be interpreted in accordance with women's caring, nurturing nature and consequently their desire to save 'face'? In order to explore these questions from both angles, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is utilized, though the main methodology employed is qualitative.

On the understanding that context is crucial in the use of language, and that language employed in informal contexts may not be used in formal contexts, respondents' views and perceptions on vague language use in both formal and informal contexts were solicited. In addition, participants' use of vague language in the formal meetings was recorded and transcribed. The researcher observed and tape-recorded academic meetings. Recorded sessions were transcribed and vague expressions were identified according to the outline given by Channell (1994:09). Questionnaires were used to obtain participants' perceptions, their interpretations and the functions of vague expressions, as these were not readily available to the researcher from the tape recordings.

1.6 Population

Owing to its proximity to the researcher (i.e she being a staff member of the institution), the University of Transkei was chosen as a population area. Respondents were randomly selected from the academic staff members of this University.

1.7 Programme of study

Chapter two (2) reviews the relevant literature in relation to vague language, gender, and the functions of such language. Language differences reflecting gender differences are discussed. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) Community of Practice approach to analyzing language is also discussed in relation to the topic. Chapter three (3) focuses on the research methods and the research design of the study. The method of the study,

being mainly descriptive and exploratory, is discussed. A step-by-step explanation of the methodology used in securing the data is offered. Chapter four deals with the presentation and analysis of data. The researcher discusses the use of content and conceptual analysis in analysing the data, and analyses accordingly. The findings from the analysis are discussed. Chapter five (5) furnishes a conclusion and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This review will focus on three main areas: an explanation of the relationship between language and gender; theoretical background to the concept of vague language, including functions / communicative use; and the explanations of context as a Community of Practice approach to the study of vague language.

The discussion of the relationship between language and gender will be related to the *difference* and *dominance* theories as propounded by Tannen (1986), Coates (1998), Cameron (1992, 1996), Fishman (1997) and Lakoff (1975) among others. The theoretical background will be based mainly on Channell's (1994) theoretical explanations of vague language use. Eckert and McConnell's (1992) Community of Practice framework will be made use of in order to demonstrate the importance of context in the relationship between vague language and gender differences

2.2 Language and Gender

Researchers in language and gender such as Lakoff (1975), Coates (1998), Fishman (1997), Tannen (1986) and Cameron (1992, 1996) all draw attention to the differences in male and female speech. These differences have been perceived within various theories. For instance, Lakoff (1975), the pioneer of studies on language and gender, introduced the *deficit* model. She explained women's language in terms of inadequacies resulting from the political and cultural subordination of women by men. In her view the linguistic features of women's language portray them as tentative, uncertain, lacking in authority and submissive (Lakoff 1975:53-56). Other explanations given by authors such as Coates (1988, 1993), Cameron (1992) and Tannen (1986) have termed women's language as simply different, i.e. nurturing, supportive and co-operative, in accordance with their socialisation. These differences have resulted in theories such as the *difference approach*, the *dominance approach* and the stronger version of dominance, i.e. the *deficit model*.

Lakoff (1975:53) propounded the *deficit* theory by expressing the view that women's language is deficient and inadequate. The *dominance* approach takes a similar stance, except that it is a weaker version of the *deficit* model. It focuses on dominance over women by men (Fishman 1997; Zimmerman and West 1983). The *difference* approach explains women's language as being simply different to that of men, in that they are more nurturing, supportive and co-operative (Tannen 1990; Coates 1993). Though this approach discusses the nature of women's language on the whole, it overlooks the political impetus of the focus on women's language. Male domination is by no means a thing of the past. However, the *deficit*, and to an extent the *dominance*, model does not consider the complexities involved in women's language. As a result of the inadequacies of both theories, modern sociolinguists led by Cameron (1992) have argued that both approaches are necessary for the interpretation of language and gender. In fact, both theories may be relevant in explaining men and women's language in any context. As such, both theories will be employed in the explanation of men and women's use of vague language in this study. Although the researcher is aware of the current debates questioning some of the fundamental theoretical assumptions on which the *dominance* and *difference* theories are based (Cameron 2005), this is not the focus of this study and would not receive extensive discussion. However, the performative notions of gender as "an enactment, discursive construction or product of social interaction" (Stokoe 2005: 119) is applied in the discussion of the data.

Many feminists have demonstrated through research that language, understood as discourse, functions as a powerful tool of patriarchal culture. Thorne and Henley (1975:15) succinctly state that language helps to enact and transmit every type of inequality, including that between the sexes, since it forms part of the *micropolitical* structure that helps to maintain the larger politico-economic structure. According to them our use of language shapes our understanding of the social world, our relationships to one another, and our social identities. De Klerk (1997:145) noted that gender identities reflect the material interests of those who have power and those who do not. She states that this relationship between men and women can be perceived as politically-contracted gender-

linked roles in which language is constructed. Coates (1993:143) reinforces this notion by explaining that when children learn to speak, one of the things they learn is the cultural role assigned to them on the basis of their sex. When men and women interact, they interpret the responses of the other in the light of their own gender-specific expectations. This, according to Tannen (1990), results in misinterpretation and even conflict.

In order to achieve a better understanding of men and women's language, numerous studies have been conducted into the linguistic behaviour of men and women. Using tag questions, Lakoff (1975: 17) concluded that women's language is tentative. She explains that when a speaker adds a tag such as, "*isn't he, isn't it, doesn't he, don't they*", as in the sentence, "*John is here, isn't he?*" he or she is not certain of the situation and is seeking confirmation from the addressee (Lakoff 1975: 15). Tags are used to express politeness, since they do not force agreement on the addressee. The explanation, then, holds that women's tentativeness is not a display of subordination but of politeness - to show concern for the addressee's face. Females are socialised to be nurturing and considerate and would therefore use forms that reflect this nature. Swacker (1975) found that males use numerals (i.e. numbers and figures) more frequently. His study showed that men used more numerals than women when asked to describe pictures. However, the men in his study preceded their numerals with indicators of approximation less frequently than women, even when they were clearly guessing. He suggests that the "stereotype of greater male accuracy is based on mere male preoccupation with verbal tokens of numerical precision" than anything else (Swacker 1975: 82). This, in my view, reveals male ego and points to the reluctance of men to accept lack of knowledge or information.

Barron (1971) studied the language of male and female teachers in classroom discourse. He found that the women showed "greater frequency of the participative case dependent on psychological state verbs and the purposive case, concerned with the purpose of persons' actions" (Barron 1971:30). He interprets this as a manifestation of women's greater concern with psychological states and with functions of objects for interpersonal use. His group of male teachers showed "a lead in the use of the objective case and in instrumental and source cases, [which - NB] reflects interest in things acted upon and the

implementation of actions by means of objects” (Ibid). He concludes that women’s style is other-oriented and *synthetic*, whereas men’s style is self-oriented and *analytic* (Barron 1971:30). He was, however, criticized for being over-interpretive of his findings (Preisler 1986: 09).

Shimanoff (1977) analysed politeness between men and women by measuring it in terms of linguistic features and communicative functions. She found that males and females were equally, but differentially, polite. The males in her study used equal proportions of negative (reducing imposition) and positive (supporting the other) politeness, whereas females preferred positive features. Shimanoff (1977: 219) suggests that the female preference could be due to the fact that females by their nature do not like to impose.

Hirschman (1974) as reported by Preisler (1986:10) used simple frequency counts to analyse male assertiveness and female supportiveness in the use of fillers, what he calls qualifiers (e.g. ‘maybe’, ‘sort of,’ etc.), and affirmative responses. The only difference he found was in the use of an ‘mhmm’ affirmative response. The frequency of this affirmative response amongst females was found to be greater than that amongst males. Swacker (1976), in analysing male-female asking of questions at linguistic conferences, found that women employ fewer background references than men (i.e. women are brief in this context), use more first person pronouns and forms of modal verbs (e.g. I **would** like to ask...). She interprets the frequent use of past modal structures as markers of politeness and subservience (Swacker 1976:158). Johnson (1980) in an observational study based on speech act theory finds that role, rather than gender, determines the pattern of question-asking. Goodwin (1980), in analysing boys’ and girls’ constructions of directives, found that boys’ directives are presented as imperatives, whereas girls phrase their directives as proposals for future activity. Contrary to Swacker (1976), both Johnson and Goodwin (cited in Preisler 1986:11) deny Lakoff’s (1975) claim that the politeness features found in women’s language are necessarily signs of weakness. In fact, as other researchers claim, they are more a reflection of these speakers’ gender socialization than of their subordinate position.

Important as the dichotomies of male and female speech may be, gender cannot be the sole determinant of these differences. Torres (1993: 281) points out that, questions about language and gender have become more complex since researchers have realized that the question of gender differences in language use relates to other issues such as age, qualifications, race, class, and social roles. In this regard Preisler (1986: 03) states:

A speaker's choice of speech forms... is determined in a predictable but often complex way, by the structure and properties of the social situation as defined by an interplay of demographic variables such as region, social class, ethnic membership, age, sex and occupation with variables directly related to the speech event such as setting, medium, relative status of participants, degree of formality and topic.

In other words, a speaker will use speech forms in accordance with the social situation, which is an interplay between demographic variables such as gender, and the characteristics of the speech event, which include the status of the participants, their relationship, the degree of formality and the topic of discussion. In as much as gender has been isolated for the purposes of this study, one should note that communication is an interplay of several other social factors as mentioned above. These variables were therefore considered in the selection of respondents and participants in this study, and also considered in the discussion of results. Respondents and participants belong to different age groups, hold similar qualifications and belong to the same socio-economic class. Though the ethnicity of the participants may vary, it is hoped that this variable would be subsumed within academic interaction, thereby, avoiding too heterogenous a sample. Cameron (1996: 47), Bing and Bergvall, (1996:19) argue that viewing men and women in a dichotomized way may result in a gross oversimplification of language and gender. In their view language and gender research should move beyond broad pronouncements as to how men and women behave linguistically, and towards detailed investigations of all the factors involved in their behaviour in specific contexts.

It is hoped that the academic environment chosen for this study will reveal how male and female staff members use vague language in a formal context and how they perceive the use of vague language in both formal and informal contexts. The formal context has been

specifically chosen to reveal how females in a position of authority use language (i.e. vague language) at formal meetings to counteract male domination in the wider patriarchal society in which we live.

Having reviewed language from the standpoint of the three approaches – dominance, difference and deficit – the question that arises concerns the difference that gender makes. Some theorists have focused on how people behave in terms of gender and why they choose these behaviours. Cameron (1996: 47) points out that what our gender identities are taken to be depends on our repeated performance, over time, of the acts that constitute our particular gender identity. So, how do men and women behave linguistically in a formal academic context and how do they perceive their behaviour in both formal and informal contexts?

According to Channell (1994:192), her respondents stated that women use vague expressions more frequently than men. She attempts to explain this perception. According to her the impression that women use vague language more frequently could arise for several reasons. First, she explains, vagueness could be stereotypically associated with women, whether or not they actually use more vague expressions. According to her, a similar phenomenon is the contrast between the stereotypical view that women talk more than men, and the research data, which shows that in mixed-sex interactions male participants always occupy proportionately more of the talk time. Second, she points out that vague language may be an exponent of power relations, particularly in relation to politeness. The present study attempts to show whether power relations are being played out in the use of vague expressions even in the formal academic context where role and status seem to be major determinants. Also, the study attempts to reveal whether women, by their use of language (vague language), are often the less powerful participants in mixed-sex interactions. Channell (1994: 192) argues that women employ their own language varieties for speaking about matters of concern to women, just as any other social group sharing interests and knowledge would employ non-specificity in talking about their shared interests. Carter (1980:232) suggests that these varieties incorporate a “high degree of non-specificity”. She argues that non-

specificity, by the use of vague language, is common in most communications of any group with a shared interest, and not specifically women. In Channell's (1994:193) view the argument expounded above negates the common perception that women would use more vague expressions. In her view, women may use vague expressions, or resort to tentativeness when the topic relates to a shared interest and the discussion is within their gender group. In other words women may use language differently in a mixed-sex interaction regarding a neutral topic. The present study seeks to confirm or refute the popular perception that women would use vague language more frequently than men, and will show how women use vague language in mixed interactions within a formal context on a neutral topic. The question now is, what is vague language and how is it used? The following section offers a discussion.

2.3 Vague Language: An Overview

Danell (1978:04) quotes W. P. Alston's (1964) traditional definition of vagueness thus:

A term is said to be vague if there are cases in which there is no definite answer as to whether the term applies.

According to Channell (1994: 07) Peirce (1902), who is considered the originator of the notion of vagueness in language, defines the notion thus:

A proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition (Channell 1994: 07).

The above definitions of vague language seem to be closely linked to ambiguity. In fact, some researchers have argued that many instances of vagueness are really instances of ambiguity. However, the notion of *vagueness* can be distinguished from *ambiguity*, although in both cases hearers do not know exactly what they should understand. *Ambiguity* has been defined as an utterance which has two or more competing but distinct meanings attached to it. *Vagueness*, on the other hand, is seen as an utterance in which distinct meanings cannot be identified. Weinreich (1966:41) adds to the distinction, suggesting that if a word can be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context, it has two dictionary entries. If it cannot be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context, but

different meanings seem possible, it is vague. In terms of these distinctions between *vagueness* and *ambiguity*, it seems that *ambiguity* is a less complex notion than *vagueness*.

Deese (1974:72) argues with respect to vagueness that correspondence between the ideas possessed by two individuals who are in communication on a common topic is rather poor, but that this is not noticed except in a situation where one is giving directions. In such a situation, he concludes, “we are suddenly made aware of the discrepancy that exists about the same idea in the minds of two different people” (Ibid).

Owing to such discrepancies, some linguists and philosophers are of the opinion that clarity and the avoidance of vagueness and equivocation are desirable, regardless of the context. Furthermore, it is commonly believed that ‘good’ language usage involves, among other features, clarity and precision, and therefore vagueness, ambiguity, imprecision and ‘general wooliness’ (Channell 1994:01) are to be avoided. Channell rejects this opinion because according to her, this view is rather simple and misleading. She argues that a degree of vagueness, which serves a purpose, is acceptable. She adds that the important notion is that vague language should be used appropriately (Channell 1994:03). She points out that speakers and writers tailor their language to make it suitable to the situation and the linguistic context, and that one way in which speakers and writers do this, is by varying their precision and vagueness. The study seeks to establish whether indeed speakers do so.

To be able to determine the use of vague expressions (e.g. frequency, functions, etc.) in communication, vague items should be identified and categorised. Using Channell’s (1994: 09, 18) terminology, the following vague terms and expressions are identified.

- Vague additives (e.g. **around**, **about**, etc.) Although **about** and **around** are used interchangeably, **about** is apparently used more often in spoken language whereas **around** occurs mostly in the written mode.

- Vague by choice of words or as Channell (1994: 18) puts it ‘unabashedly vague’ (e.g. **Whats it? thingummy, thingy, thing** etc.) These are empty words used to denote vagueness.
- Expressions that introduce fuzziness (e.g. He has a **somewhat** low self-esteem; **something like that, or something, somewhere, probably, in a way, approximately, maybe**, and so on. For example, His weight is **approximately** 3.2 kg. **Approximately** is usually used in official and semi-official situations.
- Partial specifiers (e.g. **at least, at most, less than** etc.).
- Collective nouns (e.g. **oodles, heaps of, a touch of**).
- Number approximations (**a class of thirty odd; they were about / around thirty; they were getting on for forty; five or six; six or so**).
- Prefixes and suffixes (e.g. The mountain is rather **table-like**).
- Hedges (**sort of, kind of, etc**).

The categories listed above were considered in collecting data for the current study. However, words that fall within other categories such as shields (e.g. I **think**, It **appeared**, I **believe**, etc.), and vagueness by implicature or suppression of reference were not considered. Both categories do not fit into the vagueness defined in the present study. Shields designate the speaker’s degree of commitment to the truth. In other words, the speaker is unsure of the truth of the proposition. Vagueness by implicature is actually vagueness by omission, which suggests that the vagueness has been removed. For example when someone says ‘Sam is two meters tall’, when Sam is actually 2.2 meters. Both categories are in contrast to the idea of vagueness discussed in this study. The vagueness referred to by the researcher indicates fuzziness within the proposition being expressed.

Dubois (1987:531) identifies a number of vague expressions (what she refers to as hedges) which could serve as a starting point in identifying vagueness in language. She reports that **about** was the hedge most commonly used by her subjects, followed by **approximately** and lastly, **some**. Channell (1980:436) reports a high frequency in the use of **approximately**.

Wachtel (1980) points out that our being vague or precise is affected by our knowledge of the item. He posits that the ability to approximate figures as regards persons will be higher than that of currency (i.e. about 9000 people, but R8.742). Saddock's explanation, as recorded by Channell (1980:460), is that the degree of informality and casualness is important in deciding how accurate an estimate should be. Thus, whether one chooses to be precise or vague depends largely on the context. Channell adds that the appropriate use of vague language is important. In other words, the situation or linguistic context will determine the level of precision or vagueness to be used. Thus, the use of vague language should be appropriate to the setting. The problem, Channell (1994: 21) explains, is the use of vague language in settings where precision is required and vice versa. For example, the use of precise language in an informal conversation will undoubtedly sound rather bookish and pedantic. Likewise, heavy reliance on vague language in very formal contexts will be perceived as indicating indecision and tentativeness. Tentativeness is shown as a function of vague language.

2.4 Functions of Vague Language Use

The functions of vague language, as listed by Channell (1994:194), will be explored below in relation to differences in vague language use amongst men and women. Various functions of vague language have been identified. Peires (1997) and Channell (1994) list the following:

- doubt, or genuine lack of knowledge and/or vocabulary
- avoidance
- informality and phatic communication
- denigration
- self-protection
- humour
- politeness

as functions for which vague language is employed. However, because politeness emerges in all forms of communication, and research has shown that women employ more polite forms than men (Labov 1975; Trudgill 1975; Wardhaugh 1992), one would

expect that women would use vague expressions frequently for the purposes of politeness, in both formal and informal contexts.

Channell (1994:165-167) further discusses the communicative effects produced by the use of vague expressions, and identifies some of the goals which speakers achieve by using these expressions. Her discussion is undertaken within the framework of what Levinson (1983) and others refer to as Conversational Analysis (CA). Channell (1994:31-34) discusses vague language and CA within Grice's theory of implicature. She explains that this theory assumes that conversation is a co-operative venture, and that speakers adhere to what Grice called the Co-operative Principle (CP). According to the latter, speakers try to send understandable communicative messages within the context of any particular conversation. According to Channell (1994:32-33) Grice (1981) posits that interlocutors operate by using four rules of conversation, which he calls maxims:

The maxim of quality (be truthful according to evidence).

The maxim of quantity (be informative but not over-informative).

The maxim of relevance (be relevant to the conversation).

The maxim of manner (the message should be clear, unambiguous and brief).

One way in which the maxims are relevant to vague language is that vague expressions may be used to enable speakers to follow the maxims. For example, if I am asked what time I expect to be home from work, and if I genuinely do not know, because I cannot anticipate my workload or the traffic, then my most truthful reply, that for which I have evidence, could be **'about six o'clock'**. From this the addressee would infer that I could not say exactly what time.

Another way in which Grice's maxims relate to vague language is that vague expressions are often used when one of the maxims is disobeyed. According to Grice (cited in Channell 1994:33), speakers may break one or more of the maxims to create specific effects, which he calls implicature. To illustrate, a speaker at a conference may say **'we have about five or six of them (subjects) but I'm only going to talk about three of them today'**. Since it is not possible for a researcher not to know the number of subjects

she investigated for her study, the addressees can assume that she has flouted the maxim of quantity (giving the exact figure) for a specific effect. Most probably she may have intended that the original number was not important. What was important was the focus on the three topics she was going to talk about. As illustrated above, vague expressions could be used in conversations to enable a speaker to adhere to the maxims or to create specific effects by flouting them.

Speakers may use vague expressions to achieve one of several effects. For example, a speaker may employ vague expressions to hide the actual information, or disguise the actual figure (e.g. **about 20 rands** may disguise the actual figure of 22 or 23 rands). Sometimes, the use of vague expressions may indicate that the actual, exact information or figure is not important for the purpose of the context. Another effect for which vague language is employed is self-protection. Speakers may protect themselves by using approximations if they are not sure of the exact figure, or if the figure or information varies. Channell (1994:191) adds to the list by pointing out that a tone of chatty informality can be achieved by the use of vague expressions.

In addition, she suggests from her extracts that speakers will resort to using vague expressions if they lack knowledge about the subject-matter or do not command the necessary vocabulary. She states:

I suggest that one use of vague language is to enable a speaker to talk about a subject he or she is not very knowledgeable about or a subject where he or she does not know the necessary vocabulary. (Channell 1994: 170)

She concludes that by using vague expressions, a speaker may find a way of actually talking about something he or she does not quite have the vocabulary to express.

In her view, vagueness is one of the means by which speakers show deference in an unequal relationship. She illustrates this strategy by an extract recording a communication between a student and a tutor. In disagreeing with the tutor, the student resorted to a number of vague expressions, which in Channell's view was intended to show deference. She points out that speakers resort to vague language when they are

under some kind of stress due to uncertainty of the subject, lack of knowledge and vocabulary and the *unequal relationship between the participants*. [Emphasis mine]

The communicative uses of vague language are further discussed under the following topics:

- Giving the right amount of information.
- Deliberately withholding information.
- Using language persuasively.
- Lexical gaps and the lack of specific information.
- Displacement.
- Self- protection.
- Informality.
- Power & politeness.

2.4.1 Giving the right amount of information

This aspect relates to Grice's maxim of quantity (i.e. making one's contribution as informative as is required and not providing more information than is required). As pointed out by Channell (1994: 173), vague language is a device which speakers use to tailor their contributions in such a way that they furnish the right amount of information for the purpose of the conversation. Sometimes, providing an exact figure is not necessary (e.g. in a casual conversation.). At other times (e.g. within a banking or accounting context) it might be important to do so. Sadock (1997:436) and Wachtel (1981:320) both point out that approximations can be used to vary the amount of information given. Crystal and Davy (1975:111-114) observe that vagueness is quite appropriate in some contexts. Channell, quoting one of her test respondents explaining why she would not give the exact figure even if she knew, records the answer thus: 'because in casual conversations like that, you don't go into details like that.' (Channell 1994:174). Usually, in casual conversations, being told the exact number will not contribute anything of useful interest to the hearer. The speaker could use **some** or **a few** instead of **two or three**. Thus Channell (1994: 178) concludes that speakers avoid being precise in view of the purpose of the conversation, and its possible informal setting.

Referring to a linguist engaged in phonetic research, Channell (1994:175) points out that the use of vague expressions may indicate that the information is not very relevant, as compared to information with exact figures. She states:

Tailoring the amount of information by using an approximation in direct context with an exact number may have the effect of focusing attention towards, or foregrounding, what is considered most important in the utterance. Using an approximation...communicates something like 'don't pay too much attention to this, its not very important'. (Channell 1994: 175)

In other words, using an approximation instead of an exact figure will shift the focus from the figure onto the meaning of the message. Thus the figures are relegated to the background. Too many precise figures may allow the focus on the figures to obscure the gist of the argument, whereas, if information is simply qualified as 'large' or 'small' the point gets across without a smokescreen. Hence speakers may ignore the precise figures at their disposal and rather choose vague expressions, in order to get meaning across, especially if precise figures are irrelevant for the purpose of the argument.

In other contexts, precision is salient for certain purposes. For example, a stock market report from the **SABC** would give exact figures, as changes in share prices should be provided precisely, for the benefit of those who listen. Again, in furnishing listeners with the prices of reduced items in advertising a sale, the exact original price and reduced price are mentioned in order for listeners to know how much they will be saving. In these two, albeit formal contexts, exact prices are important for the message, and not irrelevant in the situation. Channell (1994: 178) then concludes that the amount of information given is tailored for the perceived purposes of the interaction, and also, that vague expressions can be used where less precision is judged to be required.

2.4.2 Deliberately withholding information

As Channell (1994: 178) points out, vague language is sometimes employed to withhold information. She gives an example of a speaker's response as, 'the quote might be done within three or four days but the job won't be done for at least five weeks'. She explains that the use of vague expressions (**three or four days; at least five weeks**) is a defensive

tactic, because the speaker does not want to commit himself, and deliberately withholds the exact information. Also, the expression 'she's about 29 years old' is a deliberate attempt to withhold the exact age of the speaker. When questioned, the speaker explained that women do not like to be said to be thirty. Channell (1994: 179) adds that using vagueness to deliberately withhold information can sometimes be done in a derogatory manner, as in the following example:

...I'm not talking about the actor who plays him, Michael whatsisname. He's hardly in the movie anyway..... (Channell 1994:179)

The vague expression 'whatsisname' is perceived as disparaging and the speaker can be said to have a pejorative attitude towards the actor. Withholding information, which a speaker possesses but does not give, violates the maxim of quantity and triggers implicature. In the examples given above the implicature could either be a defensive tactic, not committing oneself, or derogatory.

2.4.3 Persuasive use

Channell (1994:179) argues that vague expressions of quantity are used to present statistical data in a way which favours the argument of the author, but still conforms to academic conventions of truthfulness in presentation of data. For example, a researcher who used the expression of **up to one hundred percent (100%)** explained that the figure was around 98% but it was to his advantage to make the number as high as possible. Vague language is therefore used to enable a speaker to positively and persuasively support his point without giving false information.

2.4.4 Lexical gaps and lack of specific information

Speakers sometimes make use of vagueness to convey meaning in situations where they do not have at their disposal the necessary words or phrases for the concepts they wish to express. Clear examples of speakers with such a problem follow:

Example 1

E: Cos it doesn't flow.

B: yeah (.) it's difficult to **sort of** say it in sounds.

A: uh huh / it's **sort of** difficult to **sort of**

Example 2:

C: but there is also **things like** when you're talking and you take information in when you - when you're talking its just words that you pick up – it's not whole strings of sentences and verbs **and things** - it's just the **sort of** main meaning (Channell 1994: 181).

It is possible to suggest that the word which the speaker in example 1 wanted to use was 'articulate', and that in example 2, it was 'syntactic structures'. Such examples arise where speakers do not know the appropriate word, or where they forget it. It is obvious that in both cases, the speakers lack adequate knowledge of the word. In addition to not knowing the word there is also the temporary lexical gap which occurs when a speaker cannot remember a word or name. Various expressions are used to fill in the gap. For example, expressions such as, **and things**, **thingyummy**, **thingy**, are all examples of lexical gap fillers.

Sometimes word-finding difficulty is made explicit, as in 'whatsisname'. Another situation in which vague language is used occurs where the language in question does not possess the lexical items necessary for precise expression. Thus vagueness is a ploy which speakers use when they encounter a word-finding difficulty or a lexical lack. An absence of specific information also calls for the use of vague expressions. Speakers abide by the maxim of quality by not saying that for which they lack sufficient evidence. As a result, vague expressions are used as a substitute for lack of information. For example, a visit overseas could be said to have taken place 'about ten or so years ago' or 'about 1995'. The maxim of quality is perceived as very important in academic work because of the general ethic of honesty. Writers and speakers in this context therefore utilize vague expressions in order to adhere to the maxims. In other words, employing vagueness, they restrict themselves to writing or saying what they know to be true at the time. An example is given of doctors whose ICU reports were full of vague expressions (e.g. 'approximately', 'about', etc.) but which, according to Channell's (1994:16) report of Prince et al. (1982) who conducted the study, were appropriate for the purpose, as they could not be certain of the patients' situations. They state:

The solution, then for the ICU staff under discussion here may be not that they should try to be more 'precise' in their utterances, but rather that they should try to understand that their fairly frequent reliance on other individuals' beliefs and their use of plausible reasoning are in the best tradition of scientific enquiry and rational thought and that their marking of such activities by hedges in fact demonstrates a scholarly orderliness in their representation of knowledge (Cited in Channell 1994:16).

2.4.5 Displacement

This context of vague language use arises out of uncertainty. In talking about the future or the past, a speaker may be uncertain and therefore employ vague language. (E.g. 'that would cost the university about two million rands a year'.)

2.4.6 Self-Protection

Speakers sometimes exercise caution and use vague expressions, even in situations where they know the exact information. For example, an estate agent who may say, 'there are approximately four houses on the street', is exercising caution. Although the agent may have counted the houses and knows the exact figure – i.e. four, he uses an approximation to give a vague figure so that if he counted wrongly or a house on the corner is to be included in the list, then he is protected.

2.4.7 Power and Politeness

Vagueness, as stated earlier, is used as a way of adhering to the politeness rules of a particular culture. Speakers may employ vagueness to mitigate 'face' threats. According to Brown and Levinson (1978:61) 'face' is observed in all interactions. They state that all participants in spoken interactions emotionally invest in face and it must be constantly considered. They further explain that in performing a Face Threatening Act (FTA) a speaker may avoid responsibility by either using conversational implicatures or deliberately being vague by using hedges (Brown and Levinson 1987:164). The examples below illustrate this point:

Example 1

Would you like a drink, an orange juice **or something**? The tag may have been added to politely offer the addressee options from the non-alcoholic social drinks category.

Example 2

Could we, when you give us our essays back – and give us titles – **could we sort of meet or something.** (Channell 1994: 190)

Example 2 illustrates a student's direct request to his tutor, which is mitigated by the vague tag '**or something**' in order to leave the tutor with other options, thereby achieving politeness. Sometimes, a vague tag is used with a critical statement in order to mitigate the criticism and show deference. Thus in these examples, vague expressions have been used to make conversational turns convey politeness.

It has been shown in various studies that politeness is an important language function. Peires (1997:60) identifies politeness as a function of vague language use, along with other functions. In her view, politeness is the main cause of second-language speakers using vague language. Channell (1994:190) also cites politeness and deference as a function of vague language use. Commenting on a speaker's behaviour in an extract, she states:

Given 'A's assertive behaviour, 'E's vagueness may be a marker of deference to someone established as more powerful in the context of this discussion (Channell 1994: 171).

Tannen (1998) also alludes to the function of politeness by indicating that women are more attuned to meta-messages – a form of indirectness, which according to Brown and Levinson (1987:70), is used for the purpose of deference. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987:30) argue that women's use of language, as a face-saving device (i.e. as a politeness strategy) is a result of their powerlessness. In other words women employ politeness strategies to express or show deference. This view echoes Lakoff's (1975: 54) claim that women use language to reflect their subordinate position, and will be discussed in relation to the results of the present study. Fishman's (1997) discussion also follows this line of argument. She posits that males use language to enforce hierarchical relations

between males and females. Consequently, male-female interactions may show that males would use vague language mostly for denigration and withholding information, whereas women on the other hand, may avoid being precise for the purposes of politeness. The results of the present study shed empirical light on these assumptions.

Brown and Levinson (1987), in their explication of politeness theory, focus on interaction within informal contexts, neglecting institutional contexts such as meetings. I will argue that the formal context (i.e. meetings) may reveal women as prominent users of vague expressions and that vague language is used as a face-saving device in order to mitigate the face threat which exists in formal contexts. Women's use of vague language as a face-saving device is demonstrated in their collaborative and reconciliatory attitudes.

2.4.8 Informality

Vague language is usually associated with informal conversational settings. As stated in Channell (1994:191), one would use such expressions in conversations with friends but would avoid them in formal settings. In conversations, exact figures may not be necessary. In addition, speakers may resort to using vague language frequently if they do not remember exact figures. Although the uses of vagueness are varied, an element of uncertainty is present for most conversational participants. This uncertainty is communicated to hearers by the use of vague expressions, which indicate to the hearer that the speaker is unsure of the subject or cannot find the right words. Channell (1994:4-5) points out that vagueness is by no means an occasional occurrence, nor is precision the norm. Instead, she posits that vagueness occurs as frequently as or more often than precision. Thus, most language use is not predominantly precise with vagueness being only occasionally appropriate, but the opposite.

2.5 Context and Community of Practice Approach

The Community of Practice (CofP) approach stands out as a fruitful approach in analysing discourse in specific contexts. This approach allows the different contextual uses of language to become evident. The approach is therefore used to analyse male and female discourse in meetings. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992:462) argue that setting or

context in gender and language research is pertinent and important. They point out that the problem of both language research and gender research is that they have been abstracted from the social practices in which they are produced, thus blurring the complex way in which language and gender relate to one another. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992:484) further assert the need for researchers to connect social and linguistic practices in order to examine how they are realised in specific communities. My study on vague language use follows this line of approach. Vague language and gender are examined in a specific context, as the CofP proposes. According to proponents of the CofP, the best way of examining the relationship between the concepts of language and gender is that of analysing them within specific contexts. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992) define a Community of Practice as:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464).

They point out that a Community of Practice approach can develop out of formal or informal enterprises, vary in size and quality, and can come into existence and go out of existence (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992:464).

Employing this approach, Ehrlich (1999) examined the relationship between language use and gender in courtroom discourse. Mullany (2004) made use of political interview sessions to analyse the complex relationship between language, gender and politeness. Bramley (1997) analysed the gendered use of different avoidance strategies in political media interviews in order to demonstrate the construction of gender through language. This study, in a similar vein, explores the use of vague language by academic staff members in a formal context.

2.6 Conclusion

The three definitions of vagueness mentioned in paragraph 1.1, and considered in the study, encompass categories such as: vague additives, expressions of fuzziness, vagueness by choice, collective nouns, number approximations, hedges, partial specifier.

These categories are explained under paragraph 2.3. For these vague expressions, various functions have been outlined by a number of researchers and linguists. Although linguists such as Peires (1997), Deese (1974), Watchtel (1980,1981), Dubois (1987) and Carter (1980) all discuss vague expressions, and others relate them to the functions for which they are used, Channell's (1994) exposition of vague categories and their functions is more general and will be mainly dwelt on, and used for the analysis of data.

The literature review has raised questions and suggested a possible framework for the exploration of vagueness as gendered in specific contexts. The theories of dominance and difference, and the theoretical framework of vague language expounded in this chapter, will be considered in the explanation of the research data below.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 Research Methodology

The data for this study consists of transcribed tape recordings and observational notes made during formal meetings of five departments/faculties (i.e. Chemistry, Psychology, Law, Science Foundation, and English) at the University of Transkei. The recordings and observations were made within the first hour of each meeting. Owing to the fact that the researcher was a member of the English department, recordings of its departmental meetings were more convenient. As a result, two extra recordings were made from these gatherings, adding up to seven hours of recorded and observational data, thereby increasing the data. The tape-recorded data were supported by the notes from the observations, and a questionnaire was used to introduce variety into the data collection methods. As Stubbs (1983:234) puts it, it is a practice of the social sciences that: “accounts of an event should be cross-checked against other independent accounts or evidence *gathered by a variety of methods*”. [emphasis mine]. Thus, different perspectives on a situation are collected via different modes. Stubbs further explains that the general approach to collecting conversational data is:

to collect and analyse transcripts of conversational data... supplemented by observations collected by ethnographic observation...but also to combine different methods of data collection both naturalistic and experimental, which has different advantages and limitations...(Stubbs 1983: 219).

In other words an eclectic approach to data collection is recommended.

Regarding the participants, the numbers of males and females at the meetings could not be controlled. Consequently, at one departmental meeting there was only one woman and seven men. However, for the other departments, there was some form of balance. The departments were initially selected to represent all disciplines, that is, Science, Business and Management, Humanities and Law. Science was represented by Chemistry and Science Foundation, Humanities by English and Psychology (these were chosen for no particular reason except for convenience and accessibility). Unfortunately, an

Economic and Management Sciences meeting could not be recorded due to circumstances beyond the researcher's control (i.e. merger issues). This department / faculty was, however, represented in the responses to the questionnaire. One departmental meeting was recorded in the law faculty. The idea was to observe language use at meetings within as many disciplines as possible, since academic language is unique to each discipline.

The transcriptions of the recordings and the field notes were merged to avoid any omissions. The transcriptions were not detailed and comprehensive. Instead, standardised orthography was used. This method of transcription was employed because a detailed transcription with notational conventions is time-consuming, and besides, these conventions were irrelevant to the study. Stubbs (1983:222) points out that transcription is an enormously lengthy business and cites Pittenger et al. as commenting that an interview of five minutes took twenty-five to thirty hours to transcribe. In fact, Stubbs refers to the attention to every detail as a general danger. He states:

A very general danger of discourse analysis is that it focuses unwarranted attention on details of interaction which had no reality for the conversationalists at the time (Ibid: 229).

He explains that depending on the purpose of the transcription, a broad transcription and different narrow transcriptions can select different features for representation. He adds that he uses standardised orthography where "such features seem irrelevant to the point at issue." Channell (1994: 41) expresses a similar view when she explains that given the principal interest of her work, her conversation data were transcribed in conventional orthography. The present study aims specifically to identify vague terms and expressions, and therefore a detailed phonetic transcription, including paralinguistic features, is unnecessary. The speakers were distinguished according to gender, female (F) or male (M), and numbered in sequence of contribution. (M1 if the speaker was the first male speaker to speak, M2 if the second male speaker, and so forth.)

The questionnaire, as mentioned earlier, was intended to provide variety in methodology and introduce a quantitative aspect to the study. Responses were elicited from staff

members of all the disciplines including Economic Science. The total number of respondents was forty-five. Besides the fact that there was only a limited number of staff members from which to select, the small sample size of forty-five is not entirely unreliable. One need not have large samples for certain studies. Labov (1972) claims that “patterns emerge from samples of only 25 speakers”. Stubbs (1983:223) concurs. He points out that “there are many striking examples of how general theory may result from study of small amounts of data”. The argument is that, although certain studies may require larger samples, research on spoken interaction is not necessarily advanced by the accumulation of vast amounts of data or facts. However, linguists like Le Page (cited in Stubbs 1983:223) disagree. He argues that numbers of participants should be large.

In selecting the variables to be analysed, Channell’s categories, as presented in paragraph 2.3 (i.e. vague additives, vagueness by choice, expressions of fuzziness, partial specifiers, collective nouns, number approximations, prefixes and suffixes, hedges) were used to identify vague expressions. Her categories were specifically chosen since her list is more comprehensive and encompasses those of the other researchers. The vague expressions were isolated from the utterances. The frequency of their occurrence in each one-hour recording and observation was analysed. The total frequency of all the vague expressions for males and females was subsequently calculated. The tables show the frequency of vague expressions in the different departmental / faculty meetings as well as the overall vague expressions used in each meeting, and in all the seven hours of recording and observation.

3. 2 Content analysis as an analytical tool

The data is analysed using the concept of content analysis: a research tool that is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts. Words and concepts are quantified and analysed for their presence, meaning and relationships, and then inferences are made about the messages they reveal. These texts can be anything such as a book, an article, discussions, speeches, interviews, documents, conversations, informal conversations or any other occurrence of communicative language (Busch et al. 2005).

The text is coded or broken down into manageable categories on a variety of levels - word, phrase, sentence or even theme - and examined using one of the basic methods of such analysis: conceptual analysis or relational analysis. For the present study, conceptual analysis was used to determine the frequency of vague expressions, and relational analysis to determine the functions of vague expressions. Relational analysis was also used to make inferences regarding the functions of vague expressions.

The writing guide on content analysis, produced by Busch et al. (2005), explains that conceptual analysis can be thought of as establishing the existence and frequency of concepts – most often represented by words or phrases – in a text, whereas relational analysis goes one step further by examining the relationships among concepts in a text. In conceptual analysis, a concept is chosen for examination and the analysis involves quantifying and tallying its presence. The focus here is on looking at the occurrence of the selected terms - that is vague words and expressions - within the text. Busch et al. explain the process thus:

Conceptual analysis begins with identifying research questions and choosing a sample or samples. Once chosen, the text must be coded into manageable content categories. By reducing the text to categories consisting of a word, set of words or phrases, the researcher can focus on, and code for specific words or patterns that are indicative of the research questions (Busch et al. 2005).

In line with the above explanation, the research question: ‘Do women use more vague expressions than men in a particular context-formal/informal?’ is identified. In terms of reducing the texts to categories, Channel’s list of vague categories (see paragraph 2.3) was used to extract the vague words and expressions.

At this point the focus is on quantifying these words. In other words, to determine the presence of vagueness in respect to the research question: Do female academics use more vague expressions than their male counterparts?

Carley (1992), (cited in Busch et al. 2005) indicates eight steps that are to be used in the conceptual analysis of texts:

1. Decide the level of analysis
2. Decide how many concepts to code for
3. Decide whether to code for existence or frequency of a concept
4. Decide on how one will distinguish among concepts
5. Develop rules for coding your texts
6. Decide what to do with 'irrelevant' information
7. Code the texts
8. Analyse one's results.

These steps were used during the conceptual analysis of vagueness in the texts collected. First, the decision was made to code for the words and expressions that denote vagueness according to the definition given in paragraph 1.1 of chapter one (i.e. language that is inexact (e.g. 'maybe') indistinct (e.g. 'some') or that displays several potential meanings. Second, in deciding on the number of concepts to code for, pre-defined sets of concepts and categories were used. For these categories, Channell's list of vague categories (vague additives; vague by choice of words; expressions of fuzziness; partial specifiers; collective nouns; number approximations; prefixes and suffixes; hedges), explained in chapter 2, was made use of. This list was strictly adhered to since flexibility would have introduced more categories, which could have led to complexity.

Thirdly, on deciding whether to code for the existence or the frequency of a concept, the latter was chosen, due to the fact that the existence of vagueness in speech had already been established by Channell (1994), Peires (1997) and others. Also, coding for frequency instead of existence would lead the researcher to explanations of gender issues such as politeness, collaboration in language use, indirectness in requests, face-saving strategies, and other communicative strategies, the existence of which coding alone would not indicate. Fourthly, in order to distinguish vague words from other words, words were selected that belong to the category of vagueness or that offer an indication of vagueness as defined earlier, and which can also be grouped under one of Channell's (1994) list of categories. Fifth, the rule developed for coding was that consistency be maintained in the selection of words according to the definition of vagueness (see par. 1.1

of chapter 1) and the categories listed earlier. Any word or phrase that fell outside these parameters was not selected. For the sixth step on 'irrelevant information', other words in the text were not completely ignored. Though they were not used for the coding and analysis, they helped to determine the topic and context of the discussion. The seventh step, which is the actual coding of texts, could then be done manually or via computer. Busch et al. (2005) state:

... the step is to code the text. This is done manually either by hand, i.e. reading through text and manually writing down concept occurrences, or through the use of various computer programs (Busch et al. 2005)

As the researcher's knowledge of computer programming is limited, the former was chosen. Also, Busch et al. (2005) point out that "when coding is done manually, a researcher can recognize errors far more easily". The last step, which involves analysing the results, has to do with interpretation of data. At this point, the researcher analyses the data and attempts to draw whatever conclusions and generalisations are possible. The data on the use of vague language collected by means of the given steps/procedure are analysed accordingly. The authors, however, caution that conceptual analysis deals only with quantitative data and therefore the levels of interpretation and generalisation are limited. They add that "the researcher can only extrapolate as far as the data will allow" (Busch et al. 2005). For this reason, the present author will not attempt to generalise findings for men and women, but will restrict findings to male and female academics within the University of Transkei. While advising caution in the use of conceptual analysis, Busch et al.(2005), however, indicate that conceptual analysis is a useful and effective tool for data analysis and that a researcher can safely extrapolate and draw conclusions from it.

CHAPTER FOUR

4 Data presentation, analysis and discussion

4.1 Presentation and discussion of recorded/observational data

The results of the combined data gained from observational notes and recordings are presented in table and graph form. Where necessary, actual utterances are given for the purpose of illustration.

Table 1 depicts female and male use of the different types of vague words and expressions. The different departments were indicated merely to show the vague expressions used in an hour and also to show how members of the different departments employ vague language. Although the use of vague language per department was not directly part of the study, it will be worth making a few comments on the data. The Chemistry department exhibited the highest frequency of vague language use amongst males: 45. This was not surprising as there was only one female present and she did not make any contribution during the meeting. The Science Foundation (SFYP) department recorded the most frequent employment of vague language by females: 41. Again, this was not surprising, as there were more females than males. The two males in the group made very little contribution. Of the departments which were relatively balanced in their male-female distribution, English, in one meeting, had the highest number of female users of vague language: 34 (in one meeting), and law the highest amongst males: 15. With regard to the highest frequency of male –female vague language use in these three departments, the females led the males by more than double the male figure. It is interesting to note that whereas the law meeting showed the highest male vague language use, in psychology and English the females were predominant in vague language use. As this was not the focus of the study, I do not comment extensively on the effect of the different academic disciplines on vague language use.

Table 2 depicts the overall use of vague expressions in the various departments/ faculties. The totals indicate that Psychology dominated in the use of vague expressions, 56,

followed by English in their A (August) meeting, and then by Chemistry. Law had the lowest count of vague expressions. Could this be a result of the legal aspect of the discipline, which demands detail and precision? In other words, have the precision of legal language, and the avoidance of vagueness so as to prevent loopholes and litigation, become part of the staff members' repertoire and register? This reasoning was not probed.

Table 1

Categories of vague language and F-M frequency of use at departmental meetings

| Categories | Law | | Chemistry | | SFYP | | Psychology | | Eng.-M | | Eng.-J | | Eng.-A | | Total |
|---------------|-----|----|-----------|----|------|---|------------|----|--------|---|--------|---|--------|----|-------|
| | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | |
| Vag. choice | 3 | 7 | 0 | 19 | 10 | 1 | 15 | 8 | 7 | 3 | 10 | 0 | 18 | 7 | 107 |
| Exp. fuzz. | 5 | 6 | 0 | 11 | 21 | 0 | 11 | 9 | 6 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 13 | 3 | 90 |
| Collct. nn. | 1 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 23 |
| Part. specfi. | 2 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 15 |
| No. approx. | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 10 |
| Hedges | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8 |
| Vag. add. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Pre/suffix | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 12 | 15 | 0 | 45 | 41 | 2 | 38 | 18 | 18 | 3 | 13 | 4 | 34 | 13 | 258 |

Table 2

Categories of vague language use and total frequency of use at departmental meetings

| | Law | Chemistry | SFYP | Psychology | Eng. M | Eng. J | Eng. A | Total |
|---------------|-----|-----------|------|------------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| Vag. choice | 10 | 19 | 11 | 23 | 10 | 9 | 25 | 107 |
| Exp. fuzz. | 11 | 11 | 21 | 20 | 6 | 5 | 16 | 90 |
| Collct. nn. | 2 | 8 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 23 |
| Part. specif. | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 15 |
| No. approx. | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 10 |
| Hedges | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 8 |
| Vag. add. | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| Pre/suffix | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 27 | 45 | 43 | 56 | 21 | 19 | 47 | 258 |

Table 3

Categories of vague language use by males and females

| CATEGORIES | FEMALES | MALES | TOTALS |
|---------------|---------|-------|--------|
| Vag. choice | 62 | 45 | 107 |
| Exp. fuzz. | 59 | 31 | 90 |
| Collct. nn. | 12 | 11 | 23 |
| Part. specif. | 9 | 6 | 15 |
| No. approx. | 9 | 1 | 10 |
| Hedges | 7 | 1 | 8 |
| Vag. Add. | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Pre/suffixes | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 159 | 99 | 258 |

Table 3 focuses on one of the aims of the study: mainly to establish the frequency of vague language use among females and males. Of the seven hours of recorded meetings, a total of 258 vague words and expressions were used. In other words, 420 minutes of recorded meetings yielded 258 vague words and expressions. This means that on average for every two minutes of speech a vague word or expression was used. 258 vague words out of 420 minutes yielded a percentage of 61%, which indicates that more than half of the time participants were using vague expressions during the discussions in the meetings. This confirms Channell's (1994: 04) point that vagueness is part of our taken-for-granted world, and that we use vague words more than we are aware of. However, this frequency is minimal as compared to the results of Prince et al. (1982), reported by Channell (1994: 16), who found between 150 and 450 hedges per hour. They recorded a vague word every 15 seconds (Channell 1994:16). Channell (1994: 10) also reports on Kennedy's (1987) attempt to quantify the frequency of approximation, which found 9,135 occurrences in a corpus of 63,176 words. That is, 14.46 percent of the words in the corpus, or one word in every seven. Though the present study is limited in the sense that the overall number of words were not quantified, the results confirm the outcome of previous studies.

As regards the frequency of male–female vague language use, the women are shown to use more vague words than the men: a total of 159 vague words out of the overall total of

258 within the total time of 420 minutes. This constitutes an average of 29 vague words in an hour, for females. Males used less vague words: a total of 99 of the 258 vague words, which constitutes an average of 14 vague expressions in an hour. The results therefore indicate that female participants in the study use more vague expressions than males. This was to be expected because female language is said to be tentative (Lakoff 1975), polite (Labov 1975; Wardhaugh 1994) and indirect Tannen (1996) – features which can be achieved with the use of vague expressions.

4.2 Categories of vague expressions

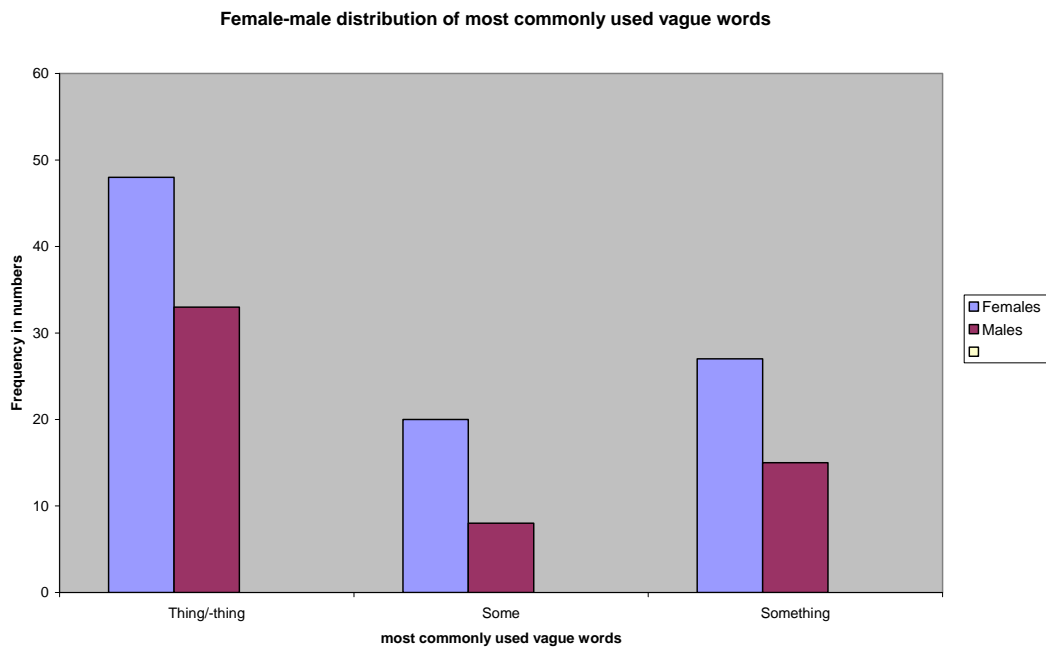
With regard to Channell's (1994: 18) categories of vague expressions (see paragraph 2.3), it is interesting to note that no vagueness in the form of a prefix or suffix was expressed by either male or female participant in any of the meetings (see table 3, par. 4.1). It seems that it is not a preferred form of vagueness in a context such as a meeting, or that this form of vagueness is perceived as too informal to be used in such a context. The most preferred expressions were words such as **some**, **something**, **thing** and **thing** stem words (e.g. **anything**). These words, grouped separately, yielded the results shown in table 4 below. **Thing** and **thing** stem words are grouped under vagueness by choice, as the use of the word indicates a deliberate reluctance of the speaker to mention the actual object or concept. **Some**, on the other hand, could be categorised as an expression of fuzziness. That is, the speaker avoids being specific by using a word that has a 'fuzzy' meaning, for example the word **some**, which does not indicate the exact part of a whole. The vague word, **something**, could be categorised as an expression of fuzziness or vagueness by choice. It was categorised in this study as an expression of fuzziness (i.e. not being specific about object or concept). In fact, Channell (1994: 09) categorises **some** stem words (e.g. **somewhere**, **somewhat**, etc.) as expressions of fuzziness. Together, **thing** and **thing** stem words, **some**, and **something** were the most frequently used vague words. Their combined frequency was 151 out of the total 258 vague words recorded. Table 4 illustrates this finding.

Table 4

Frequency of most-commonly-used vague words

| Vague words | Females | Males | Totals |
|---------------|---------|-------|--------|
| Thing/- thing | 48 | 33 | 81 |
| Some | 20 | 08 | 28 |
| Something | 27 | 15 | 42 |
| Total | 95 | 56 | 151 |

Fig 1



Cutting (2002: 15) refers to words such as **thing, anything, everything**, etc, as empty or general words. These are words that fall under Channell's (1994: 18) category of 'vagueness by choice of words'. In Cutting's (2002) view, they do not refer to any specific items and can cover almost everything. They mostly depend on the context for their meaning and are therefore used when speakers and addressees can identify what is being referred to from the linguistic or situational context. They are consequently used when the speaker does not want to mention the word or does not see the importance of

searching for the specific word. Addressees are able to understand the referent due to the context and the topic.

In the context of the formal meeting, participants probably do not want to take the trouble to refer to a specific word and therefore resort to a general vague word, **thing**. It seems that participants focus on the point being made so that a specific word for the concept is unimportant. As Channell (1994: 33) puts it, we tend to use vagueness for what we regard as unimportant, or what we think makes an insignificant contribution to the meaning being expressed. This is evident from the fact that in a meeting, contributions relate mostly to ideas and issues, and therefore participants probably focus more on expressing these ideas, and discussing issues, than on specific words. Hence, participants prefer to be vague by choice, using words such as **thing**.

The explanation for the frequent use of **something** is quite similar to that of **thing**. Most often it is used in statements such as:

‘Can I say something?’

F1: ‘I want to say something’

F2 to F3: ‘You wanted to say something?’

M1 to F2: ‘You wanted to say something?’

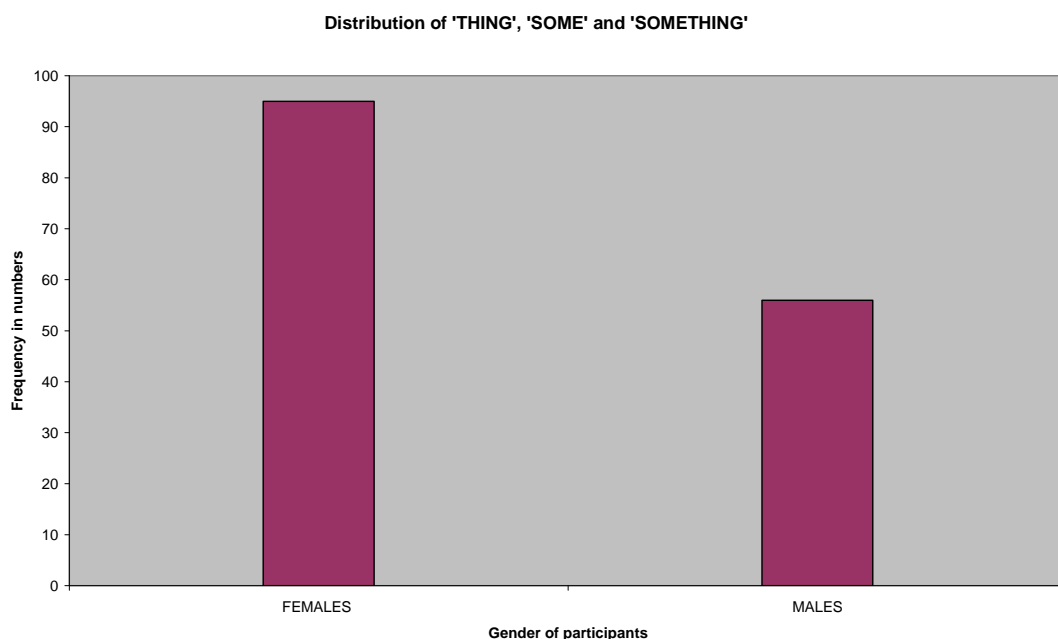
These statements occurred in almost every meeting. The speaker has something to say - an argument or idea to present. Again it appears as if it is the contribution that matters, not the form it takes. Whether it is a question, a comment, or an explanation is irrelevant. The above vague phrases used by the participants in seeking the floor may have been culturally influenced. The only Westerner among the participants, a male, was more specific. He used the question, ‘can I make a point?’ to seek the floor.

I might add that although a meeting is a formal event, in this case, the participants are not strangers to one another and therefore a level of informality exists. As members of a department they do interact frequently, leading to a level of informality in the usually formal context of a meeting. This demonstrates that certain vague forms are used more

frequently in an informal situation, and in contexts where participants have a closer relationship. I believe that a board meeting with different stakeholders would be more formal and that fewer vague expressions would be used, especially empty words like **thing**, though this theory needs to be investigated. Hence distance in relationships and frequency of interactions, do affect the level of formality in a speech event. As Preisler (1986: 03) explains, the degree of formality determines our choice of words. In this case, then, the relationship of the participants determined the degree of formality, which in turn influenced the choice of words.

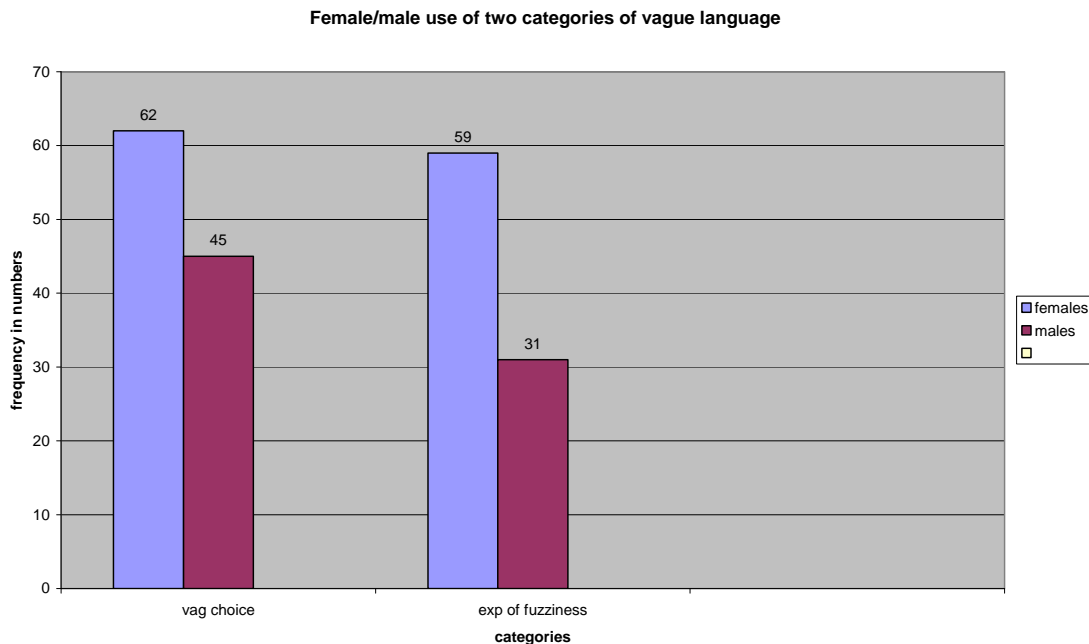
Put together, the vague terms discussed above (**thing/-thing** stem words, **some** and **something**) displayed high frequencies amongst the speakers. The females used the terms more frequently as compared to the males (F=95; M=56). The graph below illustrates this difference.

Fig 2



Within the main categories, the females again predominated in frequency of use. Females used more words that denote vagueness by choice, when compared to males. Expressions of fuzziness were also used more frequently by the former than the latter. The results are shown in the graph and discussed below.

Fig 3



4.2.1 Vagueness by choice of words

Words within this category comprised the highest frequency (a total of 110). Why the participants preferred such words is not known but an attempt is made to explain the choice of such vague words within the discussion. The questionnaire was also designed to elicit respondents' reasons for preferences. Words belonging to the 'vagueness by choice' category are deemed empty words: what Channell (1994:18) refers to as 'unabashedly vague'. Their use indicates reluctance to provide a specific word, dumping every possible idea, or meaning into the vague expression that is used. In other words, when words like **thing**, **thingy**, **whatever**, and **all of that**, are used, the speaker seems reluctant to provide a specific word, leaving the meaning open and expecting the addressee(s) to supply the appropriate meaning from the context or situation. One would not expect a formal context such as a meeting to contain many of these words. As explained earlier, the language used in formal contexts is structured, and closer to written language in form. It may not allow features of informal language. The expectation would generally be that since the speakers are academics, who interact frequently with concepts, they would make minimal use of such vague expressions that often denote informality. However, as indicated earlier, the level of informality at meetings, owing to frequent

interactions at other times and closer distance in relationships, may be quite high, influencing participants' choice of words. In other words, though a meeting constitutes a formal context, a departmental/ faculty meeting at such an institution may have a high level of informality, which allows speakers to use vague words of this kind. It seems then that formality or informality is not solely dependent on the setting but to a large extent on the relationship of the participants.

Also, as Channell (1994:01) explains, contexts which most people would consider as formal and reflecting 'good' language use, and as being concerned with serious topics, contain a great deal of vagueness. An example is evident in the 'formal' academic meetings on serious topics, which contain a great number of vague expressions. Channells' (1994:16) citing of Prince et al.'s study on the prevalent use of such expressions by ICU staff illustrates this point. Although the situation and topic were of a serious nature, the use of vague expressions was appropriate for the situation.

It is interesting to note that at no point in this frequent use of the word **thing**, **thing** stem words and other empty vague words did participants express a lack of understanding or comprehension. It seems that participants understood the referents for the following words as used in the meetings:

A: The **thing** is my students have been asking me if there couldn't be tutorials.

B: We don't need new approaches for the same **thing**

C: The whole **thing** of viability is

D: I think this **thing** is going to spoil our mood.

It could also be, as Channell (1994:08) explains in commenting on Deese's (1974) idea of vagueness, that we think we understand what is meant until our understanding is put to the test, as in following directions, when we realise that our interpretation may differ from what is meant by the person giving them.

Channell (1994:15) takes this point further in quoting the conclusion to Lehrer's (1975) study:

...speakers probably do not communicate with each other nearly as well as they think they do, since they usually have no way of knowing that others apply words differently. *But perhaps they communicate well enough for their purposes, even without knowing.* (Emphasis mine) (Channell 1994:15)

4.2.2 Expressions of fuzziness

Words in the category of expressions of fuzziness were also used frequently. They recorded a frequency of 90 and were the next most-commonly-used vague words after the category of vagueness by choice. Words in this category are not empty expressions as in the previous category, but do not indicate specifics. **Some** for example, means part of, but the exact proportion is not specified. **Somewhere** means a place, but the exact place is not mentioned. **Probably** and **maybe** indicate the speaker's uncertainty and lack of commitment as in the next example:

M1: The last **thing** is the location of equipment. If you go upstairs to one of the rooms... You'll find in there **lots of** equipment. They've been there for years. **Probably** five years... I don't know.

The use of **probably** in this case may indicate the speaker's lack of awareness of detail and therefore reluctance to commit to a definite time. In this case then, the speaker is using a vague word in order to abide by Grice's conversational principles, specifically the maxim of quality (i.e., be truthful). In being truthful the speaker may have to resort to such tentative expressions. Another purpose for the use of such words could be the avoidance of imposition. In order not to seem to be imposing their views, the speakers may precede their utterances with words like **probably, maybe, perhaps** and so on. The women used vague words in this category more frequently than the men, as shown in table 3 and exemplified below, with 12 occurrences whereas the males had eight.

(Science Foundation Year Programme discussion on organising a workshop)

F1: I feel it's a bit tight for me since its exam period.

Since it's a faculty issue...**probably** Mrs. X should come in.

Maybe Mrs. X could be pulled into the picture.

(Psychology discussion of a candidate's application to study for an M.A degree)

F1: **Maybe** to find out his area of focus...interest is?

(English discussing a faculty project)

F1: Professor X is instrumental...and **probably** the driving force.

F2: How you design a course in your own discipline. **Maybe...maybe** one of the things...is...

(English discussing tutorials)

F3: 160 and **maybe** above

M4: Students need help at all levels...**maybe** I am wrong

The frequent occurrence of these vague words in utterances by the women may be attributed to their considerate nature. Females are said to have a nurturing, reconciliatory attitude, which is expressed in their use of language (Cameron 1996; Tannen 1986, 1993). Tannen (1996) explains that from childhood boys and girls are made to socialise differently. Girls are supposed to use language for collaboration, co-operation and affiliation, whereas, the boys use language for assertiveness, challenge and competition (Tannen 1986, 1990, 1993; Cameron 1992; Coates 1988, 1993, 1996). The girls would, therefore, not want to impose their ideas, thus preceding their utterances with vague words like **probably, maybe, perhaps**, and so on.

Although Lakoff (1975:54) states that female language is tentative and therefore weak, I argue that it could be tentative for a specific purpose. Also, the motive may be more one of solidarity than that of subservience, as she claims. Tannen (1996:19) argues that linguistic strategies that have been claimed to indicate dominance can also show solidarity. She illustrates that one person could take over the floor to dominate but another may take the floor to show support and agreement, a move to be seen as

motivated by solidarity. She argues that ‘intention and effect are not always synonymous, and that there is never an enduring one-one relationship between a linguistic device and an interactive effect’(Ibid:20) Consequently it would appear that as much as expressions of fuzziness may indicate tentativeness, such a strategy as used by females, given their cultural background, may be geared towards recognition of the speaker’s face or for face-saving effect, but not to express deference because they feel they are in a subordinate position.

4.2.3 Collective nouns

The next category exhibiting a high frequency is that of collective nouns. The frequent use of words in this category, I believe, indicates a speaker’s reluctance or inability to give an exact number or exact part of a number as in the following example: **Now that we’ve been told that there is a lot of money...** Here, the Head of Department, who was also the chairperson of the meeting, was providing information about research funds. As in most cases when collective nouns are used, the situation could be that the speaker does not know the exact number, or the precise figure is not important to the discussion. The issue is whether there is a large amount or small amount. In this case then, the collective noun- **a lot of...**- suffices. As regards this category, the difference between the females and males is minimal. The males used 11, whereas the females uttered 12, vague occurrences (table 3, par. 4.1).

4.2.4 Partial specifiers

This category is similar to collective nouns in the sense that the exact part is not specified. Examples are: **less than, at least, more than, at most**, as used in the following utterance.

F1: In **less than a month...**we can come up with something.

The most commonly used partial specifier was **less than**. Females evidenced three occurrences in this category, more than the males (females = 9; males = 6) (table 3, par. 4.1).

4.2.5 Number approximation

There were only ten occurrences in the category of number approximation. This was surprising as it is thought to be an appropriate way of showing the unavailability of exact figures; for instance, **about ten, around 12**, and so on. It appears that the context and topics at meetings have an effect on the use of number approximations. In other words, the topics discussed did not call for the use of specific numbers with approximations; instead speakers resorted to general impressions of numbers, using part specifiers and collective nouns. Given that meetings are oral discourses, it was not surprising that speakers preferred to use vague words from the latter two categories rather than approximations to state numbers and figures. Approximations are usually used in written texts (Channell 1994:53). However, the few that were used showed a notable difference between males and females. Whereas there was only one occurrence among the males, the females recorded nine occurrences of number approximations. Here, I would state the limitation of the study in this regard. That is, the number of times exact figures were used was not counted. Only figures that were used with approximations were counted. It would have been interesting to discover the overall frequency of numbers in relation to numbers used with approximations.

Swacker (1975:81-82) established that the women in her study used approximations more than the men, though the men used more numerals than the women. In other words, the men in her study referred to numbers more frequently than the women, but preceded their numbers less frequently with approximations than the women. Thus the women were vaguer with their use of numbers than the men. Swacker (1975:81) suggests that the stereotype of male accuracy is merely based on their choice of words as they retained precise figures, even when they were clearly guessing. The females, however, were more cautious and preceded figures with approximations to show uncertainty.

It seems that females, owing to their gender socialisation, tend to abide by Gricean principles more than men. In this case being truthful implies using approximations to indicate uncertainty about the figure. The men, on the other hand, probably, wanting to be assertive and in control, refused to display weakness in knowledge and avoided

approximations even when guessing. In so doing they were not being exactly truthful, and were therefore not abiding by Gricean principles.

4.2.6 Hedges

The category of hedges showed a distinction between the females and males (see table 3 par. 4.1). A frequency of seven was evident among the former whereas only one hedge was used by the latter. Below are examples of hedges as used by the participants:

Psychology (discussing pressure of work after industrial action)

F1: The pressure point must come to its level **and that sort of thing**.

Psychology (discussing student application problems and an MA applicant)

F2: **Maybe** they don't need to hear my voice only... **this kind of thing**.

F1: **Maybe** to find out what his area of focus is.

F2: ...certificate **of some sort**

Chemistry (discussing storage of equipment in a room)

M1: ...before any cleaning **or sorts of thing** can be done

English (discussing introduction of interdisciplinary courses)

F1: ...instrumental and **probably** the driving force. Instead of being bundled **one way or the other**...it becomes a language driven thing. It needs **some kind of** persuasion.

Though this was a small sample it supports the view that females are more considerate and their language style is more other-oriented. It seems the hedges were used to save the addressee's face and to mitigate the utterances.

4.2.7 Vague additives

Besides the entire lack of prefixes and suffixes the least-frequent occurrence of vague language was in the vague additives category. Only five of these expressions were used. However, they were used more frequently by the males (four occurrences) than the

females (one occurrence). This was the only category that indicated a higher frequency for males than females. An example of such vague expressions is presented below.

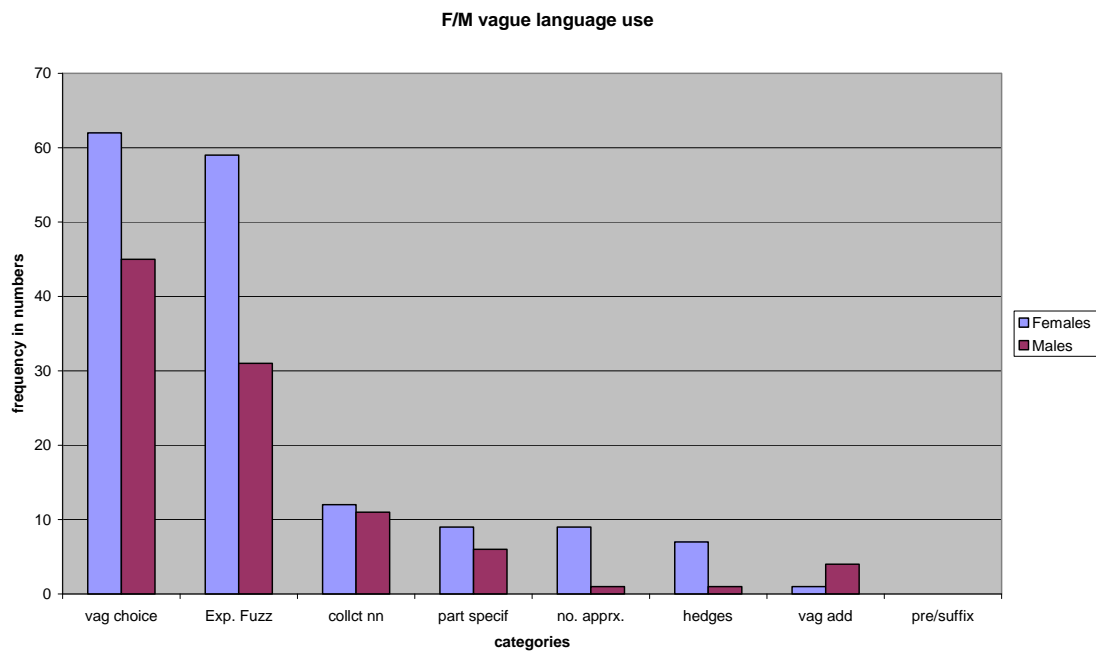
Chemistry (discussing storage of equipment)

M1: leave it for **about a week or so** and then...

The difference in the use of this category of vague expressions cannot be readily explained, except that vagueness is prevalent in this context.

The overall results of the distribution, between males and females, of the categories of vague expressions are presented in the bar chart below.

Fig 4



4.3 Summary

Although the results indicate that the categories of partial specifiers, collective nouns and vagueness by choice do not exhibit marked differences between the use of vague language by males and females, one could say that there is a distinction between them in their use of vague language at meetings. As regards the type of vague expression used, there is congruence with the most preferred vague expression. Both the males and the

females recorded the highest frequencies in the category of ‘vagueness by choice’, especially as regards the word **thing** (see table 4 and fig 1 par. 4. 2). The next most preferred category for both genders was ‘expressions of fuzziness’ especially in the words **some** and **something** (table 4, fig 1). Females displayed a higher frequency, almost double that of the males. This may suggest a female tendency to informality because words in this category were fuzzy, indicate high imprecision, and denote informality. The third most frequently used vague expressions were collective nouns, which also showed congruence (males 10; females 12). The other categories evidenced smaller differences as regards male-female preferences. Whereas the males used more vague additives, the females used more of number approximations and hedges. The females’ frequent use of hedges supports the view that females are more indirect and will hedge their requests and demands, mainly in consideration of the addressee’s face (Labov 1972; Lakoff 1975; Bramley 1997). In other words, females would reduce imposition as much as possible (Shimanoff 1997). This is done probably to prevent conflict, as females are socialised to be more reconciliatory and collaborative. (Tannen 1990; Coates 1998). Or rather, that in the presence of a patriarchal society, the females adopted their social role of being ‘nice girls’ and ‘fine ladies’ as expected of them (Mille and Mellvenny 2000). In effect, a *performative* notion of gender as “an enactment, discursive construction or product of social interaction” (Stokoe 2005: 119) was at play.

On the basis of such a small sample, one could conclude that although meetings are formal, vague language is used to a considerable degree by the participants, supporting Channell’s (1994:01,35) claim that vague expressions are used with serious topics as well, contrary to the general belief that vagueness is only for informal use.

Also, the semi-formality of departmental meetings due to frequent interaction and minimal distance between the staff members may have contributed to the use of many of the vague expressions, especially those from the vagueness by choice and expressions of fuzziness categories (e.g. **thing**). **Thing** was the most preferred vague word – partly because it can stand for anything, and partly because it allows the speaker to focus on the more important aspect of the utterance and relegate what is unimportant to the

background in the form of a vague expression. As regards the overall male and female differences in vague language use, the study yielded the following results: a frequency of 99 out of 258 vague expressions was recorded for males, and for females, a frequency of 159 (see table 3 par. 4.1). The percentages calculated were: 38% for males and 62% for females. The females produced almost double the number of vague expressions. That is, for almost every two vague words produced by the females, the males produced one. Although the prevalent use of vague expressions by the females confirms the argument that females are tentative, I would add that the tentativeness is not as a result of weakness but for the purposes of collaboration and support, and as Barron (1971: 30) points out, 'other-oriented'. I will argue that, although male domination is not a thing of the past, female use of vague language projects the difference model more prominently, in that females use vague language according to their gender socialisation. That is, females are socialised to be more collaborative, cooperative and supportive and may use strategies such as vagueness to avoid conflict. The argument could be taken further. In that as much as the females performed gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) in this respect, they could also have done so in view of the mix-sex interaction and the existence of a patriarchal society (Stokoe 2005: 120). The males however continue to dominate by means of language – less frequent use of approximations to maintain control and project assertiveness; and reluctance to display weakness in the form of lack of information, even when uncertain.

4. 4 Data presentation and discussion of questionnaire

As indicated earlier, the data were supported by a questionnaire (see Appendix A). A questionnaire of four sections, A, B, C, D, with closed and open-ended questions, was administered in order to probe perceptions of vague language use in terms of gender. A total of twenty-eight questions were asked. Sub-questions that required respondents to give reasons (i.e. unstructured open-ended questions) were not employed for the analysis, but were used as examples whenever they were relevant to the discussions. Some of the questions probed perceptions regarding vague language use in relation to context and topic; others considered perceptions of the functions of vague language use, and others, the acceptability and tolerance of the use of vague expressions. Responses were all

analysed in terms of gender. The aim was to establish male and female perceptions in this regard and to determine whether there was a correspondence between their perceptions and the actual use as shown in the recordings and observation.

The term *vague* was replaced by the word *indistinct* due to its technical/grammatical meaning, and the connotation of triviality and informality associated with vagueness.

A summary of section A is given below.

Section A (See Appendix A for complete questionnaire including extract)

Table 5 (shaded sections show questions with significant differences)

Is the use of indistinct expressions equally prevalent among men and women?

| | | Female | | | Male | | |
|-------|---|--------|------|--------|------|------|--------|
| | | Yes | No | Unsure | Yes | No | Unsure |
| Q.A.1 | Is the use of indistinct expression appropriate for the reporting in the extract? (extract in section A of questionnaire) | 25% | 34 % | % | 21% | 20 % | % |
| Q.A.2 | Is the use of indistinct expressions prevalent in your own speech? | 27 | 14 | 5 | 32 | 18 | 5 |
| Q.A.3 | Do you consider indistinct expressions appropriate in any context? | 16 | 18 | 11 | 16 | 39 | |
| Q.A.4 | Why would you use indistinct expressions? | | | | | | |
| | For politeness | 14 | 33 | | 16 | 37 | |
| | To withhold information | 23 | 23 | | 34 | 21 | |
| | Lack of information | 39 | 7 | | 25 | 30 | |
| | Memory loss | 14 | 32 | | 20 | 34 | |
| | Absence of equivalent word | 5 | 41 | | 18 | 36 | |
| | Denigration | | 45 | | | 55 | |
| Q.A.5 | Do you think that women use more indistinct expressions than men? | 18 | 11 | 16 | 16 | 11 | 27 |
| Q.A.6 | Would men be more exact and distinct in their language use? | 21 | 14 | 12 | 14 | 14 | 25 |
| | If Yes in which context? | | | | | | |
| | Formal context | 2 | | | 2 | | |
| | Informal context | 5 | | | | | |
| | Any context | 14 | | | 7 | | |

Cross-tabulations, using chi square tests, were performed upon the above questions in Section A to determine if there was any association between the responses and the gender of the respondent.

Question Q.A.3 indicated a significant association between gender and the responses, namely, that males were more inclined to respond 'No' to the question than females.

Q.A.4 (b) 'Lack of information or exact detail' as a reason for using indistinct expressions also evidenced a significant association with the gender of the respondent, namely that males tend to deny this statement.

However owing to insufficient data no reliance could be placed on the statistical certainty of the test employed.

Section A was intended to elicit respondents' perceptions on the context of vague language use, the functions of vague language, and the perceptions of vague language by the different genders. The purpose of Question 1 was to draw respondents' attention to the prevalent use of vague expressions in an oral report on an incident (see Appendix A). Nearly half of the respondents (46%) indicated that the indistinct or vague expressions used for the report were appropriate. Fifty-four percent indicated that the use of vague expressions for the report was inappropriate. Asked to supply reasons (Q A.1.1), some said that a news item should not contain that many vague expressions. Others explained that the reporter did not know the exact details.

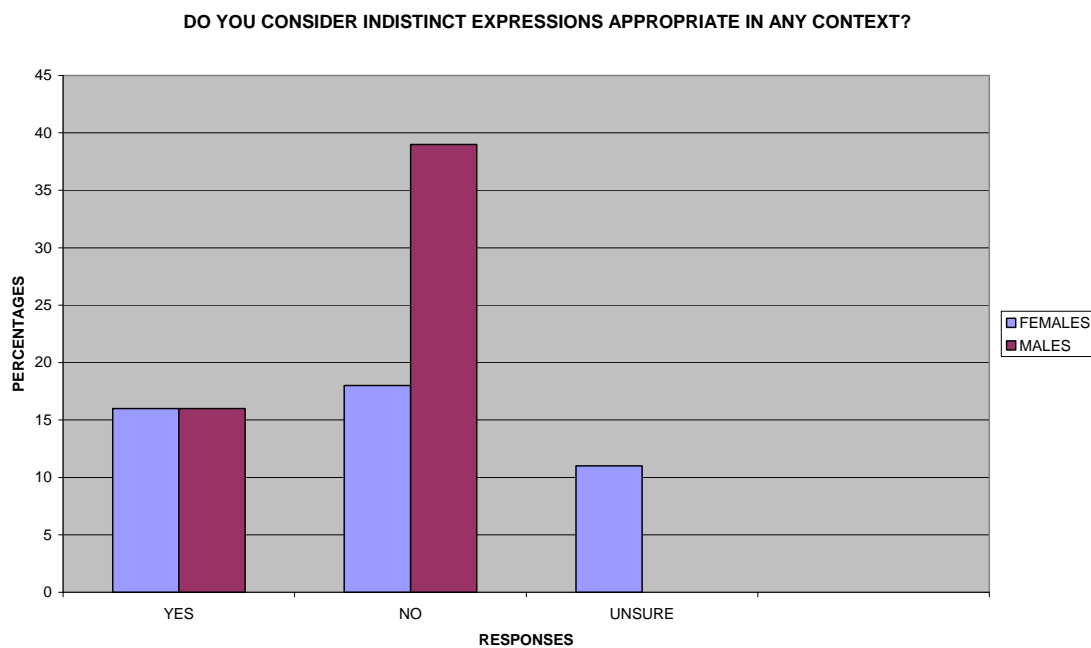
There was no significant difference between the males and the females in their responses. In other words, chi square test results were not significant. Asked if vague expressions were prevalent in their own speech, respondents varied in their responses. However, there was more agreement than disagreement.

Again, no significant difference was found between males and females. In response to the question, 'In which context would you use vague language more?', and given the

options of formal, informal, or both (Q.A 2.1), most of the respondents chose the informal context. It seems that this response corresponds to what Channel (1994: 01) describes as the erroneous belief that serious talk should not involve vague language. Respondents may also have based their responses on the informality of various vague expressions.

Question A.3 indicated a significant association between gender and the responses given. Asked if vague language could be used in any context, most of the males (39%) responded in the negative, whereas only 18% of females responded in the negative. The chi square test showed a significance of 0.019. The graph provided below illustrates the female/male distinction for that question.

Fig 5

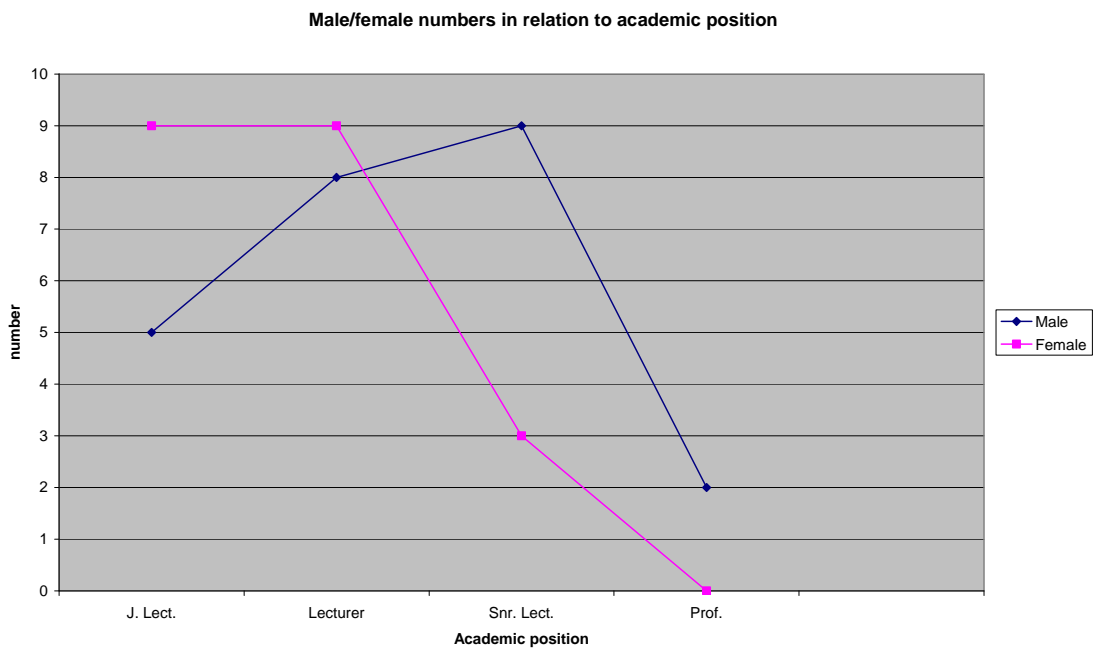


It appears that the men were more sensitive to the contextual use of vague expressions than the females. A possible explanation for this could be that most of the men occupied higher positions and possessed higher degrees than many of the women in this study. As such their academic background (doctoral degrees, departmental heads, etc) may have influenced their responses to the question. The line graphs below illustrate the numbers for males and females in relation to educational level and academic position.

Fig 6



Fig 7



Question A.4 elicited respondents' functional use of vague language. The following functions were listed from those the respondents could choose: politeness, withholding

information, lack of details/information, memory loss, absence of equivalent word, denigration. Contrary to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory that speakers would choose strategies to project negative or positive politeness, most of the respondents (70%) did not select politeness as a reason for their use of vague language. Only 30% indicated that they would use vague language for the purposes of politeness. The fact that there were no marked differences between male and female responses was contrary to research claims that women use polite forms more often than men (Wardhaugh 1998; Lakoff 1975; Holmes 1995).

Since politeness has been listed as one of the functions of vague language, one expected that more females than males would employ this strategy for these purposes. However, this was not the case, and the responses indicated no significant difference in gender. It may be that other variables might have been more influential. For example, their cultural background may have influenced responses more than gender, because all the respondents were Africans. It would be interesting to establish the responses of members from a western culture. Other variables that may have influenced the responses are those of status, education, hierarchy, etc, since the respondents are all academics. It should be added that data based on this small sample should be interpreted with caution.

As regards withholding information, as a function of vague language, there was an almost even distribution. No significant difference was found between the males and females. However, the males who agreed to using vague expressions for this purpose were more in number (34%) than the females (23%). This difference, though minimal, may lend support to the view that males tend to exert power and authority over others (Tannen 1990; Fishman 1997; Coates 1996; Cameron 1996) and may use language to do so. In this case, using vague language to withhold information might be an illustration of a male tendency to want to dominate others. In fact, the males were constructing a masculine identity in their use of vague language for the above function.

The use of vague language in situations where the speaker lacks information or does not possess exact details was accepted by most of the respondents. The responses indicated

significant differences between males and females. Whereas many agreed that they would use vague language in this situation (64%; 39% females and 25% males) the males differed significantly with respect to the non-usage of vague language here. Very few females (7%), as compared to the males (30%), indicated that they would not use vague language to mask a lack of details. For the men, this may be attributed to a male tendency to dominate and reluctance to accept weakness, or lack of information in this case. This response may be relevant to the general stereotype that men do not want to admit that they are wrong, especially in missing directions. This demonstrates - if there is any truth in this gender stereotyping - that men do not want to acknowledge their lack of information. In fact, during mixed-sex conversations, they are said to control changes in topic, and do most of the talking (Bramley 1997), displaying their knowledge. In other words, they lecture while the women are supposed to listen. It is possibly the case that this attitude is being shown in their reluctance to accept the use of vague language to camouflage a lack of information.

On the other hand, the acceptance of most of the women that they would use vague language, to hide a lack of information, seems to portray them as wanting to abide by Grice's conversational principles, specifically the maxim of quality. They wish to be truthful about what they say, and will therefore use strategies, in this case vague expressions, to indicate their lack of exact details. The difference between the men and women in not using vague expressions to indicate lack of information was quite high: 7% for the females and 30% for the males (see table 5 section A). The chi square test showed a significance of .007. In response to the use of vague language in contexts where one lacks information, it was clear that the men and the women were 'doing gender'. In other words they were responding to their gender roles in society. Responses to using vague language when one cannot remember a word did not yield any significant results. It is interesting to note that none of the respondents chose denigration as a function for which they would use vague language.

The next two questions probed the respondents' perceptions concerning vague language and gender differences. When they were asked whether women used vague language

more often than men, their responses varied. The responses were spread among the three options for both male and female. The fact that the respondents did not want to make claims to gender differences regarding vague language is indicated in the percentage that opted for the unsure option: a good 43%. Question A.6 was a rephrasing of A.5, to confirm responses to A.5. Again, a high percentage of respondents chose the unsure option. It would appear that as regards the issue of gender differences in vague language the respondents did not want to make any claims. Although chi square tests were not significant in both questions A.5 and A.6, there was a seven percent difference between the males and females in response to question A.6. Responses to question A.6.1 confirmed the females' insensitivity to context, as in question A.2. Fourteen percent of the females opted for 'any context' whereas only seven percent of the males did (see table 5 section A).

Section B

In section B, respondents' perceptions of their own vague language use were probed. Statements with vague expressions were given to them in relation to certain scenarios. Respondents were asked to either identify with these statements or reject them and supply their own. The results are summarised in table form below:

Table 6 (shaded sections show questions with significant differences)

Would you use a similar expression for the following utterances?

| | | Female | | | Male | | |
|-------|---|--------|----|-------|------|----|-------|
| | | Yes | No | Expre | Yes | No | Expre |
| Q.B.1 | We've got five or six of them, but I'll only talk about three of them | 10 | 33 | | 14 | 41 | 2 |
| Q.B.2 | Speaker states: 'He has written five or six articles and they are much the same'. | 21 | 25 | | 19 | 35 | |
| Q.B.3 | Tutor on the class mark: 'It is around 20% mark and it has never changed'. | 16 | 30 | | 20 | 34 | |
| Q.B.4 | Extract from an article: 'He hopes to set up camp around 20000 feet early in July'. | 36 | 12 | | 33 | 19 | |
| Q.B.5 | Police spokesman: 'Approximately 11 people are | 30 | 14 | | 33 | 23 | |

| | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|----|----|--|----|----|--|
| | helping us with our enquiries’. | | | | | | |
| Q.B.6 | Pinky on Christmas: ‘We had a Christmas tree that my mother managed to keep for about three years’. | 38 | 7 | | 25 | 30 | |
| Q.B.7 | Kaya on his dentist appointment: ‘It’s always around 4 o’clock’. | 29 | 16 | | 25 | 30 | |
| Q.B.8 | Kaya giving directions: ‘The valley is roughly 60 kilometres from here’. | 39 | 7 | | 45 | 9 | |

Cross-tabulations between gender and the above questions were performed but the only statistically valid association detected was for question B.6. Responses showed a significant association between gender and the response obtained. Females were inclined to affirm that they would use this expression whereas males showed no particular preference in using or avoiding it.

For questions B1, B 2, and B3, no significant results were obtained in relation to gender differences. Most of the respondents rejected the vague statements, but failed to supply their own statements. Responses to question B. 4, however, were different. Although no significant gender association was found in the responses, most of the respondents identified with the statement. The contradiction here is that both questions B.3 and B.4 contained the same vague expression, **around**, but respondents rejected the statement in question B.3, and identified with the statement in question B.4. It seems that the context may have influenced the responses. Responses to question B.5 did not show any distinction in gender. However, the responses to question B.6 were interesting. Whereas the males were divided in their responses as to whether they identified with the statement or not, the females clearly indicated that they would make use of such an expression. Responses therefore indicated a significant difference between the males and females. A higher percentage (30%) of males rejected the statement, but very few females (7%) did. The chi square test showed a significance of .007. One wonders if the low percentage of rejection from the females was not based on their identification with the topic – a Christmas tree – instead of the statement. The bar chart below illustrates the significant difference in male-female responses to question B6.

Fig 8



Gender differences in relation to questions B.7 and B.8 were not significant, as shown in table 6, section B.

All in all, there were no marked differences between female and male responses as regards questions probing their vague language use. For most of the questions both females and males rejected the statements given. Responses were significant only for question B.6, discussing a Christmas tree. Considering the frequent rejection of the statement by the respondents - both males and females – it seems respondents would rather not use such vague expressions. In practice this may not be the case and one wonders on what basis statements were accepted or rejected. A further study to probe the reasoning behind the respondents' acceptance or rejection of a vague expression could be undertaken by the researcher.

Section C

Section C probed respondents' use of vague expressions. Respondents were asked to give responses to questions and requests. Options between vague expressions and

specific answers were provided and respondents were required to make a choice from them.

Table 7

| | FEMALE | MALE |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Q.C.1 Your response to a request to a dinner date from an acquaintance:</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>No</p> <p>'I'm not sure...maybe... I'll think about it'.</p> | <p>16</p> <p>21</p> <p>9</p> | <p>12</p> <p>12</p> <p>21</p> |
| <p>Q.C.2 A stranger enquires as to the distance from the Holiday Inn to the city centre:</p> <p>Give exact distance (5km).</p> <p>Say 'I don't know'.</p> <p>Use approximation: 'about 5 km'.</p> | <p>5</p> <p>5</p> <p>36</p> | <p>5</p> <p>0</p> <p>48</p> |
| <p>Q.C.3 In response to a question as to the age of your 30-year-old, unmarried sister:</p> <p>Give her exact age.</p> <p>Say - 'I don't know'</p> <p>Answer 'About 29 years'.</p> <p>Answer 'About 30 years'</p> <p>Answer 'In her late twenties'</p> | <p>32</p> <p>2</p> <p>2</p> <p>5</p> <p>5</p> | <p>32</p> <p>5</p> <p>2</p> <p>7</p> <p>9</p> |
| <p>Q.C.4 Susan tells her boyfriend that she met his friend whom she does not particularly like. 'I saw</p> | | |

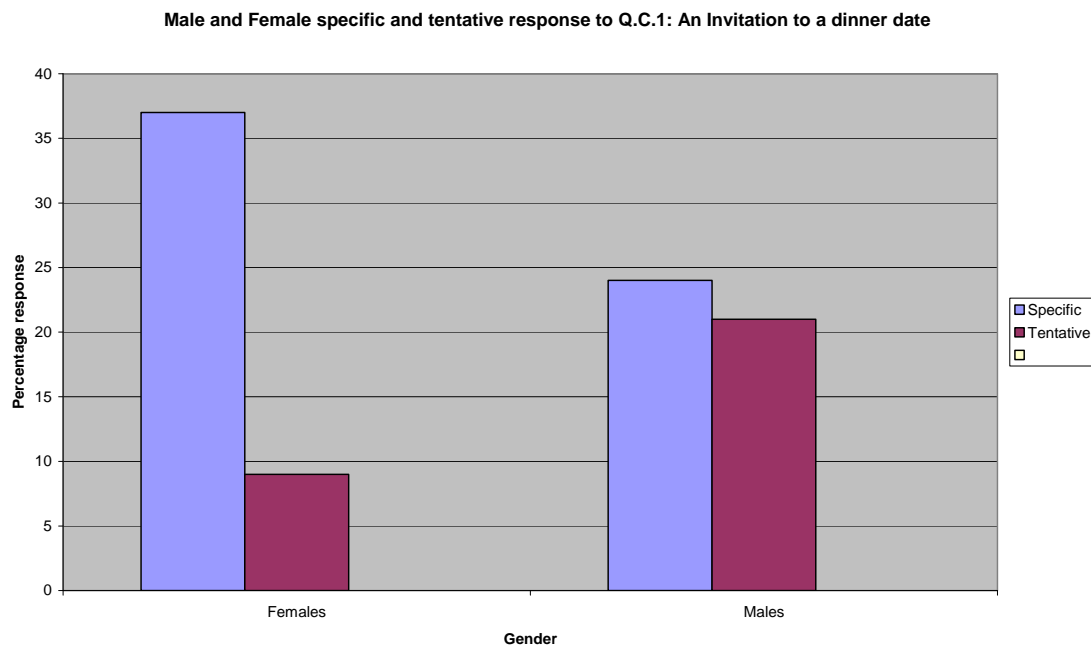
| | | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Michael Whatsisname...' Derogatory. You genuinely cannot remember his name Other.</p> <p>Q.C.5 A builder on the time to complete a job. 'The quote will be done in 3 or 4 days, but the job will only start in about 5 weeks'. Genuinely unsure of the time frame. Builder does not want to commit him/herself.</p> | <p>39 7 0</p> <p>5 42</p> | <p>41 11 2</p> <p>9 44</p> |
| <p>Q.C.6 To Sipho who has given up drinking alcohol: '...would you like a glass of juice or something?' Politeness. To offer him a choice, Other.</p> | <p>21 23 2</p> | <p>26 26 2</p> |
| <p>Q.C.7 A Vichy advertisement – 'Vichy would like you to receive this pack for R120.00. This saves you forty or so rands'. Genuinely does not know. Withholding information for a reason. Other.</p> <p>Q.C.8 A researcher presenting figures for his research overstates the figures: 'over 200 km' for 200 km and 'up to 100%' for 98%. Is he violating academic</p> | <p>2 43 0</p> | <p>2 48 5</p> |

| | | |
|---------|-----------|-----------|
| ethics? | | |
| Yes | 38 | 47 |
| No | 5 | 10 |

Cross-tabulations were performed on all the questions in section C to determine whether there was any correlation between the way females and males answered. No statistical significance could be established.

Question C.1 investigated responses to an invitation by the opposite sex. The focus was on establishing whether respondents would respond with specific or vague expressions given the context. The differences between the male and female responses were worthy of note. The males were more tentative; 21% chose vague expressions (i.e. option C: I am not sure, maybe, I will think about it), compared to the females who displayed a low percentage (9%) for vagueness. For this specific question, then, females were more specific and exact in their responses than the males. This is contrary to Lakoff's (1975:54) claim that women's language is tentative and weak. In fact, in certain contexts, as in this, women's language is far from tentative. They were more definite in their responses, while the men projected an attitude of tentativeness. As West and Zimmerman (1987) explain, in certain contexts, or in an all-female group, women's language can be assertive and strong. This, of course illustrates the fact that language use is influenced by gender, just as much as other factors such as context, topic, and participants. The chi square test showed an almost borderline significance and therefore may not be used for analysis. The percentage difference, however, indicates an association between the responses and gender. The graph below illustrates this correlation.

Fig 9



The females indeed were more specific than the males, which suggests the influence of topic and context in male and female language use. Also, as Swacker (1975:82) explains, the stereotype that males are accurate is quite superficial.

The response to the question concerning distance gave respondents a choice between being exact or using an approximation (i.e. vague expression). Most of the respondents (83%), both women and men, opted for the use of approximation. This lends support to Channell's (1994:03) claim that in certain situations, vague language is more appropriate. In this case respondents cannot be sure of the exact distance and therefore using a vague expression - an approximation - would be more appropriate. Some of the reasons given are as follows:

'The city centre is an area not a specific point'.

'Because I am not sure of distance'.

'I have never measured the distance to know the exact kilometers'.

'Not certain'.

'I am not sure'.

An interesting aspect of the responses to this question is the association of gender with the option, 'I don't know'. Whereas a percentage (5%) of females chose this option, none of the males opted for it. Again, this result could be linked to the male tendency to dominate, in the sense that males have been stereotyped as not wanting to accept their inabilities or lack of knowledge or information, but as wanting to be seen to be in control at all times. In other words, the males were performing *masculinity* according to their social roles. They would like to be perceived as knowing it all and therefore do not opt for 'I don't know'. In addition to the minimal difference between males' and females' choice of the option 'I don't know', there were no significant differences between the male and female responses to question C.2.

Responses to question C.3, regarding the age of one's sister, evidenced no significant differences between females and males. Instead, respondents from both groups chose to be specific (63%).

Question C.4 was designed to assess responses to derogatory use of vague language. It was not selected in question A.4 as a situation in which respondents would use vague language; however, for this scenario most respondents (78%) agreed that the vague expression was uttered for derogatory purposes. This seems to support Channell's (1994:14) explanation that vague expressions are sometimes used to place what is regarded as unimportant in the background. In this case, the friend's surname was unimportant to the speaker and the vague expression was used to indicate this.

Responses to question C.5 did not show any association with gender. Rather, results suggest that most respondents perceived the use of the vague expression in this context as the speaker not wanting to commit himself or herself. This confirms Channell's explanation that vague expressions are used when one does not want to commit oneself. In other words, vague expressions can be used to allow the speaker to be indirect. The fact that both males and females saw through this strategy indicates that, contrary to Bramley's (1997) claim that women are more indirect, indirectness may not be mainly female-orientated. There may be other factors such as age, ethnicity, class, etc., involved.

Responses to question C.6 were varied. Twenty-one percent of the females selected politeness as the reason for the use of the vague expression. An almost equal percentage (23%) indicated that the speaker was using the vague expression so as to offer the addressee a choice. The males were equally divided (26% saw this expression as being polite; 26% as offering the hearer a choice). It seems then, that for this group of respondents, politeness is not a major use of vague language, as was also evident in question A.4.a. One wonders if the cultural background of the respondents did not influence their perceptions. This is because African culture does not operate on negative politeness (owing to the spirit of 'ubuntu') as much as western culture does. In fact, politeness in other cultures has been known to operate differently to what Brown and Levinson (1987) propound (Mullany 2004).

Responses to question C.7 did not demonstrate any marked gender differences. Percentages showed that the majority of respondents (91%) opted for the subtle use of vague language to withhold information. Only one female and one male indicated genuine lack of knowledge as the reason for such language.

Question C.8 touched on an ethical academic issue. An overwhelming majority (85%) responded that the speaker had violated academic ethics. However, there were no significant gender differences reflected in the responses. This maybe due to the same assumptions proposed for the analysis of the data from the recorded meetings. That is, in the academic context, factors such as status, education, position etc., may influence participants' language use more than gender.

Section D

Section D probed tolerance in vague language use. Questions were developed to establish female and male responses in this regard. Cross-tabulations were performed on all the questions in section D to determine any links. The only statistically significant association detected was in question D.6.

Table 8 (shaded sections show questions with significant differences in responses)

| | Females | Males |
|--|----------------|--------------|
| Q.D.1 A garage quotes roughly R350 for vehicle repairs. When the vehicle is received the bill amounts to R390. How do you feel? | | |
| Acceptable as quote was roughly R350 | 19 | 28 |
| Unacceptable | 28 | 25 |
| Q.D.2 You invite friends to your house for around 8 o'clock. They only arrive around 9 o'clock and offer no excuse. How do you feel? | | |
| You said around 20:00, so 21:00 is acceptable | 2 | 7 |
| Your friends are unacceptably late | 43 | 48 |
| Q.D.3 You were told your journey would last six hours or so. In fact it lasts seven and a half hours. How do you feel? | | |
| The information is more or less correct | 18 | 32 |
| The information is misleading | 27 | 23 |
| Q.D.4 You book your child into a school that advertises approximately 40 students per class. When you visit the school you find 42, 46 and even 48 students per class! How do you feel? | | |
| The information is more or less correct | 11 | 5 |
| The information is misleading | 25 | 36 |
| All sizes are acceptable | 9 | 14 |
| Q.D.5 A hall that can accommodate around 1000 people is hired. 1267 persons arrive and are admitted. There is damage to the hall due to overcrowding and the owner wants to sue. How do you feel? | | |
| Justified in thinking around 1000 includes 1267 | 9 | 14 |
| It's wrong to allow more than 1000 people | 36 | 41 |
| Q.D.6 You are requested to attend a meeting at 10:00. The meeting does not start until 10:15. How do you feel? | | |
| Unacceptable | 30 | 16 |
| 15 Min wait is reasonable | 9 | 27 |
| Totally acceptable | 7 | 11 |

Choices made as regards questions D.1 and D.2 showed that there was no significant association with gender. However, fewer females (19%) than males (28%) felt that a longer interval for the vague expression in question D 1 was acceptable. Channell (1994:43) defines *interval* as a “continuous sequence of whole numbers and parts of numbers, or real numbers”. In other words, interval refers to the range of numbers surrounding the approximated figure. It seems that the women had less tolerance for longer intervals assigned to approximated figures than the men. Question D.3 also showed more male tolerance of longer intervals in relation to vague expressions. Only 18% of females, compared to 32% of males, felt the difference assigned to the vague figure was ‘ok’. It seems the men in the group are more tolerant of longer intervals or assign longer intervals to the use of vague numbers than the women. Channell’s (1994:44) study showed that length assigned to interval is affected by a number of factors – situation and linguistic context being two of them. Perhaps gender may be included, as responses in this study show.

The women’s minimal tolerance of longer intervals between approximations and actual figures was evident in question D.4. Though chi square test results were not significant, more females (11%) than males (4%) felt that more than 40 is unacceptable for an approximation of **about** 40. No significant gender difference was evident for question D. 5. Instead, there was a high intolerance of both males and females regarding the interval on the number approximation. Responses to question D.6 were worthy of note and in line with the argument /explanation presented above concerning male –female tolerance to intervals of approximation. Chi square tests showed a significance of .050. Results should however be taken with caution since the figure is borderline. Nevertheless, they tie in with earlier responses, which show that the women are less tolerant of longer intervals than the men. 30% of the females expected the meeting to start at ten o’clock exactly, whereas 16% of the men had that expectation. Again, 27% of the men thought a 15-minute wait was reasonable, whereas only 9% of the women thought so. Furthermore, 11% of the men compared to a minimal 7% of the women indicated that they had no problem with 15 minutes’ wait.

Question Q.D.6 showed that females view punctuality more favourably than males. This distinction in timing tended to contradict views expressed earlier in this study that the males were more precise in their statements and actions.

Here, the argument that status, education, position, professionalism, etc may be playing a more dominant role in the work place than gender mechanisms can be advanced. It seems that in this group, responses indicate that men are more tolerant of intervals in approximations than women. One wonders if the females are not projecting an attitude of professionalism rather than 'genderism'. This goes to show that one should be cautious in projecting gender to the exclusion of all other factors.

4.5 Summary of questionnaire data

The responses to the questionnaire have established female-male perceptions of vague language use, in relation to context, gender, functions, acceptability and tolerance. The responses did not evidence a generally marked difference between men and women. However, responses to certain questions showed significant associations in relation to gender. The women respondents were less tolerant of longer intervals than the men. However, with regard to context, the men showed more sensitivity to the contextual use of vague language than the women. The view that women are more polite than men was not portrayed in the answers given in this study. There were no marked gender differences regarding the use of politeness as a function of vague language. Indeed, as Mullany (2004) acknowledges, gender may not be the only salient variable affecting linguistic behaviour. It seems that in this study, factors such as education, status, position, and professionalism influence respondents' perceptions more than gender.

4.6 Discussion

The data presented in this study have revealed some differentiation between males' and females' vague language use. Possible explanations will be considered for these results. While the sample is not extremely large, it can be considered, with some justification as noted earlier, to be representative of academic staff members of the former University of Transkei. Nevertheless, great care should be taken to avoid unwarranted generalisations.

Although sexual differentiation of speech is expected to occur in mixed-sex interactions, the literature review has highlighted the need to involve a wide range of factors in the explanation of such sexual differentiation of speech: we should therefore not expect to discover an adequate explanation in terms of gender alone.

In line with the community of practice approach, the research on language and gender has been undertaken within a specific context. On the basis of the sample (i.e. recordings of meetings), females were vaguer than their male counterparts. However, with regard to their perceptions concerning vague language use, the differences were not so pronounced, except for a sensitivity to context and tolerance of vague indications of time.

The fact that the females in the study used more vague expressions than their male counterparts may strengthen the argument that females are tentative. However, the study also showed that in some contexts the men were more tentative. One should note that the male tentativeness in the study was revealed by means of a questionnaire and might not be a reflection of real life situation. The question of whether the gender variable affects vague language use can be answered in the affirmative. In as much as the females used more vague expressions at the meetings, they can be said to be more tentative. Nevertheless, the prevalent use of vague expressions cannot be explained as a sign of weakness or subservience (Lakoff 1975; Swacker 1976), since responses to the questionnaire were to the contrary. Instead, as Preisler (1986: 288) explains:

...when women speak more tentatively than men it is not generally because they are cowed by male chauvinists who force them into a defensive position, but rather that men and women have developed sex-specific speech patterns...

In other words, the use of vague language in itself does not indicate that the speaker is being relegated to an inferior or weak position. On the contrary, sex- or gender-specific interactional language is an embodiment of men's and women's different social experience. Put succinctly, the prevalent use of vague expressions by the women, in the present study, and their preference for certain vague terms, lend support to, and can be explained in terms of the *difference* theory. The women used vagueness to project their female social experience. For example, the use of vague language seems to have been

directed towards mitigating their utterances since women according to Shimanoff (1997:219) do not impose or do not like to impose.

This of course does not mean that male dominance in language behaviour is a thing of the past. Although the use of vague expressions to withhold information was not a predominant feature among the men, as was expected of dominant males, the men still played out their power in language behaviour. Most of them indicated that they would not use vague language to show lack of information. One wonders then whether they would rather directly agree to not knowing. Their answers to question C 2 indicate that they would not. Asked what their response would be to a stranger asking for the distance between two destinations, none of the men opted for the, 'I don't know' option. The underlying message, from their responses to the questions above, could be that they do not in fact lack information. This may be explained as a way of projecting their power and authority. As indicated earlier they socialise in terms of a display of power and assertiveness and will generally not acknowledge lack, or weakness. The women on the other hand, agreed to the use of vague language when information is lacking. By so doing they abided by the Gricean principles. In as much as male dominance and assertiveness is played out in the men's responses to the above questions, one could also add that they abide by such principles less than the females do.

Interestingly enough, the men's responses to question C 1 were more tentative than the women's. Asked what their response would be to an invitation to a dinner date by an acquaintance, the women were more definite and answered either 'yes' or 'no'. Very few of them (less than a third) opted for the vague responses. Most of the men (more than half), however, chose the vague, tentative answers. This shows that tentativeness is not just a female feature and that men might be tentative too, depending on the topic and context. Conversely, women could also be specific and definite, again depending on the topic and the context. Women's tentativeness is therefore subjective and may not be used to blindly describe their language as weak. I argue that women's predominant use of vague language, or their being tentative in certain instances, is for a reason: to mitigate

utterances and save face, in accordance with their caring, considerate, nature. As Barron (1971: 30) puts it their language is 'other-oriented'.

Responses to questions concerning politeness did not show that females use vague expressions mainly for politeness, as was predicted. Instead the males and the females responded equally to these questions. Perhaps the females equated politeness with deference or possibly they felt that the academic environment did not allow for vagueness and tentativeness. However, as Labov (1975:213) points out, what people say they do may be different from what they actually do. Even though the females' perception is that they do not utter vague expressions mainly to be polite, an observation may reveal the contrary. In actual fact, the data gathered by means of observation and recording showed that the types of vague expressions used by the females (e.g. hedges, expressions of fuzziness) were directed towards mitigation and face-saving.

An interesting finding that emerged was the formal/informal nature of departmental meetings. The generally formal context of meetings was not so formal in regard to the departmental meetings observed. Although features of informal speech (e.g. overlapping, speakers gaining the floor by themselves through other means) were not observed at the meetings, the language used was largely informal. There was a prevalent use of various types of vague expressions. Vague expressions can be and are used in formal settings, if appropriately, as Channell (1994:03) explains. However, the prevalence of vagueness and the types of vague expressions used, for example words that denote vagueness by choice, expressions of fuzziness, and empty words (e.g. **thing, stuff**) make the language quite informal. The word 'stuff' is a slang word and should not be used in a formal context. Perhaps, the mode of the meeting (it being a discussion) and its oral nature contributed to the use of informal language. The explanation given for the prevalent use of informal language in a formal context concerns the frequency of interaction and the degree of distance in the relationships of the interactants. The frequent interaction of the participants and the seemingly low degree of distance between them may have contributed to the use of informal language (specifically certain vague expressions such as **thing, stuff like that**, etc.) at the formal departmental meeting. As a result of the

informal types of vague expressions used at these meetings, the context cannot be classified as strictly formal.

Given that the women used more vague expressions than the men, at these meetings, female language can be classified as more informal. However, other factors or variables may also be at play. The informality of female language may be used to explain their low sensitivity to context in relation to vague language. For instance, responses to questions probing sensitivity to the contextual use of vague language showed that females were less sensitive to context in the use of vague language. This lack of sensitivity could be explained in terms their informality in language use. In other words, their language naturally leans towards informality in whatever context, and might not alter distinctly from formal to informal in different contexts. As a result, they do not perceive that their use of vague expressions would change distinctly in different contexts.

Finally, do the perceptions and interpretations of vague language use by men and women differ? The analysis and the explanations presented above indicate that, though there are overlaps, perceptions and interpretations of vague language use do differ with gender (as demonstrated by this group of academic staff members). For instance, the men showed more sensitivity to context in using vague expressions than the females. Also, whereas the females may be making use of vague expressions to mitigate utterances and to save face, in accordance with their gender socialisation (avoiding conflict, not imposing, being considerate, reconciliatory and collaborative), the men would be using this language feature to project male authority and assertiveness. Such differences in the use of vague language within mix-sex interactions could cause conflict and misunderstandings. However as Lehrer (1975:922) points out:

...speakers probably do not communicate with each other nearly as well as they think they do, since they usually have no way of knowing that others apply words differently...

In relation to vague language, it can be pointed out that though communication may seem to be progressing well, the possibility is that the men and the women may be sitting with different interpretations and perceptions of the vague language being used by each gender

group. It is consequently hoped that the study has thrown some light on the male and female use of vague language.

Furthermore, it is hoped that not only will the findings contribute to an increased awareness of the nature of male and female differences in vague language use (perhaps debunking a few myths in the process) but that they will also lead to pedagogical repercussions which will make teachers and parents alert to gender differentiation, or rather construction of gender identities through the use of vague language.

CHAPTER FIVE

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary

Studies on language and gender, currently emerging strongly as a topic in sociolinguistic research, have considered the differences within male and female language use, and the construction of gender identities. Some have focused on the use of language to perform different functions; others have demonstrated how language is used by males and females to construct identities. Within these research areas, one of the aspects of language that has not been explored is the use of vague language.

The dissertation has attempted to fill one aspect of this gap by investigating the gender aspects of vague language. This has been undertaken by analysing male and female language use in a formal context, that of departmental meetings, and exploring the perceptions of male and female academic staff members regarding the use of vague language in formal and informal contexts.

By means of observation and recording, data as to male and female vague language use in a 'formal' context (departmental meetings) were collected. A questionnaire was also administered using academic staff members to provide data on their perceptions of vague language in formal and informal contexts.

The analysis confirms and supports the view that males and females exhibit different linguistic behaviours in accordance with social interactional norms. Gender differences in the use of vague language were revealed: the females were vaguer than the males, and evidenced preferences for certain vague expressions. The predominant use of vague expressions by the former can be explained in a number of ways:

For one thing it shows that females may be more informal in their language use than men, at least as regards the group in the study. Barron (1971: 30) describes female language as emotional and synthetic, and adds that it is concerned with psychological states and

“functions of objects for interpersonal use”. The informality could be likened to Barron’s description. This of course does not mean that the language is inferior, but rather that females use language according to their gender socialization, in other words, ‘doing gender’. Women’s language was also found to be tentative in that they used hedges more often than the men. However it was argued that their tentativeness was for a purpose – to save face; mitigate utterances; and generally to make utterances ‘other’-oriented.

There was also a predominant use of vague expressions for a context that was supposed to be formal, which supports Channell’s (1994: 4, 5) view that “vagueness in communication is part of our taken-for-granted world... and is present in a great deal of language use”.

5.2 Suggestions for further research

While the study has suggested certain possible answers, it also raises numerous questions requiring further research. The observation and recording have provided certain data with respect to usage, but the reasons why males and females made certain choices in the use of vague expressions were not explored. Could it be in response to societal norms or other variables? A further probing, in the form of interviews, in order to establish why the choices were made is needed in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the gender differences in vague language use.

The question as to how gender differences would influence vague language use both in a strictly formal context (where participants do not interact frequently, and where distance in relationships is great) and in a very informal context (a conversation or informal chat among friends on non-serious topics) also needs to be answered. Research is necessary in these contexts to compare vague language use in the differing contexts.

In addition, the topic of the way in which vague language is used to construct gender identities should be addressed. Although the issue was touched on briefly in this thesis, an in-depth study of how women are shaping and constructing their identities through the use of vague language would doubtless result in further insights. The researcher intends

taking this investigation up and exploring how women have used language, specifically vague language, to construct their identities in the workplace in the present era of women's emancipation, gender equality and empowerment.

Furthermore, as current debates on the postmodernists/ social constructionists views on language and gender were not comprehensively discussed, the researcher hopes to take up further research for a doctoral degree, in which these views would be expounded in relation to the use of vague language.

To what extent can this small group of academics be representative of the behaviour of other academics and the findings replicable in similar contexts? More studies making use of academics from different institutions should be conducted. Lastly, a larger sample would be more representative and enable stronger generalisations to be arrived at, especially if academics are from different cultural backgrounds, of different races and in different countries.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

GENDER ASPECTS OF VAGUE LANGUAGE USE

FACULTY/DEPARTMENT.....

PLEASE TICK THE APPROPRIATE OPTION

1: Personal Details

1.1 AGE:

a. 20-29... b. 30-39... c. 40-49... d. 50-59... e. 60-69... f. 70-79...

1.2 POSITION:

a. JUNIOR LECTURER... b. LECTURER... c. LECTURER A... d. SENIOR LECTURER... e. ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR... f. PROFESSOR...

1.3 HIGHEST QUALIFICATION:

a. B A... b. B A Honours... c. M A... d. PhD...

1.4 GENDER:

a. F... b. M...

SECTION A

Please read the following news item on a fire outbreak at a scrap yard, and give your opinion in answer to the questions below. The extract contains a number of in-exact and indistinct expressions underlined.

A huge pile of cars caught fire yesterday as some scrap yard workers used cutting tools and welding torches. Firemen believe petrol ignited in the tank of one of the cars waiting to be broken up. It took firemen more than four hours to bring the blaze under control. Thick black smoke was seen for up to two kilometers around the vicinity of the yard. About twenty firemen used several thousands of gallons to put out the flames. They drew the water from a river over a kilometer away. Chief fire officer, Alan Marshall, said about 150 cars were destroyed in the fire but more than ten times that number were saved. The fire began at around two-o'clock and was finally put out at 6.30.

1. Do you think the frequent use of indistinct expressions in the extract is appropriate for the context?

- a. Yes b. No

If 'Yes' select (i) or (ii)

i) Yes, the situation did not allow the reporter to be exact and distinct. He could not have the exact figures

ii) Yes, (give your own reason)-----

If 'No' select '(iii) or (iv)

iii) No, a news item in a formal context should have distinct expressions.

iv) No, (give your own reason)-----

2. Do you think indistinct expressions as exemplified above are prevalent in your own speech/use of language?

- a. Yes
b. No
c. Not sure

2.1. In which context do you think you would use them more?

- a. Formal context (e.g. meeting)
b. Informal context (e.g. conversation)
c. Both equally

Why.....

3. Do you consider the use of indistinct expressions as appropriate in any context?

- a. Yes
b. No
c. Unsure

4. From the options given below, choose any function (s) you would use indistinct expressions for:

- a. Politeness
b. Withholding information
c. Genuine lack of information or exact details
d. Memory loss
e. Absence of equivalent word in language
f. Denigration

NB: You may choose more than one function but number them 1-6 to show their hierarchical order.

5. Do you think that women would use these expressions more often than men?

- a. Yes
b. No
c. Unsure

Give reasons.....
.....

6. Would men be more exact and distinct in their language use than women?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Unsure

6.1. If yes in which context?

- a. Formal context
- b. Informal context
- c. Any context
- d. Give reasons.....

SECTION B

Read the following utterances and indicate if (for each of the underlined expressions) you would use a similar expression in the given context.

If not please write down what expression you are likely to use.

1. A conference presenter in his / her paper states of the subjects he used for his/her study.

We've got about five or six of them but I'm only going to talk about three of them.

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- © Likely expression.....

2. A speaker describing a well- known philosopher.

“He's written five or six articles and they're all very much the same”.

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) Likely expression.....

3. A tutor complaining about the average mark of his / her class.

“It is something around the twenty percent mark, and it's never changed”

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) Likely expression.....

4. Extract from an article on a Mount Everest climber.

“He hopes to set up an advance camp around 20,000 feet in early July”

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- © Likely expression.....

5. Police spokesman on a radio news broadcast making a statement about hijackers on the N1.

“ I can tell you that approximately eleven people are helping us with our enquiries.
(a) Yes
(b) No
(c) Likely expression

6. Pinky talking about a Christmas tree in a conversation.
“I had a Christmas tree some time ago that my mother managed to keep for about three years.”
(a) Yes
(b) No
(c) Likely expression.....

7. Kaya discussing his dentists’ appointment with a friend.
“ I wonder what time I’ve got to go to the dentist. Its always around four o’clock.”
(a) Yes
(b) No
(c) Likely expression.....

8. Kaya to a hiker asking for directions.
“ The valley is roughly sixty kilometers from here”
(a) Yes
(b) No
(c) Likely expression.....

SECTION C

Please give an honest response to each of the following situations.

(1). You have been approached by an acquaintance of the opposite sex for a dinner date.
What will be your response?
(a). Yes
(b). No
(c). I am not sure... maybe...I will think about it
(d). Other.....
Give a reason for your choice.....

(2). When a stranger asks you about the distance from the Holiday Inn to the city centre,
do you:
(a). Give exact kilometers e.g. 5 kilometers?
(b). Say I don’t know?
(c). Use an approximation e.g. about 5 km?
(d). Other.....
Give reasons.....

(3). Your unmarried sister has just turned 30. In responding to how old she is, would
you:

- (a). Give her exact age?
 - (b). Say, 'I don't know'?
 - (c). Answer about 29?
 - (d). Answer about 30?
 - (e). Late twenties?
 - (d) Other.....
- Give a reason for your answer.....

(4). Susan tells her boyfriend about his friend whom she doesn't particularly like.
 "I met your friend at the Park, Michael whatsisname..."

Do you think the underlined expression was used for derogatory reasons or was it because the speaker genuinely did not remember the surname?

- (a) Derogatory
- (b) Not remember
- (c) Other.....

(5) A builder explaining the length of time required for a job.

" Well, the quote might be done within three or four days but the job won't be done for at least five weeks."

Do you think the speaker is genuinely unsure of the time frames or does he not want to commit himself to specific time?

- (a) Genuinely unsure of time frames
- (a) Does not want to commit
- (b) Other.....

(6). Siphos friend who has just given up alcohol drinking pays Siphos a visit.

In offering him something to drink Siphos asks:

Would you like a drink – glass of juice or something?

Do you think the underlined expression is added for politeness purposes or to offer the guest a choice?

- (a) Politeness
- (b) Choice
- (c) Other.....

(7). An advertisement on Vichy skin products.

" Vichy would like you to receive this pack of their cleansing milk and tonic lotion for R120. This does save you forty or so rands. But it is nothing compared to the kindness you will be showing your skin."

Is it true that the speaker genuinely does not know the exact amount of savings or simply withholds the information for a reason?

- (a) Genuinely does not know
- (b) Withholding information for a reason
- (c) Other.....

(8). A researcher, presenting figures for his research, overstates the figures: 'over 200 kilometers' for 200 kilometers, and 'up to 100 %' for 98 %.

In your opinion has the researcher violated academic ethics or is he still within the convention?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No
- (c) Give reasons.....

SECTION D

Please answer these questions by circling ONE of the options:

1. A garage tells you that repairs to your car will cost roughly R350. When you get your car back you find that the repair bill is R390. How do you feel?
 - A. You think that the figure of R390 is acceptable because you were told roughly R350.
 - B. You are very unhappy because you think that the figure of R390 is unacceptable because R390 is far beyond R350.
2. You invite some friends to come to your house at around 8- o- clock. Your friends do not arrive until 9- o- clock. They have no excuse. How do you feel?
 - A. You feel that 9 o'clock is all right because around 8 – o- clock would still include 9 o'clock.
 - B. You feel that your friends are unacceptably late.
3. You are told that your journey will last six hours or so. In fact it lasted 7 and half hours. How do you feel?
 - A. That the information you were given was more or less correct.
 - B. That the information you were given was very misleading.
4. You book your child into a school, which advertises that class size will be approximately 40 pupils per class. When you visit the school you find that some classes have 42, 46 and even 48 children in the class. How do you feel?
 - A. None of the classes are acceptable.
 - B. 42 is acceptable but 46 and 48 are not.
 - C. All of them are acceptable.
5. The hall that Mr. X. booked for the concert was said to hold around 1000 people. 1267 came to the concert and Mr. X. admitted them all. There is damage to the hall because of the crowds and the owner of the hall wants to take Mr. X. to court for admitting too many people. How do you feel?
 - A. Mr. X. was justified in thinking that around 1000 would include 1267.
 - B. Mr. X. was wrong to allow 267 people more than 1000.
6. You are told by the HoD to attend a meeting at 10h00. The meeting does not start until 10h15.
 - A. You are upset because you expected the meeting to start at 10h00 as you were told.
 - B. You are disappointed but understand that 15 minutes is acceptable time for getting people together.
 - C. You accept and do not see anything wrong because you expected the meeting to start between 10h00 and 10h15.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION