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Pragmatic Functions of General Extenders by ELF Speakers: A Case Study of *or something (like that)*

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Abstract

Vague language is a crucial aspect of everyday communication, and general extenders are an integral part of it. This paper examines the pragmatic functions of *or something (like that)*, the most frequently used general extenders in the daily communication of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers in the Asian Corpus of English (ACE). The analysis reveals that general extenders serve a vital role in indicating further information through examples, expressing uncertainty, and conveying politeness. Overall, ELF speakers utilize general extenders to effectively achieve communication goals, facilitate interactions, and enhance mutual understanding. This study offers insights into the characteristics of vague language use and pragmatic functions of general extenders by ELF speakers.

Keywords: vague language; general extenders; ELF speakers; pragmatic functions; Asian Corpus of English (ACE)

1. Introduction

Language vagueness is a widespread phenomenon characterized by imprecise or nonspecific language expression. This can be attributed to inherent vagueness, which is a fundamental property of linguistic expression, and intentional vagueness, where speakers purposefully introduce ambiguity into a syntactically and ideologically complete discourse. Vagueness has been a subject of study in various fields, including philosophy (Williamson, 1994) and cognitive pragmatics (Ungerer & Schmid, 1996). In this study, vagueness specifically pertains to pragmatic vagueness, focusing on intentionally vague language forms (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Channell, 1994).

Vague language is a crucial aspect of everyday communication, serving significant pragmatic purposes and fostering interaction. One prominent form of vague language, general extenders, has garnered considerable attention from scholars (Channell 1994; Overstreet 1999; Cutting 2012; Cheng 2007; Zhang 2012), positioning it as an important component of vague language.

This paper delves into two prominent areas of discourse research: intentional vagueness in language usage and the utilization of general extenders (such as *and so on*, *et cetera*, and *or something*, etc.) by ELF users to convey pragmatic intentions. The study not only examines the use of vague language as a communication strategy in the ELF communication contexts but also analyzes the use of general extenders and its pragmatic functions

in oral interaction. By combining these two studies, the aim is to enhance our understanding of characteristics of general extenders use among ELF interlocutors and provide insights into the pragmatic performance of ELF users in their daily communication.

2. General extenders

2.1 Definition and classification of general extenders

General extenders are tags that are added to the end of sentences to provide non-specific or general references, thereby extending grammatically complete utterances (Overstreet & Yule, 1997: 251). Examples of general extenders include *or something*, *and so on* and *and everything*. Overstreet argued that general extenders have a general linguistic form rather than a specific one, and they extend a sentence that would otherwise be grammatically complete. Typically, general extenders take the form of conjunctions (such as *and* and *or*) followed by a noun phrase (such as *thing* and *stuff*) or an indefinite pronoun (like *anything* and *everything*). Overstreet (1999) divided general extenders into two classes based on the included conjunctions. Adjunctive general extenders are guided by the conjunction *and*, as in *and everything* and *and stuff*, while disjunctive general extenders begin with the conjunction *or*, as in *or anything* and *or something*. Overstreet noted that sometimes conjunctions could be omitted, such as in the sentence, "I show myself about eighty feet out, *something like that*" (Overstreet, 1999: 11). It is important to mention that some forms, like *and on* and *or so*, differ in structure from general extenders because these conjunctions are not followed by a noun phrase. However, due to their similar meaning and pragmatic function, they are still considered general extenders (O'Keeffe, 2004:9).

2.2 Previous studies on general extenders

General extenders, as a significant aspect of vague language, have been the subject of extensive research since the mid-1970s, with numerous researchers contributing to this body of work (e.g. Brotherton, 1976; Dines, 1978/1980; Dubois, 1992; Britain, 1992; Stubbe & Holmes, 1995; Overstreet & Yule, 1997; Overstreet, 1999/2014; O'Keefe, 2004;

Cheshire, 2007; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010; Levey, 2012). The majority of these studies have focused on the constraints and influences of social, grammatical, discourse, and pragmatic factors on the use of English general extenders. Since 2000, research on general extenders has experienced rapid development, with new research focusing on emerging topics. Scholars have moved beyond studying general extenders in English and its variants, and have started conducting cross-language comparative studies on general extenders (Overstreet, 2005; Terraschke & Holmes, 2007; Terraschke, 2010) and exploring general extenders in other languages (Secova, 2014; Jensen & Christensen, 2015).

On one hand, many researchers have examined the form and frequency of general extenders used by second language speakers. For example, Hasselgren (2002) compared and analyzed the use of particle words (including *and stuff*, *or something*, *sort of*, and *kind of*) by native English speakers and native Norwegian learners in spoken tests. The study found that the frequency and diversity of particle words were positively correlated with oral fluency, and that L2 learners used fewer particle words than native speakers, which negatively impacted their oral fluency. Similarly, Drave (2002) observed that Hong Kong English learners with Cantonese as their mother tongue did not use general extenders composed of *stuff* in informal conversations, and native speakers used *or something* significantly more frequently than L2 learners. Aijmer (2004) found that advanced English learners whose native language is Swedish used as many pragmatic markers as native speakers, but used significantly fewer general extenders. Furthermore, Gilquin (2008) noted that English learners with French as their native language used general extenders less frequently than native speakers. In a study by Fernandez & Yuldashev (2011), the use of general extenders in English conversation between native and non-native American speakers was compared based on 524 computer-mediated real-time interactive utterances with native English speakers. The findings revealed that non-native speakers used more adjunctive general extenders than disjunctive general

extenders, whereas native speakers favored disjunctive general extenders. However, both groups tended to use the simplified form more frequently than the extended form. In terms of frequency, non-native speakers used adjunctive general extenders more often than native speakers, but used disjunctive general extenders less frequently. Fernandez & Yuldashev (2011) posited that, overall, non-native speakers used slightly fewer general extenders than native speakers. Importantly, the study found that this decrease was not solely determined by the English proficiency of non-native speakers, as the non-native speakers in the study were proficient English users. Furthermore, in Zhang's study (2015), the comparison and analysis of general extenders used by Chinese college English learners and native English speakers revealed notable disparities. The BNC spoken corpus contained 106 general extenders, whereas COLSEC had only 24, with five unique expressions not found in the BNC corpus. This disparity indicated a significant difference in the diversity of general extenders used by Chinese college English learners and native speakers. Additionally, frequency statistics showed that the overall frequency of the remaining 19 general extenders in COLSEC was 271, with a standard frequency of 371 times per million words. In contrast, the BNC spoken corpus contained 106 general extenders with an overall frequency of 11072 and a standard frequency of 1055 times per million words. The Chi-square value between the two sets of data was 443.47, indicating that the frequency of Chinese college English learners using general extenders in oral English was substantially lower than that of native speakers. This stark contrast could be attributed to differences in corpus types, as COLSEC's corpus is derived from the oral component of China's National College English Test, while BNC's spoken corpus primarily draws from informal conversations and a variety of contexts, including formal business activities and government meetings.

On the other hand, the functions of general extenders in the speech of EFL learners has been extensively investigated. Dines (1980) was a pioneering scholar in this area, challenging the previously held belief that general extenders were redundant components of discourse. Dines (1980: 22) argued that general extenders served the explicit function of prompting the listener to interpret its preceding component as an example of a broader general category. This suggests that the main role of general extenders is to encourage the listener to infer the general concepts implied by the speaker based on the specific examples provided. Similarly, Channell (1994) suggested that general extenders served an exemplification function, functioning as vague category identifiers that referred to related categories. Overstreet and Yule (1997) focused on the interpersonal function of adjunctive general extenders, proposing that their use by the speaker implied the existence of additional information that needed not be explicitly stated, and invited the listener to interpret the discourse using shared background knowledge. This use of adjunctive general extenders was considered a positive politeness strategy. Overstreet (1999) provided a comprehensive and systematic discussion of the interpersonal function of general extenders, emphasizing that it served as the fundamental function. She suggested that their use implied shared knowledge and experience and indicated the speaker's attitude towards the expressed information or the listener, with the specific function being determined by the communicative context and the discourse constructed by both parties. Aijmer (2002) classified the interpersonal function of general extenders, proposing that adjunctive general extenders mainly served concretization and intensifying functions, while disjunctive general extenders acted as approximators and expressions of tentativeness. Martinez (2011) found that general extenders indicated the end of reported speech, but noted that this function was not independent and was superimposed with other functions. Aijmer (2015) contended that general extenders contributed to the fluency of speech, allowing the speaker to organize their speech smoothly and spontaneously. Thus, the use of general extenders enabled speakers to articulate their thoughts naturally.

To sum up, while numerous scholars have examined the use of general extenders, most

research has focused on analyzing the forms, frequency, and functions of general extenders by comparing EFL learners' speech with that of native speakers. There has been less emphasis on studying the use of general extenders among ELF speakers. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the pragmatic functions of general extenders in the natural language corpus of ELF users in ACE.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Research question

What pragmatic functions are expressed by ELF learners using general extenders in ELF communications?

3.2 Instruments

The Asian Corpus of English (ACE) was developed under the leadership of Andy Kirkpatrick, encompassing a total of 1 million words. This corpus is comprised of naturally occurring oral interactions among ELF speakers (non-native English speakers) from a variety of Asian countries, including China, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Brunei, Japan

and Vietnam. Data was gathered between 2009 and 2014, spanning a range of events such as interviews, press conferences, and seminars. ACE researchers categorized the corpus into five sub-corpora based on content, including education, leisure, business, professional organizations, and professional research or science.

3.3 Research methods

Initially, this study selected 5 adjunctive general extenders and 5 disjunctive general extenders as potential research subjects. These 10 general extenders were then investigated within ACE to assess their frequency of occurrence, ultimately singling out the most frequently used general extender as the focal point for subsequent research on the pragmatic function of general extenders (refer to Table 1 for specific details). Following the determination that *or something (like that)* was the most commonly employed general extender, this study employed qualitative analysis to summarize the pragmatic functions demonstrated by ELF learners using *or something (like that)* within ACE.

Table 1 Frequency of general extenders in ACE corpus

Adjunctive GEs	frequency	Disjunctive GEs	frequency
and so on	48	or something (like that)	122
and everything	24	or whatever	26
and stuff (like that)	24	or so	12
et cetera	10	or anything	11
and things (like that)	8	or things	2

Note: GEs refers to general extenders.

4. Analysis

Building on prior research, the analysis of the ACE data corroborates the various pragmatic functions of general extenders in spoken English within the contexts of ELF communication. In this study, these functions are broadly categorized as indicating more information about the ongoing discourse through giving examples, expressing uncertainty regarding the information conveyed or the accuracy of the expression in form, and demonstrating politeness to maintain the interlocutor's face and foster a positive communicative environment.

4.1 Exemplification

The exemplification function is a highly significant aspect of general extenders. The presence of general extenders can indicate to the listener that the speaker is providing examples to clarify a previously mentioned general concept, facilitating a clearer understanding of the conversation. Previous research has indicated that general extenders are frequently utilized to enumerate or categorize abstract ideas or general concepts (Dines, 1980; Jefferson, 1990; Channell, 1994). This usage is also prevalent in interactions between ELF speakers. Upon examining the usage of *or something (like that)* in corpus of ACE, it was

observed that *or something (like that)* is frequently combined with certain conjunctions (such as *like*, etc.) to convey an exemplification function.

In Example 1, S1 employed the *like+or something* structure to clarify that by basic skills, he/she was referring to proficiencies in using software such as Word, Office, Excel, and so on. The general extenders *or something (like that)* inherently conveyed an enumeration, with the use of *like* serving as the precursor to *or something*. The combination of these elements rendered the speaker's expression more transparent in both content and structure, thereby facilitating mutual understanding between the speaker and the listener. Consequently, upon hearing S1's list, S2 promptly comprehended and acknowledged S1's examples, and then added proficiency in PowerPoint to construct a successful and joyful communication.

Example 1

S2: and then i teach per session

S1: o:h

S2: that's every weekend

S1: so you just teach them *like* the basic skill *like* word office excel **or something**

S2: yes yes yes er m s office er:m powerpoint mostly powerpoint

S1: o:h so if i have a question about powerpoint you're the right person to ask am i right

S2: @@ @@ @@@ yes i can

In Example 2, when S4 discussed the purpose of telecom companies' investments in rural or remote areas was to facilitate greater convenience and improve services for local residents, he/she further elaborated on the range of services by using the expression of "*including...or something like that*". The word *including* can be interpreted as a signal for providing additional explanation of the service's contents. Subsequently, the use of *or something like that* indicates the culmination of the enumeration. Such an expression conveys to the listener that the previously mentioned health and education are not the exclusive components of the service. It is evident

that the general extender *or something like that* serves a pivotal role here, guiding the comprehension of information and prompting the listener to focus on and understand the general expression and specific explanations preceding it, thus fostering communication and mutual understanding between the parties.

Example 2

S4: so it's words but for the er like kind of sim card and handset its really depend on the rural area and is it's not possible (.) to have sim card

SX-f: hm hm hm

SS: hm:

S4: so the big one that big big telecommunication company they invest on on the especially for rural areas and remote areas x yup so that they can communicate easier and to get better service for *including* health and education **or something like that**

SX-f: hm::

SX-f: hm

SX-f: {exhales}

4.2 *Indicating uncertainty*

Uncertainty can be categorized into two types: uncertainty concerning the accuracy of information content, and uncertainty regarding the expression form. In ELF communication contexts, general extenders are utilized to express both kinds of uncertainty, particularly the latter type of uncertainty. Due to the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the communicators and the complexity of the communication environments, challenges are inevitable in the process of ELF communication. Especially when communicators lack proficiency in language expression or knowledge, instances of uncertainty or language ambiguity may emerge. In the corpus of ACE, one of the most prevalent functions of general extenders is to express uncertainty about word or phrase choice. When uncertain about the word or phrase to use in a particular discourse, ELF speakers often employ the form "approximation+general extender". Here, approximation denotes a word that conveys the

intended concept or meaning, but the speakers cannot guarantee the accuracy of its expression form. In the contexts of ELF communication, such vague expressions do not indicate communication failure, but rather serve as a successful communication strategy that promotes mutual understanding and seamless communication between parties.

In Example 3, there is uncertainty about the accuracy of the information content. During the discussion between S1 and S2 about a conflict involving a female teacher and her husband, S1 mentioned that the teacher cried and her student came to her house, and they were both angry because of the teacher's husband. All the descriptions and information provided are factual until the discussion comes to the reason for their anger towards the teacher's husband. S1 used the expression "leave her...*or something*, indicating hesitancy about whether the reason is truly that the teacher's husband left her. S1 further mentioned that she/he heard from the classmates about such information, emphasizing the uncertainty about the accuracy of this news.

Example 3

S2: uh:

S1: ya

S2: ( ) maybe

S1: and she was she was crying and her student her student came from [place1] and they they are angry for her husband why the guy leave her **or something** like this *i heard from the students*

S2: so already divorced or not?

S1: i don't know they after after some times er: i lost

S2: ( )

Example 4 illustrates uncertainty regarding the word choice when reporting thoughts. S1 mentioned seeing something the previous day, yet struggled to accurately describe it, resorting to the general extender to convey that the thing was similar to a raisin. Even though S1 did not provide the specific name of what was seen, he/she did provide the listener with information about the type

of the item and give him/her helpful cue to infer the thing S1 described. Consequently, S2 promptly corrected that it was not a raisin, but prunes. This example demonstrates the crucial role of general extenders in conveying the speaker's attitude towards a proposition, and utilizing the general extenders appropriately can enhance mutual understanding and communication efficiency.

Example 4

S2: @@@ i leave the fork here it is it's er good for fiber and vitamin c have you tried

before ah i think you got right

S1: i never eat before

S2: huh you did

S1: i saw yesterday i saw that is raisin **or something**

S2: it's not raisin it's prunes it's like i don't know what is prunes plum ah i don't know

S1: oh

S2: yeah i also don't know why you want to lose weight how you lose weight every day it's exercise you exercise every day now

4.3 *Conveying politeness*

The introduction of the face theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) has served as a foundation for numerous pragmatic studies that connect a speaker's speech during potentially face-threatening situations to their intention to honor the positive or negative face of the listener. According to Brown and Levinson, positive face generally signifies an individual's aspiration for acceptance and acknowledgment from others, while negative face pertains to the desire for non-coercion and independent choice. In addition, some researchers have integrated the study of general extenders with politeness issues and have observed that the use of general extenders is frequently employed as a politeness strategy by ELF interlocutors.

In Example 5, upon hearing S1's statement about being unable to sleep all day, S3 inquired if S1 had consumed something like coffee. This indicates that S3 attentively listened to S1's words and provided considerate responses, contributing to the

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fulfillment of S1's desire to be cared for and the creation of a positive and harmonious communication environment between the speakers.

Example 5

SS: @@@@@

S1: <@> the whole day i wasn't able to sleep

SS: @@@@

S3: <@> you didn't drink coffee **or something**?

S1: i drank

S3: like two

S1: i think as much coffee that

In example 6, S1 was engaging in the speech act of making suggestions, proposing to put a timer, get up, and go get water. However, a sequence of suggestions may significantly impinge on the listener's negative face. Consequently, S3 employed the use of general extender *or some thing like that* after "go get water" as a polite strategy to tenderly offer suggestions, thereby softening the tone and linguistic impact of the suggestions and minimizing harm to the listener's negative face. This approach is aimed at showing politeness to the interlocutor and preserving a harmonious relationship with the listener.

Example 6

S2: don't move

S1: you just want to complete it (.) then i'm like {alveolar click} but (.) [first name1] actually has a very good suggestion(.) just put a timer (.) every: forty-five minutes you just get up and (2)=

S3: mhm

S1: =go get water **or something like that** (.) yah

S2: yah yah (.) that's that's good

S3: @@@@@ do morning (.) exercises @@@@

S1: yah:: for him it's like o k just do your shoulder ma: (.) which is true you look ridiculous but after a while everyone knows that you (.) everyone should do that

Similarly, in Example 7, S1 and S2 engaged in a discussion about transportation choices,

revealing potential cultural or regional differences on the topic. Upon recognizing this, S2 attempted to understand and respect S1's decision. However, S2 still harbored concerns about the choice made by S1 and proposed a possible scenario in which S1's choice might lead to failure. Such a proposition could have been perceived as a potential threat to S1's face. Subsequently, S2 asked for S1's backup plan using the general extender *or something*, thereby returning the right of speech and decision-making to S1. This served the purpose of indicating that all the suggestions made by S2 were rooted in concern for S1, rather than meddling in S1's private affairs or questioning S1's decisions.

Example 7

S1: yes (.) that's why we don't always use

S2: oh

S1: because we have our own transport

S2: hm (.) but what if you don't have you cannot find (.) anyone to pick you up **or something**?

S1: e:rm (3) well then i guess that's the only choice.

S2: okay @@@

S1: yeah but i guess that the bus is erm (.) how much does it cost? for a bus ride

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on analyzing the utilization of general extenders in natural dialogues among ELF speakers in the corpus of ACE and explores their pragmatic functions, using *or something (like that)* as a specific example. The research demonstrates that the use of vague language, such as general extenders, is prevalent in the communication of ELF speakers, and serves significant pragmatic functions. Firstly, general extenders aid the listener in signifying information through examples for the ongoing dialogue and better comprehending the content and structure of the dialogue. Secondly, general extenders play a significant role in indicating uncertainty about the expressed information or the accuracy for the word choice in dialogues. Thirdly, general extenders are of great importance in showing politeness to the interlocutors by maintaining the positive face of the

listeners or avoiding potential face-threatening acts, thereby fostering and maintaining a harmonious communication atmosphere. However, due to time limitation, this paper presents a relatively small number of cited and analyzed examples. Therefore, the representativeness of the discussion on the pragmatic functions of general extenders, solely based on the usage of *or something (like that)*, requires further verification. Moving forward, it is crucial to accumulate and analyze more instances of general extenders to make additional discoveries and enhance the comprehensive understanding of the pragmatic functions among ELF communicators.

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