

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

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Vagueness in youth speech. Functional analyses of spoken Danish.

Young people have always been charged with ruining the language of their parents and grandparents by being sloppy and imprecise in their speech (and writing, for that matter). However, it has long been argued that 'vague' language may serve a range of interactional functions (e.g. Kempson 1977; Dines 1980; Channell 1994; Gassner 2012). For instance, vagueness may arise because of unclear reference between a linguistic item and a class of objects, because a speaker (or her language) lacks an appropriate word for a specific concept, or because precision is uncalled for in the context.

Many different types of linguistic items have been categorized as vague in one way or another, including approximate quantifiers (*about N*), generic expressions (*thing*), general extenders (*and stuff like that*) and epistemic phrases (*I think*). Since the interpretation of vague expressions rests on context, many studies revolve around the semantics-pragmatics interface, but because vague expressions come in such great variety, sociolinguists have also studied such expressions as examples of so-called discourse variation (e.g. Cheshire 2007; Tagliamonte & Denis; Pichler 2010).

In this talk, I review data and results from a series of research projects related to different types of vague expressions in modern spoken Danish, i.e. epistemic adverbials (*måske* 'maybe') and epistemic phrases, general extenders, as well as the highly productive equivalent of English *-ish* (Dan: *-agtig*). The material I draw upon is the large and richly annotated LANCHART database of sociolinguistic interviews compiled during the 1980s and early 2000s.

On the backdrop of distributional data, I exemplify and discuss some representative uses of vague expressions in youth speech. One particularly interesting context is the elicitation of language attitudes. The task of categorizing other people on the basis of their speech is obviously a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson 1987), and informants orient to this by couching their descriptions in vague terms (1-2).

- (1) altså måske er de lidt mere landlige ovre i Jylland men jeg ved det ikke rigtigt
I-mean maybe they are a-bit more rural over in Jutland but I don't really know
- (2) det er sådan lidt mere ... slang ... og bare ... go with the flow-agtigt ... end det der andet
it is like a-bit more ... slang ... and just ... go with the flow-ish ... than the other one

Saturday, November 12, 2016 at 11 AM - 12 PM
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NOTE: All attendees will be asked to show some form of ID in order to enter the college.

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