Same vague expression, different conceptualizations

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Abstract: The study was to investigate the vague words measurement across native and non-native English speakers and gender differences. Ninety-two students from the University of Oklahoma participated in this study by filling out an internet-based questionnaire on the vague words. The researchers put each of the thirty-two vague words in a context, or the same word put into different contexts. The participants were asked to rate the degree or the numerical value that they thought was the most appropriate in the context of the vague word. It was found that ten out of the thirty-two words had a significant difference across the native and non-native English speakers, and two of thirty-two words had a significant difference across genders. The word "fairly" showed the most significant difference interactions of language speaking by gender.

Key words: vague language; quantifiers; preposition; intensifier; psycholinguistics; cross-culture comparison; AWS t-test; General Linear Model

1. Introduction

—"Quite a few people passed the exam."

—"How many means quite a few?"

Vague languages, such as "quite a few", are used as a major part of our daily communication. We may have questions about how much "quite a few" really means. Do people from different backgrounds or genders have the same interpretation of the same vague words? Does the vague word have its own meaning or does it depend on the context in which people use it? In this study, the researchers carried out cross-cultural and gender comparisons measuring the vague words in order to see if there are significantly different conceptualizations between the groups.

In the *Cambridge Grammar of English*, vague language was defined as words or phrases which refer to people, things or approximations that are not specific (Carter & McCathy, 2006). Phrases such as "sort of", "fairly" and "more than" are examples of non-specific approximations. Explaining why people choose to use such vague words, Carter and McCathy (2006) also state:

> Vague language softens expressions so that they do not appear too direct or unduly authoritative or assertive. It is also a strong indication of an assumed shared knowledge and can mark in-group knowledge, and can mark in-group membership: the referents of vague can be assumed to be known by listener.

The language speaking and gender differences will bring the explanations of the vague language different. Persons from different cultural background set different benchmarks of the measures (Wright, Gaskell &

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O'Muircheartaigh, 1994). For example, the average height of white males in the U.S is 175.8cm (Ogden, Fryar, Carroll & Flega, 2004), and the average height of Chinese males is 166.3cm (YANG, et al., 2004). In this case, the benchmark of "tall" is a word that has different meanings between American white males and Chinese males. In 1994, Channell published a seminal book called *Vague Language* and said, "any social group sharing interest and knowledge employs non-specificity in talking about their shared interests" (1994). Scharffer compared the question scale between black and white Americans. She showed that if the questionnaire was in numerical values, there was no difference between the black and white Americans' responses. But if the questionnaire used vague quantifiers, it corresponded to higher numerical values for whites (Scharffer, 1991). In this study, the researchers wanted to see whether the vague words held different meanings between the native and non-native English speakers, and whether or not gender played a role in the difference of the conceptualization. The hypotheses of the study were: (1) the native and non-native English speakers will have significant differences in the measuring of the vague words. (2) Males and females will show significant differences in measuring the vague words and finally. (3) Native and non-native English speakers as well as the different genders will draw significantly different conclusions when measuring the vague words.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

One hundred and fifty-two students from the University of Oklahoma voluntarily completed the online survey of the vague words. Ninety-two students finished all the questions while sixty students left some survey questions unanswered. There were sixty-one native English speakers and thirty-one non-native English speakers. Fifty-six females, thirty-six males make up of ninety-two student participant in this experiment.

2.2 Material

The online questionnaire has been developed by the researchers. Three categories of the vague words have been put on the questionnaire. There were the quantifiers, such as average, few, a lot of, more or less, many, more than, no more than, a couple of, a dozen of (Bradlurn & Miles, 1979); the preposition-about; and intensifiers, such as slightly, fairly, quite, and very, with each of these words having been put in a context. For example, "It is fairly hot today" and "She is not a really good student". The questionnaire has been divided into four parts: the first part contained fourteen questions on fourteen different words. The seven point Likert scale has been used as the format for the questions. The participants were asked to rate the degree that most make sense for them. 1 means "not at all", and 7 means "very much so". For instance, "This is an average looking car", 1 is for "worst looking", and 7 is for "best looking". The second part of the questionnaire was the situational range. The participants need to give the range of the situational questions. For instance, "The car is traveling no less than 50 miles per hour. So how fast the car is?" The participants need to give the range of the question. There were five given numbers, the participants could choose one of the numbers to represent the minimum speed of the car and choose another number representing the maximum speed of the car. The third part of the questionnaire consisted of subjective questions in which the participants needed to write down the answer of the question. For example, "I will call him sooner or later. How soon do you think I will call him". The participants needed to write down the minimum and maximum numbers. The forth part of the questionnaire requested the demographic information, like the age, gender, race, first language.

2.3 Procedure

The between-subject experimental design has been conducted in this study. The questionnaires have been randomly sent to different email lists of the University of Oklahoma. Twenty-six male native English speakers and thirty-five female native English speakers finished the questionnaire, and ten male nonnative English speakers and twenty-one nonnative English speakers finished the questionnaire. The questionnaire was internet-based. The participants open the website and the informed consent will pop up on the screen. After the informed consent, the participants can start the questionnaire. It takes twenty minutes to finish the entire questionnaire and the website automatically records the answers of each question.

3. Result

The researchers analyzed every single question on the questionnaire by comparing the means. Thirty-two vague words have been put in the questionnaire. The sample size of the native English speakers (n=62) and nonnative English speakers (n=31) was not equal, so an AWS t-test was used to compare the ranking score of each word. The significance was found in these words (Table 1).

Table 1   The comparison of each vague word

Vague word	Native English speaker		Nonnative English speaker	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
not always	3.18	0.72	3.58	1.20
a few	12.49	2.30	12.58	2.48
about	3.31	0.47	3.07	0.74
average	3.9	0.57	3.65	0.66
dozens of*	12.76	2.58	10.83	3.97
fairly*	5.10	0.70	5.65	1.02
few*	11.80	1.88	9.83	4.14
in a couple of*	5.38	0.98	4.86	1.16
kind of	5.10	0.92	4.51	1.59
less than	3.28	1.54	3.57	1.70
like	2.66	0.51	2.47	0.63
more or less*	5.10	1.11	4.06	1.15
more than	1.33	0.80	1.20	0.41
no more than	2.54	1.31	2.40	1.28
not a lot of	4.44	1.04	5.79	2.19
not all	6.02	2.22	5.41	2.21
not everyone*	7.05	2.13	5.89	2.55
not really	2.63	1.16	3.13	1.15
not the worst	2.98	1.02	2.58	1.20
not too many*	15.47	2.38	16.86	1.99
pretty*	2.41	0.50	2.64	0.49
quite	5.85	0.58	5.25	1.14
quite a few*	12.58	3.03	9.55	5.47
slightly	3.56	1.19	3.43	1.45
somehow	2.07	0.60	2.03	0.71
to a certain degree	5.40	0.92	5.00	1.34
to some degree	4.51	1.06	4.97	1.05
to some extent	4.77	1.06	5.13	1.02
truly not*	2.38	1.24	3.90	1.56

Note: *p<0.5.

The AWS t-test (Forzano & Gravetter 2007) was used to shift out the words which have the significant

difference across the native English speakers and nonnative English speakers. In the hypothesis, the gender will be a factor to influence the rating of the word, so another AWS t-test was used to indicate the significant differences between the male and female of the rating scores. Based on the results of the analysis, the rating score of "more or less" from female (n=56, M=4.43, SD=1.25) is significant different from the rating score of male (n=36, M=5.25, SD=1.00), t (85.73) =3.49, p=0.001<0.05. The rating score of the word "to a certain degree" from the females (n=55, M=5.09, SD=1.13) is significant different from the rating score of the males (n=36, M=5.56, SD=0.97), t (82.47) =2.10, p=0.04<0.05. To indicate the interaction of the gender and language speaking, the general linear model univariable test has been used. There are two independent variables, one was the gender difference and the other was the native and nonnative speakers. The researchers gathered all the significant words from the two AWS t-tests, and analyzed them by the general linear model. There was a significant difference found regarding the word "fairly" (Figure 1). Type III sum of squares has been used to evaluate the different hypotheses.

The Levene's test of equality of error variances has been used to test the error variance of the dependent variable, which was the rating scores was equal across groups, f (3, 88) =2.376, p=0.75>0.05. The general linear model (Toothaker, 1993) displays the model-estimated marginal means and standard errors of rating scores at the factor combinations of gender and non/native speakers. Based on the results, for the rating score, the linear model found the significance for the non/native English speakers as f (1, 88) =7.93, p=0.03. And there was a significant difference of the gender by non/native English speakers interaction, the Native male (n=26, M=5.23, SD=0.43), non-native male (n=10, M=5.20, SD=1.13), native female (n=35, M=5, SD=0.84) and non-native female (n=21, M=5.86, SD=0.96), f (1, 88) =5.71, p=0.02. But the significant difference did not find in the gender, f (1,88) = 1.31, p=0.225.
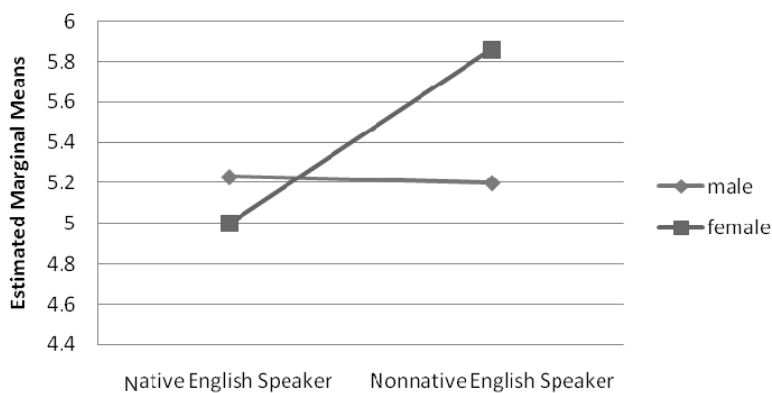

Figure 1   Estimated marginal means of "fairly"

4. Discussion

This study showed that there were significant differences in some of the vague words: "dozens of, fairly, few, in a couple of, more or less, not everyone, not too many, pretty, quite a few, and truly not". There were two words showed significant differences across gender, which were "more or less" and "to a certain degree". The word "fairly" has the significant difference interaction of native and non-native English speaker by gender.

There were some drawbacks of this study. The sample size of native and non-native English speakers was unequal, with the distribution attributed to the makeup of the American society. It did not meet the assumption of two-way ANOVA (Howell, 2007), so using the general linear model instead of the two-way ANOVA to analyze

the data added complexity to the test. The sample size of the non-native male English speakers was less than fifteen, which made the statistics lack robustness. The questionnaire was internet-based, so it lacked experimental control. The number of the vague words was limited; these could not represent all the vague language being used. In Chanell's study, the use of the vague language was depended on the communication context (1994). In the future study, the researchers need to analyze the communication context involved with the vague language usage. CHENG and Warren (CHENG & Warren, 2001) have found that Hong Kong Chinese use the vague language in ways very similar to the Hong Kong native English speakers. For the non-native English speakers, the time they spent overseas and study abroad are the strong factors of the measuring the vague words (CHENG & Warren, 2001).

The research on the vague language is multi-dimensional, so researchers could have taken different approaches. For example, linguistics, English language studies, modern foreign languages, communication, media studies, philosophy, psychology, and cross fertilization among specialisms (Cutting, 2007).

Ultimately, the further study should control more of the extraneous variables, such as the time participants spend learning English and the time they spend overseas. More vague words should be used in the research to represent the vague language. And the same words put in the different context should be analyzed.

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(Edited by Lily and Nydia)