
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating the Vagueness Markers and Gender Representation in News Media: A Case Study of Articles Related to COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of vagueness markers in different news agencies' articles. The articles which are selected as the corpus of this study were related to the coronavirus. In order to examine this issue, 119 articles were randomly selected among nine news agencies. After analyzing the data, the paper finds out that the vagueness markers were used in different news articles, but the most markers used in CNN news agency the related frequency for CNN agency is 94. The Guardian news agency has the lowest number of markers, just 1). Among the markers considered in this paper, More or Less has the highest frequency (157) and sort of had the lowest (2). In the case of gender, it must be noted that women with a frequency of 77 had the highest frequency of using vagueness markers in the news articles. This value for men is 50. According to the paper's findings, we can conclude that the women are more interested in using vagueness markers in their writing.

KEYWORDS

Gender, news agency, vagueness language, vagueness marker

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1. Introduction

Firth (1957), Garfinkel (1967) and Bernstein (1971) were amongst the first to note that speakers intend and hear more than what is said and to look for grammatical and lexical markers of implicitness. Bernstein (1971) stated that in the social group, there are some context-dependent languages that are based on unspoken assumptions.

In the 1960s, interactional sociolinguists started to look at the implicit meaning. Their model was focused on the lexico-grammatical features. The vague language contains linguistic units which have an unspecified meaning boundary, so the interpretation and concept of the sentences could be elastic in a sense, and it can mostly depend on the strategic needs of communication (Zhang, 2013). Vague language exists almost in every culture and language. The language users usually use it in different situations to show their uncertainty (Biber, (1995)). Vague language is an integral part of everyday language (Carter and McCarthy, 2006). It is important for the speaker and listener or writer and reader to have a good relationship, especially in intercultural communication. Vague language explains applying linguistic forms (grammar and words) to make the meaning of communication less clear and accurate (Peter McGee, 2018). Vague language as a device is common in daily conversation or in written text in order to show uncertainty about the subject (Yen Liang Lin, 2013). As O' Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007) mentioned, the main function of vague language is to allow the speaker or writer to the down tone they say.

It is possible that, at first glance, the use of vague language in the conversation or in the text seems to be an undesirable phenomenon, but research findings showed that native speakers frequently use this type of language in their conversations and texts (Carter and McCarthy, (2006); Channell, (1994); Cutting, (2007); Gassner (2012); Jucker, Smith and Ludge, (2003); Overstreet, (1999), (2011); Parvaresh, (2015); Parvaresh, Tavangar, Eslami Rasekh and D. Izadi (2012); Terraschke, (2010). The reason for using

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this kind of language is that most of the time, speakers feel that further perception must be tailored according to the informational needs of the other participants in the conversation. (Drave, 2000).

According to Sobrino (2015), vague language is mostly used by the speakers in order to communicate their thoughts and emotions even if they do not have any knowledge of what they mean. The use of more vague language in the conversation and human language can be a sign that the speaker him/herself has a vague and unclear view of the world (Lipman, (2009): 12). Vague language is one of the features of the language in which the oral styles of the native speaker and learners are different from each other.

Different papers were written in this field; for example, Koester (2007) investigated office conversation in order to show vague language which is used in the office environment. Adolphs, Atkins, and Harvey (2007) investigated the Nottingham health Communication Corpus (NHCC) and showed that vagueness is something usual in health communication. In addition, Parvaresh and Dabghi (2013) investigated vagueness among different languages.

The vague language also has some social roles. In face-to-face, normal conversations maintaining a good relationship between the speaker and hearer is essential. Vague language is an example of the relational language which can be found in daily conversation. It is used when the speakers tend to avoid the definite language. As O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007) mentioned, one of the main functions of vague language is to downtone what he or she communicates. In this way, by using vague language, the expression seems softer, and so the speaker does not appear as being direct, assertive or authoritative in his/ her communication. As Cater and McCarthy (2006) pointed out, the use of vague language is a conscious decision, and it is not the result of sloppy expressions or careless thinking.

Different studies have been done to consider the role and function of the vague language in different social contexts (Carter, Hughes and McCarthy, (2011)). These studies helped to find out different vague expressions and also explained how these expressions employ in different situations. As an example, Koester (2007) analyzed conversations in different working situations and analyzed conversations and interactions in work-related interactions. Similarly, Adolphs, Atkins, and Harvey (2007) used the Nottingham health Communication Corpus (NHCC) in order to assess the use of vague language in health communication contexts. As they noted in their paper, vague language has a significant role in the health communication context, and it plays an important role in the negotiation of advice.

In another study, Parvaresh and Dabaghi (2013) investigated the use of vague language in different languages. In their study, they consider the degree to which transfer is taken from Persian to English. In the same research, Lin (2012) considered the similarities and differences in vague language, which is employed in authentic corpora and in EFL textbooks. Lin found out that in the authentic texts, vague language is used as a persuasive tool, but this point is not conation in the EFL learning materials. Lin (2012) also stated that the use of vague language in EFL material would be a great benefit. The vague language is used to enrich the description of the target language.

Carter and McCarthy (2006) stated that vague languages are words and expressions that deliberately refer to a non-specific way. It means that the speaker uses these expressions deliberately in his or her speech.

This paper investigates the function of the vagueness markers in the different news agencies. Different pragmatic markers will be used in order to specify the degree of vagueness in a different context. The vagueness markers are more often used in order to check the vagueness of the context and sentences.

The pragmatic markers of *about*, *kind of*, *sort of*, *around*, *more or less*, and *whatever* are among the markers that the paper investigates in the paper. These markers are signs of vagueness.

The discourse markers indicate inaccuracy caused by the speaker or writer forgetting the related information about the previous content. Sometimes speaker or writer intentionally uses the marker to be vague about what is discussed. In both cases, these hedges use when the component of the utterance is vague, and the speaker/writer is aware of this inaccuracy.

The study aims to investigate:

1. The degree of the pragmatic markers in different news articles related to the Corona Virus and Covid19.
2. Explore the gender variable effect in the amount of these markers in the text.
3. Compare the number of markers that use in the context.

1.1. The characteristic and role of the vagueness markers

In the English grammar book, the vagueness marker is one of the most important grammatical and interpersonal features in written and spoken language. (Carter and McCarthy (2006)). According to Biber et al. (1999), vagueness language illustrate imprecision. As MacCarthy (2006) mentioned, vague expressions are words or phrases “which deliberately refer to people and things in a non-specific, imprecise way”. (p. 928). Channel (1994) describes vague language as language that “can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition” (p. 20). In other words, vagueness markers are “markers of intersubjectivity” (Overstreet and Yule 2002, 787). In the case of vagueness, interlocutors do not need to show precise information because they are on the same common ground of knowledge as the others. Adjoa (2007) mentioned that in the past two decades, there has been a renewal in language use and usage. This is related to the influences of gender in the different aspects of the language. There has been different research in this regard too. For example, in a study, the authors showed that women produce more standard linguistic forms than men. Also, women tend to use more prestigious forms. In this paper, researchers also investigate the gender difference in using vagueness markers.

2. Corpora and method

This paper draws from homogenous corpora. These corpora contain relatively relevant subjects. All the selected articles were relevant to the covid19, and all the related analyses were done in this sort of article. The articles are among the articles that news agencies publish on their websites. Different news articles were selected according to their content and subjects. With the outbreak of the Coronavirus in the world, different articles were published on different news websites to show the importance of other related facts about this pandemic disease. According to Carter and McCarthy (2006), expressions that contain vagueness markers indicate that they have a shared knowledge that is assumed to be known by the reader or listener.

In order to select the corpus for the study, different news agencies were investigated by the authors. With the growing number of articles about Covid19, the researchers decided to select the articles about Covid19 from different news agencies. 119 news articles were selected from different news websites. The articles were selected from; CNN, BBC, Fox News, Euro News, France24, USA Today, New York, The Guardian, and BNC news agencies. These articles were selected according to their content and subjects. All these articles were about the Coronavirus and Covid19. The role and semantic meaning of the vagueness markers were considered according to the context in which they were used.

In the other aspect, the vagueness markers were categorized according to the gender of the article's writer. The gender was categorized as; Male, Female, not specified and Male and Female for the articles which were written by both males and females. (It means that they had shared writers)

These markers are used by the writers in order to show the uncertainty of the writer(s) about what s/he said. To summarize the frequency of the markers, Table 1 can provide brief information about this issue. In the case of frequency of the markers, the CNN news website has the highest frequency of the markers. The frequency value for this news website was 94. Among all news websites, The Guardian has the lowest frequency for the markers, and the value for this website was 1.

From other perspectives, *more or less* markers had the highest frequency level in comparison with the other markers. The related frequency for this marker is 157. *Sort of* marker with the related frequency of 2 and *whatever* with the related frequency of the 3 are among the makers with the lowest frequency.

In case of showing some examples of the related sentences which is related to the selected corpus, Table 1 shows different examples of the markers from different news agencies. The examples were selected from the sentence mentioned in the articles published by the news agencies, and the researchers selected some of them as an example of the vagueness markers.

Table 1. Examples of the Vagueness markers in different news agencies.

No	News agency	Example
1	USA Today	Considering the incubation period for the virus is 14 days or <i>more</i> ...
2	USA Today	Compared to the 2019 U.S. population, in which the median age was <i>around</i> 38 years and those 60 years and older ...
3	New York	Cost to the U.S. government: Estimated to be <i>about</i> \$20 per dose.
4	New York	BioNTech — announced that its vaccine was <i>more</i> than 90 percent effective at preventing COVID-19 infection.

5	The Guardian	The approval marks a turning point in a pandemic that has claimed <i>more</i> than 294,000 American lives and 1.5 million lives globally.
6	CNN	In the meantime, <i>about</i> 3,000 subjects were recruited, half in the placebo and half in the vaccine group."
7	CNN	"Now it's <i>around</i> 11%, and that's because the great doctors of this country have learned how to take care of the patients, but we have new treatments."
8	CNN	The United States has reported <i>more</i> than 2,000 deaths from Covid-19 today, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.
9	CNN	"Again, these <i>kinds of</i> recommendations aren't willy-nilly. They're worked on with a variety of experts."
10	Euro News	But authorities called for greater restraint last week and banned gatherings of <i>more</i> than eight people.
11	Euro News	The Scandinavian country of 10.2 million inhabitants has registered <i>more</i> than 312,000 confirmed infections and 7,354 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic.
12	BBC	Salcombe has a population of <i>about</i> 2,000 in the winter, but this has "surged" to about 25,000 after the lockdown, according to the town council.
13	BBC	<i>About</i> 1,500 healthy volunteers aged between 18 and 50 - only a third of the expected number - took part.

In order to show more detailed information about the vagueness markers in the different news agencies, Table 2 summarizes information related to each marker. In this table, each vagueness markers' frequency is mentioned, and also the total frequency of all markers is also stated. As Table 2 shows, CNN has the highest rank for the use of vagueness marker among other news agencies with a frequency of 94 and The Guardian, with a frequency of 1, has the lowest.

Table 2. Vagueness markers frequency in different news agency's articles.

News agency	About	Around	Kind of	Sort of	More or Less	Whatever	Total
USA Today	8	6	1	0	17	0	32
New York	3	4	0	0	3	0	10
The Guardian	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
CNN	13	8	8	2	61	2	94
NBC News	3	4	2	0	29	0	38
Fox News	6	2	0	0	2	1	11
Euro News	2	7	1	0	17	0	27
BBC	5	1	1	0	6	0	13
France 24	4	1	4	0	22	0	31
Total	45	33	17	2	157	3	257

In the other aspect, the research aims to investigate the relationship between markers and gender. To do this, the frequency of the markers according to the gender must be specified as well. In order to show the frequency of each marker according to gender, Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of the vagueness markers according to the authors' gender.

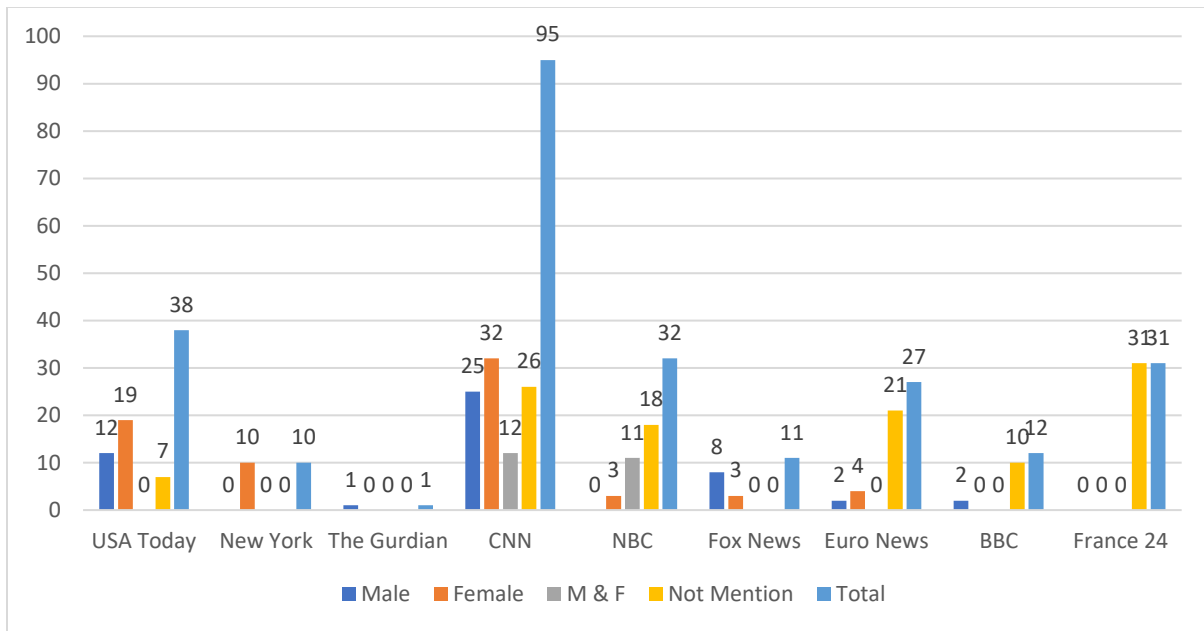


Figure 1. The frequency of the vagueness markers according to the gender of the articles' writer in each news agency.

As Figure 1 summarizes the frequency of the vagueness markers according to gender, for each news agency, four taxonomy were selected. The taxonomy was: Male, Female, Male and Female (for the articles which has two writers, both male and female), and Not Mentioned (For the articles in which the researcher did not know who is the writer of the article). As Figure 1 shows in the CNN agency, women with a frequency of 32 has the highest frequency between all other agencies and the frequency for Male writer in the CNN agency is 25, which is the highest frequency for Male among all other agencies.

Figure 2 summarizes the frequency for each vagueness marker according to gender. As the paper aims to investigate the vagueness markers according to the gender of the writer in order to find out that is there any relationship between vagueness markers and gender or not, Figure 2 illustrates the related information about this issue.

As illustrated in Figure 2, males and females both use vagueness markers in their writing. But the difference is between the frequency and the type of vagueness markers they use in their writing. Most males use *About* as a vagueness marker in their writing. The frequency of this marker for a male writer is 50.

About the female writer, it must be said that the markers that they used in their writing were the *More or Less* vagueness markers. By considering Figure 2, we can find out that the frequency of the maker for a female writer is 77.

Unfortunately, there were some news articles that the author was not mentioned. As is shown in Figure 2, there are some high-frequency markers that the gender is not specified, but we can conclude that the most frequent marker among all the markers is *More or Less*.

This value for a male writer is 22 for the *about*.

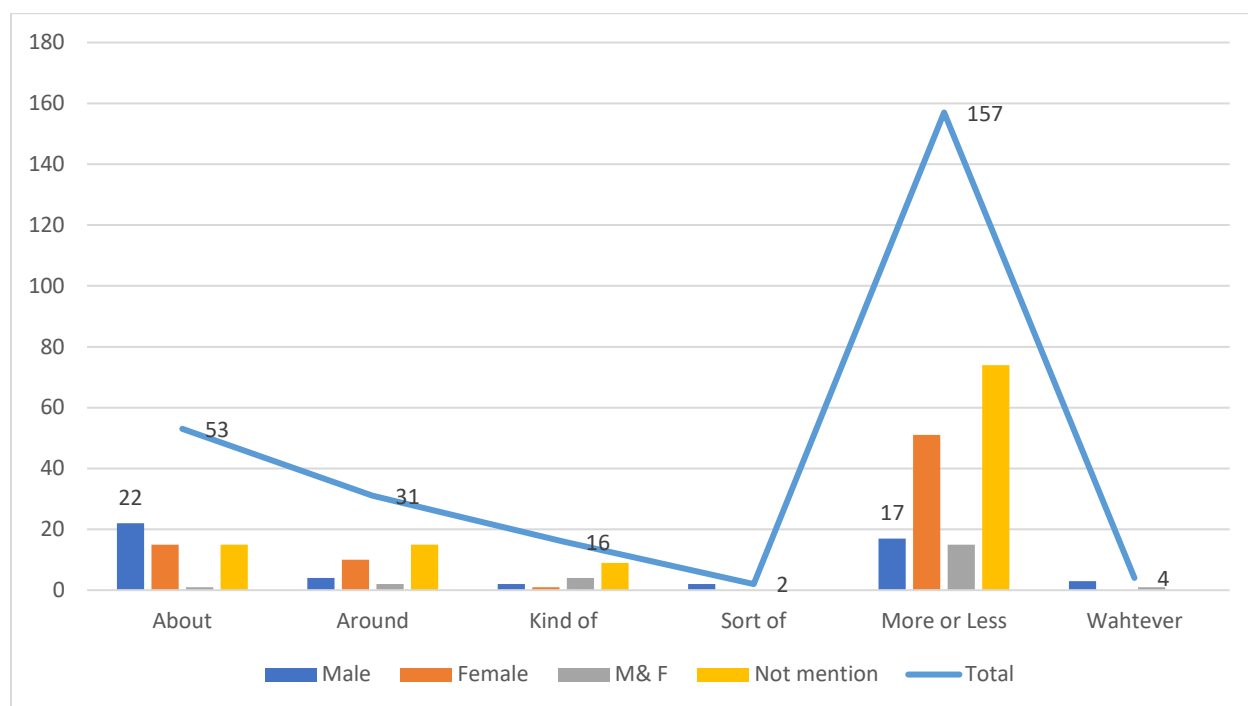


Figure 2. Vagueness markers according to the writer's gender.

3. Conclusions

This article examined the use of vagueness markers in the corpus related to the Corona Virus. For this purpose, the news articles from nine famous news agencies were selected as the corpus of the study. The news agencies were: USA Today, CNN, BBC, NBC, New York, the Guardian, Fox News, Euro News, and France24. A total number of articles, 119 news articles, were selected as the corpus of the study. All the related articles were thoroughly investigated in order to find out the usage of the markers in the context. The markers that the paper investigated were *about*, *around*, *kind of*, *sort of*, *more or less*, and *whatever*.

According to the research finding, among all the markers, *more or less* had the highest frequency in the context and *sort of* had the lowest frequency. The frequency value for the *more or less* was 154 and 2 for *the sort of*.

From another perspective, the paper investigated the news agencies. Among all the news agencies investigated in this research, CNN news agency has the highest range of vagueness markers. The related value for this agency was 94. The Guardian, with the frequency value of the 1, was the agency with the lowest vagueness marker.

At last, in the third phase, the paper investigated gender. After considering the gender of the articles' writers, the articles were divided into four categories: Male, Female, Male and Female and not mentioned. According to the paper's findings, we can conclude that the women used more vagueness markers. Women used 77 markers in their articles, and males used 50.

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