This lesson is based my adaptation of a text I found on the internet. You can see the original text at www.linguarama.com/ps/297-4 . This text in turn draws heavily on the book *Vague Language* by Joanna Channell (OUP 1994).

One of the problems we have in the language classroom is finding tasks and topics to talk, write and read about. In Commentary 2 *Meaning before Form* I talked about a lesson which was based on an approach to language teaching know as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach (see: http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/clil.shtml) or *content-based instruction.* As in task-based teaching the belief behind CLIL and content-based instruction is that learners acquire language most efficiently when their attention is on content rather than form. In this case the content is to do with language. The serious study of language should be a central part of any language learning course. If sensibly treated it can contribute to learning by providing topics which are of real relevance and interest to learners. It also encourages learner independence by encouraging learners to investigate language for themselves.

Books and articles on applied linguistics and sociolinguistics provide a valuable source of learner texts, and there is an abundance of books aimed at the intelligent layman such as Melvyn Bragg's *The Adventure of English* (2003 Hodder and Stoughton)*,* Bill Bryson's *Mother Tongue*(Penguin 1990)*,* Kate Bridge's *Weeds in the Garden of Words* (2005 CUP)*.* Among specialist books which could be mined are Jean Aitchison's *Language Change*(1981 Fontana) and *The Articulate Mammal* (1998 Routledge)*;* Dwight Bolinger's *Language: the Loaded Weapon* (1980 Longman)*,* and any good introduction to sociolinguistics. Possible questions might include:

- What are the differences between spoken and written English?
- What is *collocation*?
- What are *fixed phrases*?
- What is *language change*? How do languages change?
- What is *taboo language*?
- How can I be polite in English?
- What is a dialect?

The topic for this lesson is:

VAGUE LANGUAGE

1 Introduction

Define briefly what is meant by 'vague language' and give one or two examples.

2 Reading

Vague language

Vague language is not totally accurate or clear. Although some people think this is "bad" English, all native English speakers use vague language when they are unable or unwilling to give accurate information, or they think it is either unnecessary or socially inappropriate to do so. A good example of vague language is rounding up numbers when telling the time. Twenty-six minutes past two becomes:

It's *about* half past two.
It's *almost* half past two.
It's half two-*ish*.
It's *nearly* half past two.

Often, speakers use vague language not because they do not have accurate information, but because they feel it is more polite to make a less definite statement. "That is wrong" becomes:

"I'm not sure that's completely correct."

Short definite statements sometimes sound too assertive to native English speakers, sothey often add extra vague language to a sentence. This extra language has no extra meaning, it is just a social softener.

The use of vague language differs from language to language and is an important cultural consideration when doing business in a foreign language. Native English speakers, for example, can find Germans direct because German uses little vague language. On the other hand, for Germans, native English speakers can sound indecisive, inaccurate and lacking authority. In both cases they are reacting to characteristics of the language, not their business partner. Here are some more examples of vague language commonly used by native speakers of English.

List completers

Sometimes a speaker might start a list of some kind and then cannot remember the rest of the list or does not think the other items are important enough to mention. In

these cases, list completers are ideal:

"I typed some letters, reports *and so on*."
"You have to ask a doctor or a lawyer *or someone like that, you know*."

List completers are very common and use words such as things and stuff. Here are some more list completers:

and stuff like that
and things / stuff

or something like that
or stuff like that
or what / where / whoever

Placeholders

Placeholders are for when a speaker does not know or cannot remember the name of something or someone. We use general words like *thing, person, man, guy, bloke, woman* as placeholders.

"I need a *thing* for the slide projector."
"I gave it to *you know, that guy* in the accounts department."

Grammatically these simply replace the name of the person or object that the speaker cannot remember and never change their form. Other place holders include:

whatsername (for a woman)
whatsit
thingy
thingummy

Quantifiers

Vague language is very common with numbers when expressing quantity, frequency or the time. Low numbers are often substituted by phrases such as *a couple of / a few*, whereas larger numbers are rounded up with *about / around* or replaced with *lots of / loads of*.

"Should we say *around* three or four o'clock?
"It cost *around* 20 pounds *or so*."
"It's *about* a million."
"The computer caused *loads / lots of* problems."

With vague language *a couple* does not necessarily mean two. It could mean up to three or even four. When people do not want or need to give accurate numbers they can use the following:

"There were about 30 *odd / or so* people at the meeting."

"He's not that old. I'd say he's about 30-*ish*."

"There were *a lot of / lots of / loads of* problems."

"I've been to Prague *a couple of / a few* times."

"I think we need *about / around* 30 (*or so*)."

Generalisers

Also very common are items like *sort of, kind of* or *you know*. These may be used when someone cannot think of the right word. We also use items like this when we do not want to be too precise, perhaps because we don't want people to think we are trying to look like an expert on a topic.

Suffixes

We often add the suffix *–ish* or *–y* to a word to show that we are not being precise. This is very common with colour adjectives:

"It's a sort of green*ish* blue."
"He's not that old. I'd say he's about 30-*ish*."
"I'll try and come around two*ish*.
"He has kind of blonde*y* hair."

2 Task 1

How many examples of vague language can you find in this conversation?

SB: What's your favourite colour?
CM: My favourite colour? Mmm. I suppose it's blue. I don't know why I like blue, except it's probably the most popular colour for … for a majority of the population.
SB: You think … more than red?
CM: Well if you look at erm, any group of people together, like say in a football stadium or something like that you'll find the predominant colour – I find the predominant colour invariably is – is blue. Blue jerseys and things like that.
SB: Not if it's Liverpool and they're all in red!
I don't think I have a favourite colour. I just sort of wake up in the morning and I just feel like pulling on clothes of one colour or another..
CM: Yeah, but if you go shopping or something don't you choose say a blue shirt rather than a pink shirt?
SB: Well, I tend to buy – when I buy clothes, most clothes buy tend to be sort of khaki or olive or sort of greyish, and then I have things with bright colours to go with them. Not green. I don't like green. I'm not too keen on yellow either. But apart from that – red, blue, purple, black, white – you know.

Look at the examples you have picked out. Are they *list completers, place holders, quantifiers, generalisers* or *suffixes*. Are there any items which don't fit into these categories?

Commentary:

There will not be total agreement on this task. I would suggest all the following could be regarded as *vague language:*

> SB: What's your favourite colour?
> CM: My favourite colour? Mmm. ***I suppose*** it's blue. I don't know why I like blue, except it's ***probably*** the most popular colour for … for a majority of the population.
> SB: You think … more than red?
> CM: Well if you look at erm, any group of people together, ***like say in a football stadium or something like that*** you'll find the predominant colour – I find the predominant colour invariably is – is blue. Blue jerseys and ***things like that.***
> SB: Not if it's Liverpool and they're all in red!
> ***I don't think*** I have a favourite colour. ***I just sort of wake up*** in the morning and ***I just feel like*** pulling on clothes of one colour or another..
> CM: Yeah, but if you go shopping ***or something*** don't you choose say a blue shirt rather than a pink shirt?
> SB: Well, ***I tend to buy*** – when I buy clothes, most clothes I buy ***tend to be sort of khaki or olive or sort of greyish***, and then I have things with bright colours to go with them. Not green. I don't like green. ***I'm not too keen on*** yellow either. But apart from that – red, blue, purple, black, white – ***you know***.

Again there will not be complete agreement. I would suggest:

> List completers: *or something like that; or something; things like that; or something; you know.*
> Place holders: ??
> Quantifiers: ??
> Generalisers: *like say; sort of; sort of.*
> Suffixes: *greyish.*

The remaining items: *I suppose; probably; I don't think; I just feel like; I tend to; I'm not too keen on* can be regarded as 'hedges'. We use hedges when we want to moderate what we say. So *I'm not too keen on* is a way of saying *I don't like; I tend to* means *I sometimes do something.* We use hedges a lot when we are being critical. So we say things like: *I didn't really enjoy that very much* or *I'm not really very fond of …*

3 Task 2

Look at these examples. Divide them into list *completers, place holders, quantifiers, generalisers, suffixes* or *hedges*.

> a) They live in a sort of castle place.
> b) I don't like touristy places, you know, Blackpool, Southend, places like that.
> c) It's getting on for ten o'clock.
> d) I quite like him, but I'm not too keen on her.

e) We stopped of at that supermarket place on the high street.
f) There must have been about a hundred people there.
g) It was full of old boxes and stuff like that.
h) What's that stuff on your shirt?

4 Task 3

Can you think of examples of vague language in your own language? Do they fit the same categories?