

LANGUAGE AS CONTENT

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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 (some of which might be doable at the elementary level) might include:

- What is *collocation*?
 - What are *fixed phrases*?
 - What are the differences between spoken and written English?
 - What is *vague language*?
 - What is *language change*? How do languages change?
 - What is *taboo language*?
 - How can I be polite in English?
 - What is a dialect?
- Can you think of a couple of topics, taken from the list above if you like, which could usefully be treated in an elementary course?

SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

How is spoken language different from written language?

- 1 CB: I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind, because there's a barrier around you. But heights where you think you may be able to fall.
- 2 BB: Yeah. I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere. But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says 'Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.' I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet...
- 3 CB: Yeah.
- 4 BB: ... with a rail about - perhaps eighteen inches high ...
- 5 CB: Mm.
- 6 BB: ... and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something. I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.
- 7 CB: That's very frightening.
- 8 BB: And, you know, I sort of edged round. I couldn't go back through the same door. I edged round and managed to find the other door. And that's it. Ever since then if I go up a ladder I'm scared stiff now. It really is, it's er, changed my whole life, you know. Absolutely frightening, that.

Look at the dialogue above and answer these questions:

- 1 Look at turns 1 and 2. There are several occurrences of *er* and *erm*. What function do you think these noises serve?
- 2 Why do the speakers say *something like a lighthouse or something; I sort of edged round*?
- 3 In turn 2 BB says *I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay*. Why does he repeat himself?
- 4 Are there any words in turn 2 which you would not expect to find in written English?
- 5 What is unusual about the structure of the sentence *The top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind*?
- 6 How many 'sentences' are there in turn 1?
- 7 What is the verb in the last sentence in turn 8?
- 8 Is turn 6 grammatical?
- 9 At turns 3, 5 and 7 CB actually interrupts the narrative. Is she being rude?
- 10 It is often said that you should not start a sentence with *and* or *but*. How many sentences in this extract start with *and* or *but*? Why do you think this is?
- 11 What about the final sentence in turn 1?

1 Most spoken discourse is composed in real time. Speakers are working out what they want to say and producing language at the same time. This is not easy to do. It is not surprising that even native speakers sometimes need time to gather their thoughts. So one of the functions of *er* and *erm* is to allow time for them to do this.

Ers and *erms* are often referred to as ‘fillers’, as though they had no meaning or function, but they often have a clear purpose. Often they come just after a possible completion point, a point at which the listener might think the speaker has finished a turn. So the *er* or *erm* often means ‘Please let me continue. I haven’t finished what I want to say. I’d like a little time to gather my thoughts. Often you will hear *er/erm* at the beginning of a turn in response to a question. Here it means something like: ‘Yes, I have heard your question and I intend to answer it. Please allow me a moment to work out my response.’ It is misleading to think of *er/erm* as having no meaning or function. Hardly anything in language is there without a reason.

2 The phrases *or something* and *sort of* are examples of what is often called **vague language**. Because spoken language is produced in real time, we sometimes don’t have time to find the exact word or phrase we want, so we use vague language. You will sometimes hear people, often teachers, complain about this, saying we ought to be more precise in the language we use. But vagueness is a common feature of language. Everybody uses it – even the people who complain when they notice others using it. If you use a lot of vague language when you are giving a prepared lecture you might rightly be criticized for not having prepared carefully enough. But if you are speaking spontaneously, you will certainly find yourself using a lot of vague language.

3 There is a lot of repetition in spoken language. When we are reading we can go back over the script if we have not understood. Obviously we cannot reread spoken language, so the speaker often builds in redundancy by repeating parts of the message. In this case the speaker even goes on to say *I could go anywhere*, which is simply a further explanation of what he meant by *I was okay*.

(See Willis, D. *Rules, Patterns and Words* CUP 2003 Chapter 9; Willis D. and J. Willis *Doing Task-based Learning* OUP 2007 Chapter 7)

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 *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."

As short definite statements sometimes sound too assertive to native English speakers, they 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. There are important cultural differences. 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 all 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*:

and stuff like that

and things / stuff or something like that

or stuff like that

Placeholders

Placeholders are for when a speaker does not know or cannot remember the name of something or someone.

"I need a *thingummy* for the slide projector."

"I gave it to *whatsisname* 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

Quantities

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 / (just) over / under* 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 to give accurate numbers they can use the following:

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

"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* or *kind of*. These may be used when someone cannot think of the right word. We also use items like this and words and phrases like *rather / fairly / a bit* 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. We also add comments like *I think, I suppose, I guess* or *you know* to show that we are not being precise.

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 *greenish* blue.”

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

“I’ll try and come around *twoish*.”

“He has kind of *blondey* hair.”

(Adapted from: www.linguarama.com/ps/297-4.htm)

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 khaki or olive or sort of grayish, 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.