DISCOURSAL APPROXIMATION IN WEST AFRICAN ANGLOPHONE

NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

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Abstract

This study focused on the use of vague linguistic approximation elements in discourse with reference to time, amount and/or distance/location in words like: about, almost, approximately, around, between, nearly, or, roughly, some, and up to. Adopting Sperber and Wilson (1985) relevance theory framework and drawing on Corpus Linguistics methodologies, the study subjected a specialised corpus of the editorial genre of the West African Anglophone journalistic writing of 250 editorials (between 2017 and 2019) from five purposively sampled Anglophone online newspapers to AntConc® Concordance Tool. The approximating elements in the editorial corpus were: identified, classifiedinto types and their functions in the editorial discourse determined as well as compared the differences in usage between the countries; to prove that the use of the linguistic approximating elements in the editorials is an interactional strategy used by editorial writers for discourse approximating purposes. The study will be of importance to students of English as a second language, scholars of vague language and pragmatics of language, in particular and language scholars in general as it dwells on the practical use of language in human communication.

1. Vague Language: An Introduction

The study examined the interactional strategy of editorial writers who deliberately used vague approximators in newspaper editorials in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorial discourse. The study analysed 250 editorials from five West

Africa Anglophone countries: The Sun (Cameroon, hence Cam), The Pointer

(Gambia, hence Gam), Daily Graphic (Ghana, hence Gha), Daily Observer (Liberia, hence Lib), and The Tribune (Nigeria, hence Nig). The linguistic approximating elements covered in the study are:about, almost, approximately, around, between, nearly, or, roughly, some, and up to.

Vagueness pervades every human interaction in every culture and mode of communication (see: Alkhatnai, 2017; Sabet, & Zhang, 2015). Some analysts argue that without some form of vague language (hence, VL) in the human repertoire, communication would be hampered. Others affirm that being vague is a desirable feature of language (Williamson, 1994 cited in Jucker, Smith, & Ludge, 2003; Sinclair, 1994) while the total absence of vagueness in human communication would be uncalled for (Xi, 2013). Other analysts claim that humans purposely or unintentionally use VL because they “must” use it (see:

Cutting, 2007b; Ewata, 2017; Overstreet, 1999; Zhang, 2011) and that it is the predominant stylistic device in genres like literature, love talk, politics, diplomacy etc. (see: Chen & Yan, 2017; Cutting, J., 2007a). Channell(1994, p. 3) affirms that we cannot do without VL, what matters is we use it appropriately.

Though VL was initially in the domain of philosophy, interest in it has since moved to other disciplines which account for the different ideas of it. This study shall take vagueness and VL from the perspective of Channell (1994) who says an expression is vague if:

1. it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appear to render the same preposition;
2. it is ‘purposely and unabashedly vague’
3. its meaning arises from the ‘intrinsic uncertainty’ referred to by Peirce.

Based on the above assertions, it can therefore be concluded that defining VL is as vague as the concept itself. That is not saying attempts would not be made to define it.

Zhang (2015) takes VL as an "elastic” concept preferring the term “elastic” which she used interchangeably with “vague” in focusing on language users’ ability to “adjust, modify, and manipulate” language in order to accommodate the meaning intended in discourse (2015, p. 4). She submits that VL is any instance where a language user stretches and negotiates the meaning of words in discourse “to suit the moment-to-moment communicative needs” (2011, p. 573). This implies that VL is “fluid and stretchable” to serve the purposes required in discourse “in both clear and unclear ways” (2015, p. 1). This puts VL usage in human interaction in the realm of pragmatics which is concerned with the discipline of strategies, intentions and speakers’ conveyed meaning (Al-Duleimi & Hammoodi, 2015). Interlocutors in discourse effortlessly discount the 'wrong' meaning(s) from vague utterances and recover the meaning the speakers intended (Blakemore, 1992).

To Cheng and O’Keeffe (2015), VL is ‘underspecifying’ – since language users do not always say exactly and fully what they mean in interaction but rely on the context of the interaction – which is common in conversation (2015, p. 360). In the light of this, Cheng and Warren (2001) say the context of the interaction is neither fixed nor fully shared by the participants. In discourse, interlocutors interpret each interaction as they come not referring to a laid down template. To Cheng & Warren, therefore, “vague language consists of a closed set of identifiable lexical items that can be interpreted without recourse to judgements based on the particular context in which they occur” (p. 81). However, despite the lack of exactness in the definition, analysts agree that VL perform different functions in discourse.

For the purpose of this study, I will take VL to be any instance in discourse where a language user stretches and negotiates the meaning of words. Since the essence of the study is on approximation, I shall take VL to be any instance where the editorial stretches the meaning of a word to give it an approximate meaning in terms of amount, duration, and/or distance/location The editorial is taken as the standard of language use by users of English in the Anglophone West African sub region.

As vagueness is an integral part of human communication, a mastery of VL is a key part of our communicative competence as language users (Cutting, pp. 3– 4). The ability to communicate vaguely also forms part of the second language learners’ intercultural pragmatic awareness in the target language which “‘strategically’ allows one both to convey and interpret meaning” that ultimately aids their pragmatic competence (Wishnoff, 2000).

VL is identified in different forms in the human language. It could come as:

1. vague additives (which include vague approximators (e.g., about) and tags referring to vague categories (e.g., and things like that)
2. vagueness by choice of words (e.g., yoke, thingy) and vague quantifiers (e.g., piles of), and
3. vagueness by implicature (e.g., the sentence Sam is six feet tall has the potential to be vague as he may be six feet and a quarter of an inch tall) (Channell, 1994, p. 18).

Since there are many words in the English language that convey vagueness and approximation, this study paid attention to those ones that are part of Channell's (1994)vague additives though some of the words are originally adverbs and modifiers (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik called intensifiers(1985, p. 567). The words serve as linguistic approximation elements in discourse that function to approximate duration, amount and/or distance/location. The study concentrated on the use of VL in writing as per educated second language users of English from the perspective of journalism, the newspaper editorial in Anglophone West Africa in: the Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria as well as the Anglophone part of Cameroon.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

i. identify the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African

Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus; ii. classify the vague linguistic approximation elements used in the West

African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus into typology; iii. determine through statistical evidence the frequency of use of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus;

1. determine through statistical evidence difference in usage of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus on the basis of whether English is the sole or second official language;
2. analyse the functions of the identified vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus.

The study proffered answers to the following research questions:

i. Are there vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus? What are the main vague linguistic approximation elements focused on in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials? ii. What are the types of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus?

1. How frequent is the use of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials?
2. Can the frequency of use of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus be determined on the basis of whether English is the sole or second official language?
3. What functions do the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus discourse perform?
4. Significance of the Study

VL has been the subject of many linguistic researches (Dubois, 1987; Channell, 1994; Overstreet, 1999; Cheng & Warren, 2001; Ruzait, 2010; Cheng & O’Keeffe, 2015 etc.) from different parts of the world and focusing on different aspects of VL in different modes of communication in different fields or discourse genres. This study took up the mantle from where the previous studies left it by dwelling on an aspect of VL in English in the second language situation, in the written mode of the journalistic editorial genre. The study will further enrich the growing literature in VL and draw attention to its usage in the Anglophone West African Englishes. The study would be important to language scholars and students in general and to the second language studies and vague language usage in particular.

1. The Vague Linguistic Approximators

Approximators are grammatical subcategory of downtoners with other members as: compromisers, diminishers and minimizers who are themselves a subcategory of. Contrary to expectations, intensifiers do not necessarily heighten the effect of the elements they modified. They may, in fact, lessen them.

This study is not concerned with intensifiers generally but the ones used in discourse to make the utterance less specific, that is, make utterances be deliberately and unresolvably vague (Powell, 1985). Working on the premise that humans are deliberately and unresolvably vague in their interactions, the study looked at how the Anglophone West African editorials use the linguistic items as deliberate vague elements. The items are mostly adverbs and modifiers used as hedges – to make things less clear because the speaker intentionally or unintentionally cannot categorically stake their necks out defending the exactness of their claims and if the exactness is proved wrong they can, at least, have a facesave. According to Biber, Conrad and Leech, hedges indicate that the modified item is not being used precisely as they show imprecision of word choice. They go on to say that hedges are associated with numbers, measurements, and quantities and that such hedges are called approximators(2002, pp. 210–212). This “implicates that the speaker is less than fully committed, or committed in some marked ways, to the truth of the proposition” (Prince, Bosk, & Frader, 1982). Channell says the approximators are words or phrases “added to what would otherwise be a precise statement, to result in a vague reading …” (p. 18). They are used to: “sum up, round up or give a general rather than a specific view, sum etc. They estimate: degree, quantity, frequency and time …” (Ewata, 2017). The concern of the study is on the use of the items that result in approximations of: number (amount, weight, age size, etc.), duration and distance/location. According the Prince, et. al., the approximating elements affect the truth-conditions of the propositions associated with them. They classified the words used to perform the estimate function as rounders. These include such words as: about, some, between, around, approximately, roughly, almost, around and up to that lead to approximation reading. (1982, p. 89). It is in this guise that Channell calls them approximators (p.42).

To Carter & McCarthy, approximators are “a wide range of expressions used with numbers and quantities which enable speakers to give approximations rather than being absolutely precise and perhaps being heard as pedantic” (2006, p. 203). Hamawand(2017, p. 97) says linguists shy away from confronting the topic of approximation because it is fraught with complications and that they lacked the tools to investigate the topic.

Examples in our corpus include:

1. …except for a few challenges in some five constituencies for which elections in those areas have been put on hold (Gha, August 24 , 2019).
2. … the issue of bread in the country should be dealt with as soon as possible as about 90% of Gambians in the country consume bread on a daily basis (Gam, 15April, 2019).
3. … North West and South West regions between September 22, and October 1, 2017 (Cam, 17 October, 2017).
4. … someone who is fronting for the same senator has acquired around 2,700 acres… (Lib, 8 July, 2019)
5. Approximately 35 percent of the west African country’s land is under threat of desertification especially … (Gam, 26 July, 2019)
6. Liberia is acknowledged to contain roughly 4.3 million hectares of lowland… (Lib, 11 July, 2019)
7. … we have almost three years to go (Gam, 10 June, 2019).

Approximation in general term is: “a fact, object, or description which is similar to something else, but which is not exactly the same”. From the specificity of time, amount and/or distance/location, it is: “a number, calculation, or position that is close to a correct number, time, or position, but is not exact”

(https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/approximation). It is in this light that Hamawand(2017) says though the guess that is required for a purpose might not necessarily be exact, it is however within the limit of accuracy. Quoting Biber, et. al. (2002: 113), he states that speakers/writers know they can express their thoughts with some degree of vagueness.

Roughly speaking, the time, amount and/or distance/location may be inexact but the supposition will serve the present purpose as it is sufficiently accurate for this specific purpose.

1. … the multi-million dollar investment would utilise around 180,000 tonnes of corn and 75,000 tonnes of soya beans for its feed production (Nig, 24 July, 2019).
2. The attackers, numbering about 10, reportedly stormed the hall around 1

a.m. … (Nig, 29 August, 2019)

1. … this extension will take the current mandate of parliament up toFebruary, 29, 2020 (02 July, 2019).

In 8, the exact amount of corn and soya beans needed is not given but a rough estimate is given which warrants the use of around as an approximators.

In 9, two approximators, aboutmaking reference to number (10) and around making reference to time (1. am) are used. Like in 8, the exactness of the amount and time could not be ascertained by the writer rather than say so, they use linguistic approximators.

This is also noted in 10 where the attention to draw to an estimated from now to the time or date mentioned.

In their interactions, native speakers of English often try not to be too exact or factual so as not to sound very direct. As a result, they add expressions to make what they say more approximate or vague

(https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/approximationsaround-four-o-clock). Thus, they resort to use vague approximation of number, time, distance/location etc. which are part of VL as:

Vague language softens expressions so that they do not appear too direct or unduly authoritative and assertive. It also is a strong indication of an assumed shared knowledge and can mark in-group membership: the referents of vague expressions can be assumed to be known by the listener. There are times where it is necessary to give accurate and precise information; in many informal contexts, however, speakers prefer to convey information which is softened in some way. Such vagueness is often wrongly taken as a sign of careless thinking or sloppy expression. Vagueness is motivated and purposeful and is often a mark of the sensitivity and skill of a speaker … (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 202). The study paid attention to three approximations models used in the corpus. They are:

i. Approximation of number (amount, weight, age etc.)

In our corpus, the vague linguistic approximating elements used to indicate this are: around, around, approximately, roughly, nearly, almost, up to, and some as exemplified in the following sentences:

1. As we noted, only recently, about 120 Africans were reported to have … (Nig, Jul 10, 2019)
2. … we run into an Amba checkpoint of about 15 armed combatants (Cam, 04 Jun 2019).
3. … almost one in 0 people in the world… (Gha, Jul 20 , 2019) 14) … registering a voter-drop of almost one million votes (Cam, 30 Oct 2018).
4. Approximately 35 percent of the west African country … (Gam, July 26, 2019)
5. … temperatures of around -60C at an altitude of 40,000ft (Nig, Jul 10, 2019).
6. ArcelorMittal estimates that between 50 to 60 thousand tonnes … (Lib, July 17, 2019)
7. … attracting roughly one-third of this (Gam, July 05, 2019).
8. … favourable conditions are reserved for some inmates … (Cam, 30 Jul 2019)
9. Various reports suggest that as a large, unified market of up to 1.2billion people … (Gam, July 24, 2019)
10. Among the most concerning findings is that the residents of about a fifth of cities globally (July 12, 2019) …
11. … member of the House of Representatives from Bomi County owns about 1,200 acres of land (Lib, July 8, 2019).
12. Between 2005 and 2016, approximately half of China … (Gam, July 05, 2019)
13. with 25% for Latin America and almost 50% for Asia (Gam, July 24, 2019).
14. Liberia is acknowledged to containroughly 4.3 million hectares of lowland … (Lib, July 11, 2019)
15. Forests cover around 68 percent of Liberia … (Lib, July 11, 2019)
16. The Daily Graphic is mindful of the fact that up to 30 per cent of electricity tariffs … (Gha, Jul 30 , 2019)
17. hey released some detainees as reported … (Gam, July 29, 2019)
18. Each constituency shall have an approximately equal population of 20,000, or such number … (Lib, August 12, 2019)
19. … except for a few challenges in some five constituencies for which elections … (Gha, Aug 24 , 2019)
20. … attending to the needs of some 250 students (Lib, June 21, 2019).
21. Nearly 80% of cities around the globe are expected to undergo dramatic

… (Gam, July 12, 2019)

ii. Approximation of duration

The vague linguistic approximating elements used to indicate this in the corpus are:about, between, around, approximately, roughly, some and up to. examples from our corpus include:

1. The adoption of the Liberian flag on August 24, 1847 came just about a year … (Lib, August 27, 2019)
2. … philosophy behind the founding of the corporation about a century ago (Cam, 28 Jan 2019).
3. We, however, regret that almost a fortnight since in his inaugural speech … (Cam, 22 Nov 2018)
4. but it is nauseating that it took almost one week (Nig, Aug 14, 2019).
5. …. reportedly stormed the hall around 1 a.m … (Nig, Aug 29, 2019)
6. Between 1961, when we unified, there have been the following brands of beers (Cam, 12 Jun 2017).
7. … in the North West and South West regions between September 22, and October 1, 2017 (Cam, 17 Oct 2017).
8. … the current mandate of parliament up toFebruary, 29, 2020 (Cam, 02 Jul 2019).
9. .. contradicts the very philosophy behind the founding of the corporation about a century ago (Cam, 28 Jan 2019)
10. The adoption of the Liberian flag on August 24, 1847 came just about a year … (Lib, August 27, 2019)
11. The much-talked about issue of whether Barrow would serve three or five years … (GAM, June 18, 2019)
12. History also recalls that some years ago some local journalists … (Lib, August 28, 2019)
13. However, some 10 months later in November … (Lib, July 19, 2019)
14. … hat commission has been on for nearly one year and has … (Cam, 8 Sep 2018)

iii. Approximation of distance/location

The words that depict this are: about, between, around, approximately and or as used in the following sentences from the corpus:

1. A senator from the same county possessesapproximately 800 acres … (Lib, July 8, 2019)
2. … House of Representatives from Bomi County owns about 1,200 acres of land (Lib, July 8, 2019).
3. … continental shelf, averaging about 34km in width … (lib, July 11, 2019)
4. … major metal mines are inside or within 10km of a protected area … (Cam, July 05, 2019)
5. … exploitation rights over nearly the entire southeast in exchange for a pittance (Lib, July 11, 2019).
6. a timely observation as growing farming sector around African cities poses public health threat if not properly regulated (Gam, August 16, 2019).
7. From our history and the instability that go on around our neighbouring countries … (Gha, Jun 29 , 2019)

4. Theoretical Framework

Vagueness shall be viewed in a general model of language use. This is in agreement with Sperber and Wilson (1985) in their paper, ‘Loose talk’ in relation to their Relevance Theory. They argue that contrary to the code model where “communication is achieved by encoding and decoding messages” philosophers like Grice proposed a model of communication called the “inferential model”. This unlike the code model does not rely on encoding, transfer and decoding of the message; it entails producing and interpreting evidence. They claim that works done by scholars on communication have shown that both the code and the inferential modes contribute to our understanding verbal communication which involves both processes – coding and inferential and that both models can achieve the goal of human verbal communication, though differently and that both “are too general to constitute a theory of communication” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, pp. 1– 3). This brings us to the principle of relevance.

Using the inferential model, Sperber and Wilson (1985 – 1986) say, human verbal communication is ostensive as it prepares the hearer to be ready as the speaker intends to say something that will be “relevant” to the hearer. It is therefore the responsibility of the listener to make “inferences” based on what the speaker says so as to arrive at the “relevant” meaning.

They affirm that in verbal human interaction, the literal truthfulness of an utterance is guaranteed in a situation where the speaker/writer of a declarative sentence, “in expressing a certain proposition, automatically vouches for its truth” and that “similar rules of literal commitments can be formulated for nondeclarative utterances.” They however say various situational exceptions exist to the “hypothetical rule of literal truthfulness.” Such exceptions include “quotations”, where the literal meaning is conveyed by the declarative sentences but are not asserted. In relation to quotation being an exception to the literal truthfulness, Jucker, et. al.(2003) say the “truth is not asserted” in quotations as the resemblance can be very low (say a summary or precis of the quotation) or high (say a direct quotation). Sperber & Wilson (1985) also mentioned metaphors, and tropes as other situations that involve a total departure from the literalness where the speaker is apparently vouching for the truth of some propositions but not for the truth of the proposition literally expressed.

Attention to vagueness in this paper is predicated on the assumption that rather than being wrong about the duration (time, month, year, date), distance/location (exact spot or particular place) and amount (weight, age size, etc.) the editorial writers have resulted to using linguistic approximation elements such as about, some, between, around, approximately, roughly, almost, around, and up to. Though this could be said to be in contradiction to Grice (1975) 'maxim' of truthfulness as the vague linguistic approximation would not be held as the “literal truthfulness,” Sperber and Wilson (1985) say VL does not violate the maxim of truthfulness. Echoing Grice (1975), they say:

when a speaker says, or makes as if to say, something which would blatantly violate the maxim of truthfulness, the hearer will assume that the maxim is being observed on another level, and will try to recover as an implicature some related proposition which a speaker observing the maxims might have wanted to convey (1985, p. 154).

In this light too, in using the vague approximators, the editorial writers have not in any way violated any communication convention or maxim (either Lewis’ (1983 ) convention of truthfulness and Grice’s (1975) maxim of truthfulness cited in Wilson & Sperber, 2002), as the editorials used the vague linguistic approximating elements to: establish rapport with their audience (readers); condenses discourse if, through shared knowledge, the listener (audience) can reconstruct the set; enables vagueness in discourse and signals the speaker is unsure (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010). According to Wilson & Sperber (1985), “Whatever genuine facts such a convention or maxim was supposed to explain are better explained by assuming that communication is governed by a principle of relevance” (2002, p. 15). This explains why rather than being too specific and becoming boring to their audience in the process, as seen in the sampled editorials, the editorial writers have approximated duration, number and distance/location and this achieved or satisfied the theory of relevance.

1. Methodology

Five online newspapers; one from each of the Anglophone West African countrieswere purposively sampled for the study. In all, the study sampled 50 editorials per paper per country from a randomly selected daily newspaper (between 2017 and 2019) from the four countries in West Africa where English is used as the only official language (Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria) and from where English serves as a second official language (Cameroon). All the editorials were downloaded from the newspapers’ websites. For replicability, each of the five newspapers are listed against the countries: The Sun newspaper (Cameroon, labelled as Cam: http://thesuncameroon.cm/index.php/category/editorial/), The Point newspaper (Gambia, labelled as Gam: http://thepoint.gm/editorial), The

Daily Graphic newspaper (Ghana, labelled as Gha: https://www.graphic.com.gh/daily-graphic-editorials.html), The Daily Observer newspaper (Liberia, labelled as Lib: https://www.liberianobserver.com/opinion/), and The Tribune newspaper (Nigeria, labelled as Nig: https://tribuneonlineng.com/category/editorial/). Online newspapers were chosen of physical newspapers because of their availability and ease of access. More so, they can be re-verified by other scholars. For relative representativeness, each newspaper had 50 editorials which amounts 300 editorials. This also gives the corpus balance. The online newspapers are not specialised papers but tabloids published daily. For uniformity of the corpus, the study concentrated on newspaper editorials genre which follows van Dijk (1995) and Weintraut’s(2005) views on editorial, they must be “'impersonal', focus on public (news) events, and support general (social, economic, cultural or political) opinions, usually shared by other elites” and must “explain or interpret, criticize, persuade and praise.” Most importantly, the editorial genre that formed the specialised corpus are “naturallyoccurring language” that gave us the opportunity to study real language usage by real human beings, while at the same time, being a specialised corpus gave us the chance to study and understand professional language (Flowerdew, 2004, p. 11). To be an object of study, each vague linguistic approximating element must have appeared in at least two newspapers. Pictures, hyperlinks, advertisements, emails, website addresses and other extraneous materials have been carefully edited to make the corpus as exact as required since it is not an instructional or scientific discourse. However, the date, the paper’s name, title of the editorials are left serving as metadata to the corpus. Because the editorials did not follow a sequential order, the aspect of they being of the same time was not followed but they are all between 2017 and 2019.

1. Results/Findings

Though each of the words listed here have different hits in the corpus when searched, the study’s attention was on the occasions they served as vague linguistic approximators. Of the 10 items that this study focused on, three patterns of usage emerged: the first is the low usage with three item – roughly, or and approximately whose usages ranged from two to seven instances in the corpus. Of this three in group, roughly had two instances of usage and this gave it a 0.72% of the 279 instances the elements were used.It was followed by or which was used five times out of the 279 instances that the 10 elements were used with a 1.79% usage of the elements. The low range pattern was completed by approximately with seven instances of usage that gave it a 2.51%.

The second pattern is the medium usage with four items - almost, nearly, up to and between –whose usages ranged from 9 – 20 instances in the corpus. The range started with up to that was used nine times that gave it a 3.23% instances of use of the 279 times the 10 elements were used in the corpus. It was followed by nearly that was used 11 instances with a 3.94% usage. The medium range was continued with almost with 14 instances of usage with a 5.02% of use in the corpus while between had 20 instances of use and a 7.17% instances of the 279 times the 10 linguistic approximating elements were used.

The third pattern, the high usage – about, around and some – that ranged from 54 – 95 instances had three members. It started with around with 54 instances and 19.35% of the 279 instances the elements were used. Then came about with 61 instances of use that gave it 21.86% of the use of the elements while the group was rounded-off with some that had 96 instances of use and 34.41% use of the elements in the corpus.

Of the 10 linguistic approximating elements studied, roughly was the least used as it recorded only two instances (once apiece by both countries). The item was used by Gam and Lib with a 0.72% usage for both of them out the five countries that the study sampled. This is followed by or that was used five time by Cam. and Lib. (one instance, respectively). Nig. used the item the most with three times by that gave it a 1.79% out the 279 times that the 10 elements were used. This in turn gave Nig. a 1.08 % of usage out the 279 instances the five Anglophone West African countries used the item. It is of note too to state that Gam. and Gha. did not use the item at all in the corpus.

Another item with a sparing usage in the corpus was approximately. It was used only seven times in the corpus. Of the five countries the study covered, only two of them used the item. Gam. used the items twice while Lib. used it five times. Though it had a 2.51% of use, the five instances of usage by Lib. gave her a 1.08% of the 279 instances the 10 elements were used.

As stated earlier, out of the 10 items three of them (up to, nearly and almost) were moderately used. The moderately used items started with up to. It was used by all the countries except Gha. The remaining four country in the study used it 9 times that gave the item a 3.23% usage. Of the four countries that used: Cam. used it once which gave it 11.11% of the total use of the item and 0.36% of the 279 times the linguistic approximating elements were used. Gam. and Nig. used it twice with 22.22% of the total use of the item and a 0.72% of the general use of the linguistic approximating elements. Lib. used the item the most – three times – with a 33.33% of the total use of the item and a 1.08% of the 279 times the item was used.

The remaining four items – about, around, between, andsome – were significantly used. The group started with between which was used by all the five countries in 20 instances though not in the same order. Of the five countries that used the item, Gam. used it the least times with in just one instance. Cam, Nig. and Lib. used it in progressive order of 3, 4 and 5. The three countries put together used the item 12 times which gave them 60% of the individual use of the item in the 20 instances it was used an a 4.30% of the 279 times the vague linguistic approximating items were used by all the five countries. Gha. had the most used times of the item as she used it 7 instances which gave her 35% usage of the 20 instances the item was used by the five countries and a 2.51% of the 279 instances the 10 vague linguistic approximating elements were used by the five Anglophone countries in their newspaper editorials.

The elements and the frequency of use both in number and percentage of use individually and on country per country basis are presented in the table below:

Table 1. The Vague Linguistic Approximation Elements in the Anglophone West African Editorials

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| TYPES OF  VALEs | CAM | GAM | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| about | 12 | 19 | 9 | 14 | 7 | 61 | 21.86 |
| almost | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 14 | 5.02 |
| approximately | 0 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 7 | 2.51 |
| around | 13 | 16 | 9 | 13 | 3 | 54 | 19.35 |
| between | 3 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 20 | 7.17 |
| nearly | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 11 | 3.94 |
| roughly | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0.72 |
| some | 14 | 10 | 21 | 30 | 21 | 96 | 34.41 |
| up to | 1 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 9 | 3.23 |
| or | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 1.79 |

TOTAL 52 53 48 73 53 279 100

COUNTRY 18.64 19% 17.20 26.16 19% 100% AVE % % %

Source: Present study

Legend: AVE (average), CAM (Cameroon), GAM (the Gambia), GHA (Ghana), LIB (Liberia), NIG (Nigeria), TOT (total), VALEs (vague linguistic approximating elements)

7. Discussion

In Section 1 of the study, five objectives were stated from which five research questions are derived. Answers are proffered to the five research questions here:

1. What are the main vague linguistic approximation elements focused on in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials?

There are different vague linguistic approximation elements in the corpus of the study. However, since the study set out from the beginning to examine just 10 specified vague linguistic approximation elements the 10 are identified in the study. The 10 vague linguistic approximation elements identified are: about, almost, approximately, around, between, nearly, or, roughly, some, and up to.

The elements so identified and studied do not function as grammatical entities that they are but took up another function here as discourse entities that made the amount, duration and/or distance/location they modified vague and approximate. The elements are used by the editorials to stress the writers’ inexactness though not as a result ignorance or inarticulateness but they were used deliberately but the editorials to signal to the readers that they could be exact but rather bore the with the exact number, duration or location, they have chosen to be vague through the approximation.

1. What are the types of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus?

The vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus are part of those Channell (p.18) calls “vague additives (which include vague approximators (e.g., about) …” and the one Carter & McCarthy (2006) say “ are originally adverbs and modifiers”. Let us take a look at these examples from the corpus:

20) Various reports suggest that as a large, unified market of up to 1.2-billion people … (Gam, July 24, 2019)

46) … that commission has been on for nearly one year and has … (Cam, 8 Sep 2018)

49) … continental shelf, averaging about 34km in width … (lib, July 11, 2019)

In the three examples above, amount, duration and location are approximated using the vague approximating elements. Example 20) did not give us an exact number of people in the area it rather approximated “up to 1.2-billion people”. In 46) too we are not told the exact duration had been on but we were told it had “been on for nearly one year” which approximate rather gave a specific figure. The exact distance was not mentioned in 49) but we were given an approximate distance of the continental shelf average “about 34km in width”. The elements so studied function in discourse to approximate duration, amount and/or distance/location iii. How frequent is the use of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials?

From the statistical perspective the frequency of use of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus vary as the elements are used differently but their usage can be statistically determined.

As stated in the findings of the study, the study focused on 10 vague linguistic approximating elements. The 10 elements were used 279 times in the 250 editorial corpus. The statistical usage is discussed below:

aboutwas used 61 times by the five West African Anglophone countries with 21.86% of the 279 instances that the items were used. This is presented as table 2.

Table 2:almost as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African Editorials

VLAEs CAM GAM GHA LIB NIG TOT AVE

21.86% of

about 12 19 9 14 7 61 279

COUNTRY 19.67 31.15 14.75 22.95 11.48 100

AVE % % % % % %

almost had 14 hits in all with a 5.02% of the 279 instances the item were used by the five country. It use on country by country basis is presented as table 3 below:

Table 3:almost as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West

African Editorials

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| VLAEs | CAM | GAM | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| almost | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 9 | 14 | 5.02% of  279 |
| COUNTRY  AVE | 28.57  % | 0.00  % | 7.14  % | 0.00  % | 64.29  % | 100% |  |

approximately had 2.51% of 279 instances the vague linguistic approximating elements were used by the five West African Anglophone newspaper editorial. It was used by two of the five countries. The usage is presented in table 4:

Table 4:approximately as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West

African Editorials

CA

VLAEs M GAM GHA LIB NIG TOT AVE approximately 0 2 0 5 0 7 2.51% of 279

COUNTRY 28.57 71.43

AVE 0.00 % 0.00 % 0.00 100%

aroundwas used 54 time by the five countries. It had 19.35% of 279 times the 10 elements the study studied were used in the study. The item was one of the three of the 10 that was prominently used in the study. Its usage is presented in table 5, below:

Table 5:around as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African Editorials

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| VLAEs | CAM | GAM | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| around | 13 | 16 | 9 | 13 | 3 | 54 | 19.35% of  279 |
| COUNTRY  AVE | 24.07  % | 29.63  % | 16.67  % | 24.07  % | 5.56  % | 100% |  |

between had 7.17% of the 279 instances the 10 vague linguistic approximating elements were used in the study. It was also used by all the five countries the study focused on. Its usage on country by country basis is presented in table 6 below:

Table 6:between as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West

African Editorials

CA GA

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| VLAEs | M | M | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| between | 3 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 20 | 7.17% of 279 |
| COUNTRY  AVE | 15% | 5% | 35% | 25 % | 20% | 100 % |  |

nearly had 7.17% of the 279 instances the 10 vague elements were used by the five countries in the study. Table 7 shows its usage on country by country basis in the study.

Table 7:nearly as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African

Editorials

CA GA

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| VLAEs | M | M | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| nearly | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 11 | 7.17% of 279 |

COUNTRY 100

AVE 36.36 18.18 9.09 0.00 36.36 %

roughly was one of the least items of the 10 vague linguistic approximating elements the study focused it had 0.72% of the 279 instances the 10 items were used. Its usage is presented in table 8, below:

Table 8:roughly as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West

African Editorials

CA GA

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| VLAEs | M | M | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| roughly | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0.72% of 279 |
| COUNTRY  AVE | 0.00 | 50% | 0.00 | 50 % | 0.00 | 100 % |  |

some was also used by all the five West African Anglophone countries the study focused on. It was one of the prominently used items in the 10 list of the study. It had 34.41% of the 279 instances the 10 items were used. Its usage is presented in table 9, below:

Table 9:someas a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African Editorials

VLAEs CAM GAM GHA LIB NIG TOT AVE

34.41% of

some 14 10 21 30 21 96 279

COUNTRY 14.58 10.42 21.88 31.25 21.88 100

AVE % % % % % %

up to had 3.23% of the 279 instances the 10 items were used in the 250 editorial corpus. Though it was used by the five countries, it was not that prominently used. Its usage is presented in table 10, below.

Table 10:up to as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African Editorials

GH

VLAEs CAM GAM A LIB NIG TOT AVE up to 1 2 0 4 2 9 3.23% of 279

COUNTRY 11.11 22.22 44.44 22.22 100

AVE % % 0.00 % % %

orwas also not prominently used in the study. It was used by three of the country in the study and had 1.79% of the 279 times the 10 items were used in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorial corpus. It is presented below in table 11.

Table 11:or as a vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African

Editorials

CA GA

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| VLAEs | M | M | GHA | LIB | NIG | TOT | AVE |
| or | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 1.79% of 279 |
| COUNTRY  AVE | 20% | 0.00 | 0.00 | 20% | 60% | 100 % |  |

iv. Can the frequency of use of the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus be determined on the basis of whether English is the sole or second official language?

It is important to state that the five countries used the elements almost on the same range with slight differences, irrespective of whether the language situation was sole official or second official language. Of the five countries, Gha. used the items the least with 48 instances which gave her a 17.20% of the 279 instance the 10 items studied were used. Cam., where English is the second official language came next with 52 instances after Gha. and 18.64% of the 279 instances. Gam. and Nig. tied with 53 instances of use and 19% of the 279 instances the items were used. Lib. used the items the most of the five countries with 73 instances and 26.16% of the 279 instances the 10 items were used. roughly was the least used of the 10 items with 2 instances and 0.72% of the 279 instances the 10 items were used in the 250 editorial corpus. some was the most used item of the 10 item list of the study. While roughly was used by only two countries, some had presence in the five countries with 96 instances in the study and 34.41% usage out of the 279 instances the items were used in the 250 editorial corpus of five West African Anglophone countries. There is only one token difference between Cam. where English is the second official language and Gam. and Nig. where English is the sole official language. The usage of the items is presented in table 12, below:

Table 12:The vague approximating element in the Anglophone West African Editorials

VLAEs CAM GAM GHA LIB NIG TOT TOTAL 52 53 48 73 53 279

COUNTRY AVE 18.64% 19% 17.20% 26.16% 19% 100%

v. What functions do the vague linguistic approximation elements in the West African Anglophone newspaper editorials corpus discourse perform?

Though the words perform other grammatical functions, they all perform approximate function in the editorials studied to approximate number, duration and or distance/location.

1. Implications of the Study

As established by previous studies, vagueness generally and VL in particular is a predominant feature of humans the language. All the five countries studied used one form of vague language or the other. The implication of this is that since the editorial genre is a formal writing genre from different countries in the Anglophone West Africa contained the elements, whether in the first or second language situation the human language is replete VL.

Another implication from the study is that the status of English, whether as sole official or second official language in a country does not affect the usage of the language as only one instance separated the usage of the item by Cam. where English is the second official language and Gam. and Nig. where English is the sole official language.

The low usage of roughly in the five-country corpus – two instances by two countries out of the five, points to the fact that the element might be a spoken discourse element. Despite this however, that it is present in the formal written editorial discourse implies that the line between spoken and written discourse as well as formal and informal language is thinning out.

1. Conclusion

This study, like the previous ones, concludes that to humans, vagueness generally and the VL, as exemplified by the vague linguistic approximating elements in particular, is a deliberate discourse or interactional strategy of humans as typified by the editorial writers who used the elements for discourse approximating purposes. For the elements to have been used in 279 occurrences in the editorial discourse, shows the elements are human discourse specific items.

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