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**EXPRESSING “VAGUENESS” IN MODERN
ENGLISH**

DIPLOMA THESIS

**VYJADŘOVÁNÍ NEURČITOSTI V SOUČASNÉ
ANGLIČTINĚ**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

This diploma thesis analyses various ways of expressing vagueness in modern English. This is a very frequent phenomenon in both spoken and written language. However, this thesis concentrates only on written English. At first, several approaches to the phenomenon of vagueness are introduced. Then, the vague expressions are classified from several points of view and divided into different groups. These expressions are analysed as to their meaning, distribution and syntax. Attention is paid as to which vague expressions are used with time expressions, distance expressions, sums of money etc. Non-numerical vague quantifiers are taken into account as well. The thesis also observes whether the vague expressions occur in the singular or plural, if they collocate with countable or uncountable nouns, if they can be combined and if there are other means (e.g. suffixes) which have the same or similar function. The frequency of the occurrence of vague expressions in different registers is summarised at the end of the work.

Anotace

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá různými způsoby vyjadřování neurčitosti v současném anglickém jazyce. Je to častý jev objevující se jak v mluvené, tak v psané podobě jazyka. Tato práce se soustředí pouze na jazyk psaný. Teoretická část představuje několik přístupů k problematice vyjadřování neurčitosti v současném anglickém jazyce. V praktické části jsou shromážděné výrazy neurčitosti rozděleny do několika skupin a analyzovány z hlediska jejich významu, distribuce a syntaktických vztahů. Práce sleduje, jaké výrazy se používají s časovými údaji, s údaji vzdálenosti, s peněžními částkami atd., ale též jaké nečíselné neurčité kvantifikátory současný jazyk užívá. Dále si všímá toho, zda se tyto výrazy vyskytují v singuláru nebo v plurálu, zda se pojí s počítatelnými nebo nepočítatelnými substantivy, zda lze neurčité výrazy kombinovat a existují-li v angličtině další prostředky (např. sufixy) se stejnou nebo podobnou funkcí. Četnost výskytu neurčitých výrazů v jednotlivých funkčních stylech je shrnuta v závěru práce.

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1 Introduction

Vagueness in both written and spoken language is a very common phenomenon and a very interesting area of language study. It deserves specific attention in the description of English and also in language teaching.

Some people think that vagueness and imprecision are bad characteristics of language usage and that they should be avoided. According to them, to be an excellent language user, your expression should be clear and accurate. I do not agree, because you can find a lot of vague expressions in many respectable English newspapers and magazines. The authors of these articles are competent users of the English language and they show it by using a certain degree and number of vague expressions. "This is the key to understanding that vagueness in language is neither all 'bad' nor all 'good'. What matters is that vague language is used appropriately." (Channell 1994: 3)

In spoken language, a lot of interruptions, overlaps and grammatically incomplete parts occur. Most speakers are usually not aware of using vague expressions. They notice such words only in cases when they are used in an inappropriate way.

The phenomenon of vague language can be examined from different points of view. In a wider sense, ambiguity can also be included. In the theoretical part of my diploma thesis, I would like to describe several approaches of linguists who have been interested in vague language and have analysed it in some way. In the last chapter of the theoretical part, I only touch on the issue of vagueness and ambiguity; it is beyond the scope of my work so I am not going to devote efforts to this issue in the practical part.

In the practical part, I am going to classify vague expressions from several points of view and divide them into different groups, for instance, according to their morphological structure, according to the frequency of their occurrence, etc.

2 Vague language –

What does it actually mean?

2.1 A definition of vague language

Many linguists ask how we can best describe or define vagueness. Is language itself or our usage of it mainly responsible for vagueness? Some linguists examine only the language itself but some go further and consider a wider context and relations. Vagueness occurs widely in language usage and some investigators claim that all language use is vague in some way.

Channell (1994) works with the following definition of vagueness in her book:

“An expression or word is vague if:

- a. it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition;*
- b. it is “purposely and unabashedly vague”;*
- c. its meaning arises from the “intrinsic uncertainty” referred to by Peirce”*
(Channell 1994: 20)

Russell (1923) tried to define vagueness in his study, too. He claims that vagueness, even if it refers primarily to what is cognitive, is a conception which can be applied to every kind of representation. However, at first, he gives the exact definition of accuracy: *“One system of terms related in various ways is an accurate representation of another system of terms related in various other ways if there is a one-one relation of the terms of the one to the terms of the other, and likewise a one-one relation of the relations of the one to the relations of the other, such that, when two or more terms in the one system have a relation belonging to that system, the corresponding terms of the other system have the corresponding relation belonging to the other system.”* (Russell 1923: 89)

Thus, on the contrary, *“a representation is vague when the relation of the representing system to the represented system is not one-one, but one-many.”* (1923: 89) Vagueness is a matter of degree which depends on the scope of the possible differences

between different systems that are represented by the same representation. In contrast to vagueness, accuracy is an ideal limit.

Russell continues that the representing system consists of words, perceptions and thoughts and "*the would-be one-one relation*" between the representing system and the represented system will be meaning. If there were an accurate language, meaning would be a one-one relation, no word would have two or more meanings and no two words would mean the same. In actual languages, meaning is one-many relation. However, Russell sees here a complication with regard to language as a method of representing a system, "*namely that words which mean relations are not themselves relations, but just as substantial or unsubstantial as other words.*" (1923: 90) In a language, certain relations of higher order are represented by relations, in agreement with the rules of syntax.

Russell concludes his study by the statement that "*all vagueness in language and thought is essentially analogous to this vagueness which may exist in a photograph.*" (1923: 91)

2.2 Main reasons for vagueness

Many speakers of English are not aware of using vague language. They notice it only if it is pointed out to them. A very important topic in many discussions about the reasons for vagueness is whether this phenomenon is present in our language or in the world itself, in other words whether vagueness is semantic or ontological in nature. Ullmann (1962) mentions "*lack of clear-cut boundaries in the non-linguistic world*" as one of the reasons for vagueness. I think that vagueness in language and in the world should not be separated from each other, because they are in a very close relationship due to the fact that most of our knowledge is vague. However, it would be a mistake to think that vague knowledge must be false. On the contrary, it has a better chance of being true than a precise one because there are more possible facts that can verify it.

I am going to describe Ullmann's reasons for vagueness and the reasons proposed by other linguists in a more detailed way in the next chapter.

3 Some approaches to vague language

Until now, not much attention has been paid to the phenomenon of vagueness in the specialised literature. Different linguists who have been interested in this phenomenon have focused on different aspects of it. In this chapter, I would like to introduce several approaches of linguists who have dealt with the problem of vague language.

In 1994 a major descriptive study of linguistic vagueness was published, called *Vague Language* and its author is **Joanna Channell**, a linguist. She claims that strategies for being vague are essential for the communicative competence of native speakers of English. She examines syntactic, semantic and pragmatic characteristics of vagueness and the conversational effects which occur from its use.

It seems that there have been two points of view – the first view is that vagueness is a good thing, the second view claims the reverse. Ullmann says that a language is not able to express thoughts because it lacks clarity and precision. I agree with him to the point that imprecision and vagueness are not bad. They can be an advantage – especially for poets and creative writers. However, the vagueness of our words is a handicap in some situations.

Peirce (1902) is often considered to be the originator of the idea of vagueness in language, however, Ullmann dates it earlier by tracing it back to Plato. Perhaps, Peirce was the first to try to formulate this idea in some way. Channell explains his views by saying that “*the language system permits speakers to produce utterances without having decided whether certain facts are 'excluded or allowed' by them*”. (Channell 1994: 7)

3.1 Ullmann and his “Words with blurred edges”

Ullmann (1962) claims that the term *vagueness* itself is rather vague and ambiguous. “*The condition it refers to is not a uniform feature but has many aspects and may result from a variety of causes. Some of these are inherent in the very nature of language, whereas others come into play only in special circumstances.*” (Ullmann 1962: 118)

According to him, one of the most important reasons for vagueness is *the generic character of words*. He says that words refer to classes of things or events and not to single items and he gives Wittgenstein's example in which the nature of the word, *game*, has been examined. Wittgenstein has compared various types of games (board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games etc.) and has found a lot of similarities which overlap. If we consider more and more games, the common features appear and disappear because some games are competitive, others solitary, some games are amusing, others are not, some games need skill, some require chance etc. In this sense we could say that, except for precisely defined scientific or technical terms, this process of generalisation inevitably leads to vagueness "but it is the price we have to pay for having a means of social communication flexible enough to cope with the infinite variety of our experiences."

The generic character of words has very often been connected with "abstractness" in language. However, the opposition between abstract and concrete is not the same as the opposition between generic and particular. A word may be general in meaning and, at the same time, it may remain on the concrete plane. But in a wider sense, generic terms can be considered as "abstract", more schematic, they refer to a wider range of items but tell us very little about them. For example, the word *animal* is more general, i. e. more abstract than *lion*.

Ullmann says that almost all our words are to some extent generic but there are many differences between languages; some prefer particular terms while the others are more abstract and general. It is necessary to add that richness in particular terms does not have to be a sign of inability of a language to generalise but it may be influenced by environment and living conditions. Thus, it is not surprising that some tribes such as, for example, the Eskimos have a lot of expressions for different kinds of snow, whereas other tribes such as, for example, the Aztecs use the same word stem for "cold", "snow" and "ice". So, there is a certain word-stock typical of each environment. Snow is very important for the inhabitants of the Arctic region, so every state of it is very carefully specified. Similar examples can be tribes living in desert areas; such nations have their own particular needs and use a different type of vocabulary.

Ullmann also claims that even languages based on the same civilisation differ in the use of general and specific terms. French is regarded as an "abstract" language while

German and English are "concrete". Sometimes, a single generic term in French corresponds to several particular terms in German. French has, for example, only one generic term, *aller*, where German distinguishes among more specific terms, such as *gehen*, *reiten*, *fahren* etc. French is obviously able to add a supplementary phrase to specify the meaning of the verb but the more specific German terms automatically contain this extra information. According to Ullmann, the fact that French is so "abstract" is connected with its preference for simple, unmotivated words.

German is also more precise in certain compound adverbs. It distinguishes between the direction towards and away from the speaker (adverbs *herein*, *heraus*, *hinein*, *hinaus* etc.) which does not exist in English or French. The individual French word is mostly more schematic, poorer in expressive details than its German counterpart. In this respect, English is closer to German than to French.

The second important reason for vagueness which Ullmann mentions is the fact that *the meaning of our words is never completely homogenous*. This means that it is context-bound. Even the simplest words have many different aspects which depend on the context, situation and also on the personality of the speaker who uses them. He claims that "*only the context will specify which aspect of a person, which phase in his development, which side of his activities we have in mind*" (Ullmann 1962: 124).

To illustrate his point, he gives an example of a noun with a concrete meaning - *book*. Its meaning varies according to its users. It means something different to readers, an author, a publisher, a librarian, a book-collector and others.

However, Joanna Channell who examines the problem of vagueness suggests that there are some expressions that are always vague and so a precise interpretation or analysis is impossible.

Ullmann mentions as a further source of vagueness, *lack of clear-cut boundaries in the non-linguistic world*. Here it is essential to distinguish between concrete and abstract terms. "*Even in our physical environment we are often faced with phenomena which merge into one another and which we have to divide up, as best we can, into discrete units*" (Ullmann 1962: 125).

Ullmann takes the human body as an example of concrete terms. He describes a certain shift in meaning which was "*a kind of semantic chain-reaction*". For example,

the French word, *cuisse*, has its origin in the Latin word, *coxa*, "hip", but in French this word means "thigh". These shifts would not have occurred, he claims, if there were a definite boundary between the two areas in our anatomy.

The lack of boundaries is more prominent in the abstract terms where it is much more complicated to distinguish them sharply from one another. The abstract terms of ordinary language are much less precise and it is left to the dictionary to define the precise meanings of expressions.

Channell comments on this reason for vagueness and claims that the extra-linguistic world is vague "*in any case as far as our subjective perception of it goes*" (Channell 1994: 7). She gives examples in which she asks when a hill becomes large enough that we can qualify it as a mountain or at what precise age a girl should be referred to as a woman.

The fourth and the last source of vagueness which Ullmann mentions is *lack of familiarity with the words with the things they stand for*. This factor is, of course, variable because it is individual and depends on the general knowledge and on the interest of each person. For example, people who live in a town or city usually have only superficial knowledge of the meaning of animal and plant names or of agricultural terms. Another example which Ullmann gives are terms such as *existentialism*, *logical positivism*, *enzyme* and *cybernetics* and notes that there are many people who would not be able to explain reasonably these "*key-terms in the twentieth-century civilization*". Apart from such specialised terms, there are a lot of others that English has borrowed from foreign languages and whose meaning is not clear to many speakers. Ullmann concludes that this unfamiliarity "*continues to represent a serious social and educational problem*" (Ullmann 1962: 128).

Channell accepts Ullmann's factors of vagueness in language but she thinks that he confuses causes and effects. His reasons *the non-linguistic world is vague* and *unfamiliarity* are facts about the world and people in it, which necessitate the ability of language to express vagueness, are the first two reasons (*generic character of words, meaning is context-bound*).

In my opinion, the factors for vagueness which Ullmann describes are essential for the examination of vagueness in language. However, I agree with Channell's claim

that linguistic vagueness is not gratuitous and that it is caused by the world in which language is used.

3.2 Comparison of Wachtel's truth-conditional approach with Sadock's pragmatic account

In his study, **Wachtel** (1980) proposes an alternative theory to **Lakoff's** theory, which supports a fuzzy semantics, and to **Sadock's** theory, which provides a radical pragmatic account. He considers these two theories as untenable and suggests defining the truth conditions of approximations in terms of round numbers and treating approximations within a context-sensitive semantics. He is interested in the approximator, *approximately*, only and its relationship to sentences where there is not any lexical approximator.

Wachtel gives examples of sentences where an apparently precise sentence is used with a vague meaning:

- (1) *Sam is approximately six feet tall.*
- (2) *Sam has approximately \$10,000 in his savings account.*
- (3) *Odessa has a population of approximately one million.*

He says that if we consider (1) in a more detailed way, we find out that Sam could be five feet eleven inches tall, or six foot one and (1) is still true. But where is the point at which (1) starts being false? "*It is clearly impossible to specify this point.*" (Wachtel 1980: 202)

Sadock also considers the sentences which contain *approximately*. He compares sentence (1) and this sentence:

- (4) *That cockroach is approximately six feet tall.*

According to him, if Sam and the cockroach are actually 5 feet 8 inches, (4) is a better estimate than (1) because human beings are often about six feet tall while cockroaches are not. Adult humans are usually from five to seven feet tall, it is a rather narrow range. Cockroaches are usually very small, so the range between zero and at least six feet is much larger than in sentence (1). The smaller the range, the more precision is required and hence, the larger the number should be.

Thus, Sadock says that *"it is the purpose of the estimate that essentially determines how close to the truth it must be to be warranted"* (Sadock 1977: 434). So he sees the pragmatic notion of purpose as central. According to him the role of an approximator is *"to trivialize the semantics of a sentence, to make it almost unfalsifiable"* (Sadock 1977: 437). The appropriateness of a particular approximation is a pragmatic, not a semantic matter. There are a lot of contexts so it is possible to find some context in which any approximation is acceptable. Therefore, Sadock claims, it is useless to speak about the truth conditions of an approximation.

Wachtel does not agree with Sadock at this point because his conclusions make incorrect predictions about sentences such as:

(6) *Sam is not approximately six feet tall.*

Sadock says that what makes an approximation true in almost all circumstances is the correct specification of the truth conditions of it. From Sadock's consideration follows, Wachtel says, that *"the negation of an approximation is false in just those circumstances; i.e. that as long as Sam's height is not zero, (6) is false. This is not the case."* (Wachtel 1980: 203). (6) is a negation of (1) and it does not mean that Sam has no height. This account *"correctly predicts that (7) entails (1)"* (1980: 203):

(7) *Sam is exactly six feet tall.*

Sadock's theory says that (7) entails (1) but it also predicts that (7) entails a sentence like this: *Sam is approximately three feet tall* but Wachtel does not agree with this prediction.

Wachtel says that not every pragmatic account of these phenomena is false but that this pragmatic account is inadequate. He also tries to formulate an alternative theory in more explicit terms which *"provides a non-fuzzy and non-trivialized semantics for approximations"* (Wachtel 1980: 204).

He considers the problem from another point of view. He examines sentences where there is no approximator but the sentence resembles approximations. As an example he gives these sentences:

(8) *Sam is six feet tall.*

(9) *Sam has \$10,000 in his savings account.*

(10) *Odessa has a population of one million.*

(8) would normally be considered as true if Sam was 5 feet 11 inches tall, (9) and (10) would be true if he had \$9,873 and if the population of Odessa was 1,002,493. But what about these examples:

(11) *Sam is 5 feet 11 inches tall.*

(12) *Sam has \$9873 in his savings account.*

(13) *Odessa has a population of 1,002,493.*

If Sam is actually six feet tall, (11) is false. It is the same with the sentences (12) and (13) - if he has exactly \$10,000 and Odessa's population was exactly one million. Wachtel explains it so that sentences (8) to (10) are "*inherently approximations*" (Wachtel 1980: 204) but examples (11) to (13) are not. The reason is that the numerals in (8) to (10) represent round numbers but (11) to (13) do not.

Sadock does not pay attention to sentences without *approximately* but he describes something similar to Wachtel's sentences without an approximator that were described above. Sadock considers the number of significant figures and the importance of context in determining the suitability of an approximation.

He compares these sentences:

(14) *Odessa has a population of approximately one million.*

(15) *Odessa has a population of approximately 990,000.*

and supposes that the actual population of Odessa is 980,000. (14) is a better approximation than (15) even though 990,000 is closer to the actual number of population than one million. "*What seems to be going on here is that (15) has more significant figures than (14) and consequently involves a smaller scale. This effect only comes into play if the scale established by the last significant figure is smaller than the scale established by the nature of the approximatee.*" (Sadock 1977: 433)

The form of the approximation is more important than its content in determining the scale by which "*the defensibility of an approximation is to be judged.*" A change in units involved makes a change in the perception of accuracy of the approximation even if there is not any change in the magnitude of the guess. The next important thing is that the same figure can be considered as more or less accurate; it depends on how it is put. Thus, *about a dozen* is rougher than *about twelve*, *approximately two and a half tons* "*is not as accurate sounding*" as *approximately two-point-five tons*.

Wachtel, similarly to Sadock, considers the role of context as crucial for the question of round numbers and gives this example: 10,000 is a round number but 9,873 is not, "*if we are measuring Sam's wealth to the nearest thousand dollars.*" But if we are measuring his wealth to the nearest dollar, 9,873 is a round number because there may be actually \$9,872.91 in his account. It follows from that that the notion "round number" is context-sensitive and the relevant contextual factors must be taken into account when we decide if a particular number is or is not the appropriate round number for a given exact number. The most important contextual factor is the purpose of the estimate.

Wachtel makes a very important observation which, in my opinion, is valid. He claims that the difference between the sentences *Sam is approximately six feet tall* and *Sam is six feet tall* is that the latter can be used to describe Sam's height as exactly six feet tall while the first sentence cannot. Thus, *Sam is six feet tall* is synonymous with *Sam is exactly six feet tall*. The number *six* in *Sam is six feet tall* is an exact number, not a round number. "*Otherwise, Sam is six feet tall is synonymous with Sam is approximately six feet tall, and six in Sam is six feet tall denotes a round number. In view of these synonymy relations, we conclude that approximately six in Sam is approximately six feet tall denotes a round number, and that exactly six in Sam is exactly six feet tall denotes an exact number.*" (Wachtel 1980: 205)

Wachtel goes further and tries to define the expressions *approximately* and *exactly* "as denoting functions from numbers and contexts into sets of numbers." He claims that if a sentence which contains *exactly n* is true, then the same sentence which contains *approximately n* must be true. "*Therefore, anyone who utters (1) when he is in a position to utter (7) is being less informative than he could be.*" (Wachtel 1980: 207)

In the previous analysis we have seen that (8) can be synonymous either with (1) or (7). If the speaker follows the Grice's Maxim of Quantity, the distinction between *exactly* and *approximately* is not important for the purposes of the exchange. It means that there is not any difference between exact numbers and round numbers. Thus, for the purposes of exchange, Sam may actually be exactly six feet tall or may not be, but he is at least approximately six feet tall. The maxim of quantity says that the speaker is not expected to give either less or more information needed for the purpose of the conversation. This explains the fact that (8) usually means that Sam is exactly six feet

tall and it is not considered false if Sam's actual height is 5 feet 11 inches as in the other example. However, if (8) must give an exact description of Sam's height, then it is synonymous with (7). If (8) provides only an approximation, then it is synonymous with (1).

Examples (11) to (13) illustrate the same case. The difference between (11) and (8) is that in (11) there are more significant figures than in (8) because the latter does not refer to inches. The speaker provides more information about Sam's height. This information is necessary "*if he is assumed to be acting in accordance with the maxim of quantity and not providing more information than is required for the purposes of the exchange.*" (Wachtel 1980: 209)

Wachtel concludes his analysis with the claim that he has specified the semantics of *approximately* without using the fuzzy semantics which Lakoff uses. Wachtel involved the notion of context and if the context is involved, it is a pragmatic account. However, his pragmatic account is more explicit and explains certain aspects of approximations which Sadock's pragmatic account does not. Wachtel asserts that the present theory uses neither a fuzzy nor trivialised semantics. He treats approximations as "*containing expressions that are indexed for the context of use*" (1980: 210) and says that the approximating expressions can only be correctly dealt with within a semantic theory that treats them as indexical. As he has treated approximations in this way, "*so that the context is instrumental in determining their truth conditions, and by defining the notion of rounding functions*", he has explained the semantic and pragmatic aspects of approximations without having to solve problems that face a fuzzy or trivialised semantics.

Wachtel makes several important points connected to the meaning of *approximately*. In my view, the most important of these is that an approximation containing *approximately* is true for an interval of numbers, the centre of which is the given number. I think that the context is very important for an approximation. A particular approximation may be correct in one context but not in another. He explains the obvious fuzziness of approximation in terms of rounding. At the same time, he emphasises that if we treat approximations within a context-sensitive semantics, we avoid the problems faced by a fuzzy and trivialised semantics.

3.2.1 Distinguishing between approximators

I had at my disposal another of Wachtel's studies which was written in 1981. Here, he wants to show "*how different approximators can be handled within the same theory with no radical changes*" (Wachtel 1981: 311).

He also discusses several objections to his analysis of approximations as raised by Joanna Channell. She considers the difference between *approximately* and other approximators such as *about*, *around* and *or so*. Wachtel agrees with her assumption that the interval of numbers allowed by *approximately*, *about* and *around* is symmetrical around the given number but *or so* is not the case. Approximator *or so* seems to extend above the given number, not below. Thus, the scope allowed by *or so* is not symmetrical around the number.

At this point, Wachtel makes a very important observation. He claims that "*there are two distinct ways in which an approximator can differ from approximately: either the latitude it allows in a given context may be wider or narrower than that allowed by approximately, or it may skew upwards or downwards. It may of course differ in both these ways. The apparent centrality of approximately is of course accidental and has no real substance.*" (Wachtel 1981: 312). Therefore, he distinguishes between skewing and non-skewing approximators. Non-skewing approximators differ from skewing ones in the fact that the latitude they allow in a certain context is distributed symmetrically around the given number while in the case of skewing approximators this is not the case. *Or so* seems to be a skewing approximator; *approximately*, *around*, *about* are non-skewing approximators.

Next, Wachtel deals with the approximator *or so*. He compares his theory with that of Channell. She treats *or so* as a unitary approximator but Wachtel objects that it consists of *or* and *so*, and we should therefore examine *or so* in these terms. He disapproves of the fact that Channell considers *or so* approximations and *n-or-m* approximations separately even if they are very similar to each other. Wachtel refers to *or so* approximations as *n-or-so* approximations. He explains his theory in this way: he treats *so* as a pro-numeral, so that both types fall into the same category of *n-or-m* approximations; *m* is either a specific numeral or the pro-numeral *so*. He adds that *m* must be greater than *n* in *n-or-m* approximators. Channell also discusses the problem of

magnitude of m in n -or- m approximations and she says that the magnitude of m is determined by the magnitude of n . She takes into account other relations between n and m , too. Wachtel agrees with her to the point that there are restrictions on what m can be, given a particular n . "*If the same constraints apply to the interpretation of so, then for a given n the possible referents of so are extremely limited.*" (Wachtel 1981: 317)

Wachtel turns to Channell's objection that she raises to the term, *round number*, which Wachtel used in one of his studies (1980). He used it in a different way from the way in which it occurs in natural language usage. His explanation is that approximators take a number which is not a natural round number and use this number as a round number. Thus, the approximator shows that an unround number is being used as a round number. From that follows that rounding is important in approximations.

Wachtel considers this sentence: *John is 5 feet 11.49999 inches tall* and claims that even this is an approximation – "to the nearest hundred-thousandth of an inch". He asks questions such as: Do we include John's hair too? Do we measure him in the morning or in the evening? He admits that these questions should not be asked because we are concerned with a relatively precise approximation. In these cases, a number quantifies non-discrete items, with the exception of analytic sentences such as *A metre is 100 centimetres long*. In this sentence, there is an absolutely exact number. However, we may have a situation where every number is an approximation, claims Wachtel. In his study, he considers Channell's objections to his analysis of approximators but he says that her objections are based on the results of elicitation tests. Channell claims that these tests provide information about the semantics of approximators. However, according to Wachtel, these tests can provide indications but not any convincing evidence of the semantics of the involved sentence. It is necessary to find an interpretation for the sentence and after that a specific context in which the sentence has that interpretation. "*If semantics is considered to be the study of the meaning of the sentence, and if 'meaning' includes at least preferred and non-preferred interpretations, then elicitation tests of this type do not provide evidence of the required type.*" (Wachtel 1981: 319) Then Wachtel turns to the expression, *not less than*, because Channell has used it in her elicitation tests but he does not regard it as an approximator and comments on his opinion in this way: "*It does not exhibit the cut-off point problem characteristic of approximators.*" (Wachtel 1981: 320) Its analysis is, therefore, irrelevant. He

explains the reason why the elicitation test generated a scope similar to that for *or so*. It is because either a natural round number was used, or because of pragmatic factors which result from the choice of *not less than* instead of the easier expression *more than*. Wachtel emphasises that we must consider the possibility of interpreting *not less than* “as a stylistically marked version of *as much as*”. He adds that it is important “to distinguish between true approximators and mere vague or partial specifiers, which do not involve the problem of a cut-off point with respect to the truth of the sentence they appear in.” (Wachtel 1981: 320)

Wachtel is a supporter of the truth-conditional semantics which is important but I think that there is a question about the adequacy of this theory. Several types of sentences cannot be treated by truth-conditions (questions, comparatives). Channell mentions another problem in connection with the adequacy of the truth-conditional approach: “many difficulties arise both from the insistence that only two truth values are necessary, and from proposals to allow three, or more.” (Channell 1994: 30)

In my view, Wachtel’s studies are interesting and important in some ways, for example, his analysis of *approximately*, which I still consider to be valid. However, I agree with Channell’s objections which concern the inadequacy of the truth-conditional approach for the treatment of the semantic differences between different approximators.

3.2.2 Truth and approximations

Now I would like to return to **Sadock** and his theory. He says that “*the requisite truth definition for an approximation is therefore one that makes it true in all circumstances, or one that makes it true unless the approximatee does not have the property at all*” (Sadock 1977: 435). According to this statement, all approximations would have the same truth value under almost all conditions. Sadock, however, asks how the fact can be explained that they are not interchangeable in all contexts. He answers that the approximators do not differ in their truth values but in their sense; they are not interchangeable because the sense of the statements is different even if their reference is the same.

Sadock concludes his analysis by mentioning some advantages of the pragmatic account which he prefers. He says that if approximators were truth functional, as they are in a fuzzy semantics, he sees no reason “*why they could not take already inexact*

expressions as arguments". According to him, the fuzzy semantics approach does not exclude approximations which are bad. He gives this example:

(16) **Sam is about approximately six feet tall.*

According to a fuzzy semantics, this example would be grammatically correct and its meaning would be similar to the exaggerated approximation as in example (17).

(17) *Sam is very roughly six feet tall.*

Sadock explains that in a fuzzy semantics, expressions like *some*, *a few*, *several* and *many* are truth-functional and they are different from the numerical quantifiers and the quantifiers *all*, *every* and *none* in the fact that "their semantics are fuzzy rather than discrete". Thus, it can be assumed that an approximator and a vague quantifier used together create an expression which is less accurate. However, these expressions are ungrammatical. Sadock gives examples to illustrate his assumption which, in my view, is correct:

(18) **Sam has approximately some money in his savings account.*

(19) **Sam has written approximately a few/ several/ many books.*

Sadock supports the pragmatic approach which is able to explain why examples (18) and (19) are ungrammatical. According to this theory, the main task of an approximator in a sentence is to trivialise its semantics. Double approximations cannot be taken into account because a single approximator is able to trivialise the semantics of a sentence as much as is possible.

Sadock comments on quantifiers, *some*, *a few*, *several* and *many*, because he wants to explain the fact that he considers examples (18) and (19) as bad. He suggests treating them as such because it is difficult to find a situation in which a sentence containing, for instance, *a few*, is clearly false, except the situation when there are no entities that fit this description. He emphasises that there are, of course, differences among these various quantifiers. They stand in a hierarchy: *many* indicates *several*, *several* indicates *a few*, and *a few* indicates *some*. Furthermore, he treats these expressions as conversationally upper and lower bounded. The first maxim of quantity ("Do not say more than is required...") provides the lower bound and the second maxim of quantity ("Do not say less than is required...") provides the upper bound. According to Sadock, if we say *many*, it indicates more than if we say *several*, "without making any different semantic commitment". Thus, he claims that it is for pragmatic reasons

that these inexact quantifiers are so extended; they have rather trivial semantics so “further trivialization by means of approximators is impossible”.

The other argument which Sadock provides for the pragmatic approach is that simple approximators are not different from one another “in the communicated degree of accuracy of the approximation”. Even many native speakers are not sure which of the words, *circa*, *about*, *around*, *roughly* and *approximately*, are more precise. They differ in some way. “*But it is the case that these approximators do not differ in any striking way as to how close the approximation must be to the truth to be defensible*” (1977: 438).

At the very end of his study, Sadock claims that the semantic theory of such forms does not offer a non-ad hoc explanation for this phenomenon. All approximators are alike in their ability to turn interesting, falsifiable sentences into uninteresting, unfalsifiable ones.

Sadock is mainly interested in the approximator, *approximately*, in his study. I agree with his observation that it also depends on the nature of the item which is approximated, when we judge how good the approximation is. I also think that his explanation of the reason why some approximators used with a vague quantifier are ungrammatical in the pragmatic approach, even if they are not considered to be bad in a fuzzy semantics, is correct.

3.3 Lakoff's fuzzy logic

In 1972, **Lakoff** wrote a study in which he considered the problem of vagueness in language. He considered mainly the theoretical problem of finding a semantics for vague expressions which express quantity. Lakoff is a supporter of fuzzy logic which uses deductive methods for situations in which the information may be partly or approximately true; it does not make an absolute distinction between true and false. In fuzzy logic, everything is a matter of degree.

Lakoff (1972: 222) tried to show that the sentence *Sam has approximately \$ 10,000 in his savings account* used as an example is true if he had \$9,999 and continuously less true if he had e.g. \$9,950, \$9,600 and so on. However, he did not say

anything about the case if Sam had \$10,030, \$10,500 and so on. He says that *approximately* can be vague to differing degrees in different circumstances.

He proposed further that "*some of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy*" (1972: 195). This idea is similar to Crystal and Davy's suggestion about particular expressions which exist to make conversation inaccurate.

Lakoff speaks about "hedges" which are expressions by which speakers avoid being compromised by a statement that turns out to be wrong. Thus, instead of giving an order "Buy me a newspaper!", one can use an interrogative as a hedge and say "Could you perhaps buy me a newspaper?"

Prince et al. (1982) claim that vagueness is typical of medical discourse and draw an important distinction. They say that Lakoff's "hedges" identify two distinct phenomena. There are hedges that "*introduce fuzziness with respect to the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition being conveyed*" (Channell 1994: 16). Prince et al. give these examples:

His feet were blue.

I think his feet were blue.

In the first example, the speaker is sure that his feet were blue, in the second one, the speaker was not sure if they were not.

Then, there are expressions which introduce fuzziness within the statement that is expressed by the speaker. Here are Prince's examples:

He has a somewhat low interior larynx.

His weight was approximately three point two kilograms.

In these examples, speakers make an unhedged statement about a fact which is vague from their experience and knowledge.

Fuzzy logic is only one of many proposed logics of vagueness. In this approach, unlike standard conditional logic, the truth of any statement is a matter of degree. It does not exclude approximations of approximations which are, in my opinion, wrong. Fuzzy logic considers them as the exaggerated approximation, but I think this is not correct. In contrast to this approach, the pragmatic theory is able to explain the ungrammaticality of these expressions.

3.4 Vagueness in linguistics and other sciences

Danell (1978) is also interested in vagueness in Linguistics and he emphasises the necessity of taking into account the findings of other sciences such as Neurology, Psychology, Philosophy etc. and not being restricted only to Linguistics if we consider vagueness and its reasons.

Danell mentions two important aspects of vagueness: "*words and phrases are not fully specified in meaning*", and the fact that "*there are phrases of which a native speaker does not know whether they are grammatical or not*". (Danell 1978: 4) These aspects are probably "*reflections of the same fundamental properties of the human mind as a processor of (vague) information*". (1978: 4) Thus, he does not always distinguish clearly between these two aspects.

He does not agree with some linguists who consider vagueness in language as something so obvious that it does not need to be described. He also mentions Chomsky's and some American structuralists' opinion on vagueness which is "less straightforward because of its implications on a formalised linguistic theory." Chomsky stated in one of his studies that grammar generates only the grammatical sentences of language and no ungrammatical ones. From this, it follows that vagueness could not be tolerated within the language described. However, as Danell claims, Chomsky has expressed the goal of grammar more cautiously in his later writings: "*A fully adequate grammar must assign to each of an infinite range of sentences a structural description indicating how this sentence is understood by the ideal speaker-hearer.*" (Chomsky 1965) Such vaguenesses can be attributed to performance or to the fact that the observed speaker is not ideal.

Then, Danell mentions the opinion of the linguist R. P. Botha and regards it as untenable because Botha claims that uncertainties indicate the deficiencies of specific theories rather than lying in the nature of language. To find out how it really is, Danell suggests the examination of a science other than Linguistics.

He compares computer language with natural language and finds out that computer language must be precise, otherwise the message is incomprehensible to the computer. Unlike this language, natural language can be (and very often is) vague. The brain does not work like a computer and it is able to select the information which it

needs even if this information is vague. Neurology does not know exactly how the brain handles vague information but it is sure that there are many restricting factors that simplify language. *"These restricting factors can be resumed in two words: limited capacity (of the conscious processing unit, of the articulatory and auditory channels). Different aspects of channel capacity are illustrated by the activities of talking, listening, writing and reading."* (Danell 1978: 8)

Danell suggests a model of how vagueness can be a "by-product" of speech production. He claims that the brain has access to a nearly unlimited amount of concepts which are connected to word forms and these word forms can be connected to more complex conceptual patterns. Only a small number of these data is chosen to form an utterance. The choice is partly accidental, partly controlled by the grammatical conventions in order to make the utterance intelligible.

Such discussion should be taken into account when we try to apply basic linguistic theories, thinks Danell. Then, we must examine concrete grammatical problems. At the same time, he says that such analysis is important for those who work on making computers communicate in natural language. However, he claims that: *"The computer scientists working on artificial intelligence have tended to make simplified "breadth first" models of language (...), leaving aside for the moment much of the fine detail of the structure of natural language."* (Danell 1978: 11)

He does not want to criticise this approach but suggests that linguists should *"take a careful linguistic study of a well-defined grammatical phenomenon and then let a computer scientist try to formalise the results so as to make them digestible to the computer."* (Danell 1978: 11)

Danell concludes his study with the statement that it is difficult to give a good description of vagueness, only "operational" definitions can be proposed. They are based on the property of the brain as an information processing system.

The brain processes the incoming information in accordance with patterns which already exist in the memory and so the old patterns are reinforced by new information. Part of the information received is lost but it is inevitable: *"Thus some details of the original signal will be lost. On the other hand, other details that never belonged to the original signal may be added as part of the pattern that has been recognised. This more*

or less random variation between original signal and message received is experienced as vagueness.” (1978: 21)

He regards as an important advantage of vagueness the fact that the “*gist*” of a vague message can be understood even if the message is defective.” (1978: 22)

In my opinion, Danell’s approach is interesting and useful because he considers a wider context and employs the knowledge of other branches of science, such as Neurology and Psychology and does not confine himself only to the field of Linguistics.

3.5 Vagueness in conversational English

In 1975 **Crystal** and **Davy** published an Applied Linguistics textbook in which they refer to vagueness but from a different point of view than that which we can find of other linguists. The basis of their research is conversational English and so a lot of recordings of natural conversations appear in their textbook. They analyse conversational English in order to help foreign students with this language. They examine the lexis in several extracts in detail and show how successful native speakers are in conversational appropriateness.

Crystal and Davy claim that intelligibility and fluency are among the important aims of a learner who wants to master a foreign language but they emphasise that there is something more important which ensures successful conversation and this is appropriateness. They have found that it is just appropriateness that is lacking in the conversation of non-native speakers. What is interesting is the fact that native speakers are often tolerant when a foreigner does not speak fluently or is not understood so well but they are less tolerant if an inappropriate grammatical pattern or item of vocabulary is used. It is regarded as a personal or psychological fault in the speaker.

Crystal and Davy do not give a full explanation of what is meant by the term “appropriateness” because it is not the most important subject of the book. Such an explanation would comprise a very detailed description of many linguistic features and the relationships between these features and certain situations. However, they emphasise that “*appropriateness must always be analysed in relation to some situation*” (Crystal and Davy 1975: 110). They assume that “*there is at least an element of homogeneity in all situations that may be regarded as “conversational” in our terms*

and then to deal mainly with that aspect of language in which the problem of appropriateness presents itself most acutely: the choice of vocabulary.” (1975: 110)

One of the most important signs of an informal conversation is the lack of precision, claim both linguists. They say, and I share their opinion, that lexical vagueness in informal situations should not be criticised. Precision on formal occasions is the aim of most participants of a conversation but, on an informal one, they do not control their expressions. However, vague expressions should be used normally because the non-native speaker must be prepared for the situation in which he does not understand all the words which the native speaker is using.

According to Crystal and Davy, the most important reasons for vagueness are:

- memory loss – the speaker forgets the correct word he needs to use
- there is not the appropriate exact word in the language, or the speaker does not know it
- the subject of the conversation does not require precision, and an approximation will do
- the choice of a vague expression preserves the informal atmosphere of the conversation

They distinguish three types of expressing lexical vagueness in spoken English. “Lexical items which express *total* vagueness” are classified as the first type. The speaker cannot find a suitable word therefore he uses an expression which shows that it is not available. In English, there are many expressions which seem to have developed specially for this function. Crystal and Davy note that these expressions are typical of spoken language only, so that their spelling is “somewhat uncertain”. They count in this group such lexical items as: *thingummy*, *thingy*, *thingummajig*, *thingummabob*, *whatsisname*, *whatsit(s)*, *what-do-you-call-it*, *oojamaflip*, *doo-da*.

The second type of vagueness can be found “at the end of a sequence of lexical items” where specific terms are not necessary. Here, a summarising phrase can be used, for example: *and things*; *and things like this*; *and the like*; *and so on*; *and so on and so forth*; *and so forth*; *and everything*; *the whole thing*; *something*; *etcetera*; *sort of thing*. Crystal and Davy give this example: if someone asks you what you have in your shopping basket, you do not usually give a precise list of items but you say the most

important things followed by a summarising phrase: I've got some apples, oranges and things like this.

The last type they note are vague generic terms and collective nouns, such as *bags of, stacks of, tons of, heaps of, oodles of, umpteen* and *a touch of*.

They also mention that the colloquial lexicon contains a lot of ways of expressing number approximations: *a class of thirty odd, there were about/round about thirty, there were getting on for thirty, there were thirty give or take a couple, thirty as near as makes no difference, thirty as near as dammit, he was a shade under/over six feet tall, she was getting on for/knocking on (for) forty*. There is also a very frequent usage of the approximating suffix *-ish* which is extremely flexible and can be added to many nouns and adjectives – *mannish, womanish, tallish, shortish, fortyish, whitish* etc. Another prefixes and suffixes which are used when the precision is not important are *-like* and *-wise*. Crystal and Davy give these examples:

That mountain is rather table-like.

Linguisticswise she's rather clever.

They conclude with the statement that native speakers very often use vague expressions in informal speech.

I think that Crystal and Davy examine the lexis used by native speakers in a very detailed way. They pay special attention to extracts in which native speakers successfully meet the requirements of conversational appropriateness. On the basis of their research, they try to create a few categories which would make orientation in the confusing mass of colloquial expressions easier. At the same time, they emphasise that these categories should not be regarded as the only possible ones or as a comprehensive list of colloquial vocabulary. They prefer these categories to simple alphabet listing. I share their opinion and consider that their research on spoken English and colloquial vocabulary is a useful contribution to the phenomenon of vagueness. It confirms that vagueness is both intrinsic and important in the language system of English.

Jim Brown (1979) is very near to Crystal and Davy's theory and is also interested in conversational English. He asserts that non-native speakers must learn "how to be imprecise". Some teaching methods are very often based on written material which is rather formal, including vocabulary. If the speaker transfers this lexical accuracy to the spoken medium, his speech seems to be formal again.

Brown claims that “*conversation which has no lexical vagueness is, at the extreme, bookish and pedantic, which is to say, inappropriate*” (Brown 1979: 26) and he continues to assert that students of a foreign language should be able to express themselves even if they do not know an exact word. The teacher must recognise what should be taught and how to teach it. Brown suggests using general words such as *someone* and *something*.

He mentions similar words to those mentioned by Crystal and Davy, which occur in colloquial English: *thingummybob*, *thingummajig*, *doo-hickey*, *whatchamacallit* and he adds that these expressions are less frequent than the word *thing*.

In spoken English, the pro-form *do* in conjunction with *something* is very frequently used for actions: “*Hey, Fido’s in the hall doing something on the floor!*” (Brown 1979: 26). Brown, similarly to Crystal and Davy, writes about the approximating suffix *-ish*, which is very frequent.

Other means of expressing vagueness in informal spoken English are expressions “*sort of*” and “*kind of*”, Brown continues. They can appear “*before almost any syntactic class of word or phrase*” and indicate that the word or phrase which is used is not accurate. He gives these examples:

“*She kind of laughed. (She did not exactly laugh, just more or less.) (giggle)*

My brother’s eyes are sort of brown (but not exactly brown). (hazel)” (Brown 1979: 26)

Brown concludes that most of the mentioned vague expressions are stylistically informal which is correct in conversational English. If the speaker cannot find the suitable word, he should express himself with whatever means possible. He emphasises that precision is not the most essential thing for fluency; much more important is continuity of expression. Learning to be imprecise is a very positive stage in effective communication in English.

Brown is in the first place oriented to conversational English and his view is based on the results of Crystal and Davy’s research. He is interested primarily in teaching, in the ways in which the teacher should help the learner with fluency in language.

4 Vague versus ambiguous

The definition of the expression 'vague' according to The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is "not having or giving enough information or details about something" and the definition of the expression 'ambiguous' is something "that can be understood in more than one way; having different meanings".

Some linguists say that many examples of vague expressions are, in fact, examples of ambiguous expressions. Thus, several tests have been developed to distinguish vagueness from ambiguity. There is a general approach to distinguishing vagueness from ambiguity: "*Ambiguity has traditionally been identified where a sentence has two or more competing but distinct meanings attached to it, whereas vagueness is seen where distinct meanings cannot be identified.*" (Channell 1994: 35)

In spoken language, hearers do not often realise that a sentence could have more meanings. Ambiguity is relevant, for example, when it is used by the speakers in punning or when there is a wrong interpretation of an utterance.

Weinreich explains that a word is ambiguous in a neutral context if it has two dictionary entries and it is vague if it cannot be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context and has different meanings.

Lakoff agrees with the general notion that certain sentences can be ambiguous and others are vague. He gives these examples of ambiguity (a) – (c) and vagueness (d) – (f):

- (a) *Selma likes visiting relatives.*
- (b) *Harry was disturbed by the shooting of the hunters.*
- (c) *The chickens are ready to eat.*
- (d) *Harry kicked Sam.*
- (e) *Sam bought a lamp.*
- (f) *Max left for Rome.*

In examples (d) to (f), Lakoff explains that in (d), Harry could kick Sam with his left foot or right foot or both; it is left vague which. In (e), the amount for which Sam bought a lamp is left vague and similarly in (f), the place from which Max left for Rome is left vague, too.

Lakoff suggests a test for distinguishing vagueness from ambiguity but it works only for some kind of constructions, not for all.

(a') *Selma likes visiting relatives and so does Sam.*

(b') *Harry was disturbed by the shooting of the hunters and so was Al.*

(c') *The chickens are ready to eat and so are the children.*

"These sentences are two-ways ambiguous, not four-ways ambiguous. (a') can mean either

Selma likes going to visit relatives and Sam also likes going to visit relatives

or

Selma likes relatives who are visiting and Sam also likes relatives who are visiting.

However, (a') cannot mean

Selma likes going to visit relatives and Sam likes relatives who are visiting

nor

Selma likes relatives who are visiting and Sam likes going to visit relatives." (Lakoff 1970: 357-358)

The same applies to sentences (b') and (c'), they are also two-ways ambiguous. It seems that, by ambiguous sentences the same meanings are required on the left-hand and right-hand sides of (a') – (b'). Vague sentences act differently in such cases.

(d') *Harry kicked Sam and so did Pete.*

(e') *Sam bought a lamp and so did Sandra.*

(f') *Max left for Rome and so did Harriet.*

If we assume in (d') that Harry kicked Sam with his left foot, (d') does not require that Pete kicked him with the same foot. It is similar in (e') and (f'): the price for the lamp does not have to be the same in both cases. Nor does (f') require that Max and Harriet left for Rome from the same place. From that, it follows that in (d') – (f'), "*vagueness on the left-hand side of the sentence is independent of vagueness on the right-hand side*" (Lakoff 1970: 358).

Then, Lakoff gives several unclear examples:

(g) *John hit the wall.*

(h) *John knocked the child over.*

(i) *John cut his arm with a knife.*

In (g), somebody could have thrown John against the wall or John could have gone over and hit it. In (h), John could have accidentally knocked the child over or he could have pushed him over. In (9), John could have been using a knife for cutting something and accidentally cut his arm; or he could have intentionally cut his arm.

Lakoff says that such sentences might be considered as vague but not ambiguous, however, he knows that such a claim is not in agreement with the results of the test mentioned above. Then, he thinks about sentences such as:

(g') *John hit the wall and so did Pete.*

(h') *John knocked the child over and so did Pete.*

(i') *John cut his arm with a knife and so did Harry.*

(g') means that John and Pete both went over and hit the wall, or it means that they both were thrown against the wall. It cannot mean, however, that one of them went over and hit the wall and the other was thrown against it. (h') and (i') work similarly.

Thus, Lakoff concludes that if the above test is correct, (g) – (i) are ambiguous, not vague, sentences. His test can be used for some kinds of constructions but not for all.

Danell also deals with vagueness and ambiguity in his study mentioned above. He claims that there are cases where no ambiguity can be found, even if the phrase is vague or unspecified with respect to certain facts. If an ambiguous phrase is said, our brain has a general model from which it is able to interpret such a phrase. Danell emphasises that the role of the semantic model is much more important than the role played by formal structure.

He believes that a linguistically relevant distinction between ambiguity and vagueness can be made if we start from concrete utterances. "*If the utterance is susceptible to two different parsings, it is ambiguous.*" (1978: 16) This distinction is useful in formal linguistic analyses but it is not important for the question of "*how the brain interprets (or "disambiguates") utterances, because the brain deals with ambiguous utterances in exactly the same way as it deals with other utterances (which are always vague).*" (1978: 16)

Danell regards vagueness as an important subject of a language study and sees the main advantage of it in that *"the 'gist' of a vague message can be understood even if the message is defective."* (1978: 22)

5 Introduction to the research section

In the practical part of my diploma thesis, I am going to try to classify vague expressions from several points of view and divide them into different groups. The aim of the classification is to examine how vagueness in language can be achieved – e.g. by adding some lexical units or, on the contrary, by taking them away. I would also like to pay attention to approximate expressions which are used with numerical and time expressions, with distances, with sums of money etc. There are also many non-numerical quantifiers such as *a bit of*, *a lot of*, *several*, *many* etc. that are worth mentioning.

Similarly, it is interesting to observe whether vague expressions occur in the singular or in the plural, whether they are followed by countable or uncountable nouns, whether any approximators may be combined – are there any rules for their combination? Are there any suffixes or any other means that can have the same or similar function as approximators?

By searching for vague expressions for this diploma thesis, I have focused only on written language. They have been excerpted from fiction, magazines and newspapers. I have found 530 vague expressions.

The basis of dividing vague expressions into groups in this work is Channell's division described in *Vague Language* (1994). In my opinion, it is logical and takes into account the most important features of approximators, such as their meaning, distribution and morphological structure.

In *Collins COBUILD English Grammar* (1992), some approximate expressions are also described but not as precisely as in *Vague Language*. They are divided into three groups:

- words expressing minimum amounts (e. g. *at least*, *or more*, *more than*)
- words expressing maximum amounts (e. g. *almost*, *or less*, *nearly*)

- words expressing approximate amounts (e. g. *about, approximately, around, odd, or so, or thereabouts, roughly, some, something like*)

In this grammar, only the distribution of these approximators is described but nothing more.

In Quirk et al. (1987: 8.29), approximators are also mentioned but in another sense. They are classified as one group of downtoners and described as expressions that “serve to express an approximation to the force of the verb, while indicating its non-application.” (1987: 452) *Almost, nearly, practically, virtually, as good as, all but* are given as examples of approximators. All these expressions refer to different meanings of a sentence and I think that Quirk et al. concentrate more on ambiguity than on vagueness. In Chapter 13.70 they describe only briefly the distribution and meaning of the approximator *or so*.

6 Approximating quantities with numbers

In this chapter, I am going to concentrate on vague quantifiers which precede a precise number or quantity. The result is that the sentence has a vague meaning and the fact is that these structures denote an interval of numbers rather than a precise number or quantity.

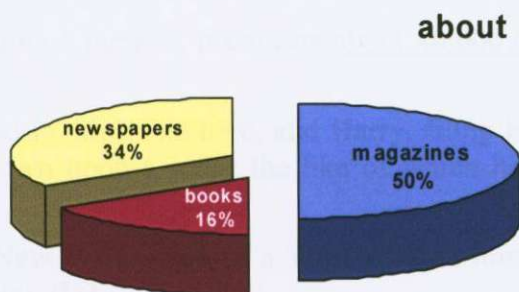
I have included *about*, *around*, *approximately*, *some* and *roughly* in this group. Their structure is *approximator* + *n*. Furthermore, I have included expressions where there is a precise number connected with *or so* (the structure is *n or so*), and so called “*partial specifiers*”. I am going to analyse them in terms of their meaning, distribution and syntactical structure.

Despite the fact that these approximators are vague, they are widely used and are understandable by both readers and hearers without any problems.

6.1 About

The word *about* is very frequently used as an approximator. It occurs 56 times among 530 vague expressions I have found. It is always added before a number. There are more possibilities of what can follow the number:

- a common countable noun in the plural (e. g. people, players, pieces)
- an adjective + a plural countable noun (e. g. *purple and gilt chairs*)
- a unit of weight, time and distance in the plural (e. g. *tons, minutes, days, miles*)



- a unit of currency in the plural (e. g. *dollars, pounds*) – if the currency is written as a symbol (\$, £), it is, of course, put between *about* and the number
- there can be some examples where nothing follows the number – the approximated item is left out

By adding *about* in front of a number, the sentence gets a vague meaning; the number or quantity is no longer precise and the recipient usually imagines an interval of numbers which is symmetrical around the number given. However, it is very difficult to state the exact length of the interval, it usually depends on the recipient, on how he interprets the information. If someone says, for example, that *the meeting lasted about 3 hours*, we usually imagine that it lasted more than 2 hours and less than 4 hours but we cannot say the exact time.

According to examples that I have found, *about + n* always has a vague meaning and the precise number is followed by a noun in the plural. The exceptions are only such cases when the noun is missing but we know from the context what it should be.

Here are some examples:

About 200 pieces of artwork were uncovered, carefully removed from the vault in which they had been locked for 57 years. (TM, 9/03, p.56)

Yeltsin spent about six hours in Amman before suddenly leaving the funeral ceremony while a condolence session was still in progress. (UT, 2/99, p.1A)

As the Earth makes its annual journey around the sun, it collects about 40,000 tons of dust. (NG, 3/04, p.1)

About twenty purple and gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry, filing into the front seats with the Weasleys, looked down upon a scene the like of which he could never have imagined. (HP, 2000, p.88)

About 1,000 people rallied outside the New York home of a West African immigrant who died when police fired 41 shots on him. (UT, 2/99, p.4A)

In the past year, about 23 million British people – almost 40 per cent of the population – will have undertaken volunteer work of some kind, donating some 90 million hours of their time to the benefit of others and the wider community. (G, 9/03, p.59)

Mom and dad, who have spent hours in prayer, nod yes, and a line of crimson wends its way down the tube, bringing the first of about 600 million cells into the boy's body. (NG, 7/05, p.15)

I remember Ghana becoming independent – when I was about 10 – and the Suez crisis, when the kids in my school sang: "We'll throw Nasser in the Suez canal." (STM, 8/03, p.11)

She expects to save as much as 10% of the company's 1999 travel bill of about \$ 600 million, in part through consolidating teleconferencing and travel with Rosenbluth. (UT, 2/99, p.9A)

The wreck is just one of perhaps 600 scattered around the Cape Verdes, an archipelago of ten small island located about 500 kilometres west of Senegal, Africa. (G, 1/03, p.22)

6.2 Around

The approximator *around* occurs 18 times in the sentences I have found. It is not as frequent as the approximator *about*, but, in my opinion, these two approximators are interchangeable in most cases. The distribution and structure is the same as in the case of the approximator *about*. *Around* always appears before the number. After the number, there can be:

- a countable noun in the plural (e. g. *teachers*)
- a unit of distance in the plural (e. g. *metres*)
- time expressions in the plural (e. g. *years, minutes*)
- a unit of currency in the plural (e. g. *dollars, pounds*)
- age (e. g. *around seventeen*)
- percentages (e. g. *around 19 percent*)
- the approximated item is omitted

If *around* precedes a number, the sentence has a vague meaning; it is the same as with *about*. Again, the number is no more precise and we imagine an interval of numbers around the number given.

Here are some examples with the approximator *around*:

And she's set up a training school in London which has a waiting list of six to nine months and produces around 100 teachers a year. (TM, 10/02, p.47)

Born sometime around A.D. 360, he is revered as a national saint, not as a soldier but as an educator. (NG, 3/04, pp.42-43)

At temperatures of around 700°C, these rocks began to melt, forming granite. (G, 5/03, p.64)

In 2001, customers spent £580 million on these lines and it's estimated this grew to around £1 billion in 2002. (C, 7/03, p.67)

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. (HP, 2000, p.67)

With additional social pressures – principally alcoholism – and epidemics, the Ouge population has dropped to around 100. (G, 9/03, p.46)

There are more than 12,000 volumes in these libraries, many of them transcribed in exquisite Kufic script – an early form of the Arabic alphabet that dates back to around the eighth century. (G, 9/03, p.38)

Richard and Judy stay on for an hour for drinks and canapés – the second best I have ever tasted – with the guests in the green room, getting back to Hampstead and the children around 7.30 p.m. (STM, 6/03, p.24)

Around 1470 the Inca conquered the region. (NG, 6/04, p.58)

Using data from the U.S. Geological Survey, Greene presents a brighter picture, with world production most likely to peak around 2040. (NG, 6/04, p.90)

6.3 Approximately

In spite of the fact that much attention has been paid to this approximator by linguists – Lakoff (1970), Wachtel (1980) and Sadock (1977), it is not used as frequently as, for instance, the two above-mentioned approximators. I have found only 4 examples where *approximately* is used. In my opinion, it suggests that the use of *approximately* is restricted to official or scientific registers.

The distribution of *approximately* is the same as *about* and *around*, i.e. it precedes the number. It can be combined only with exact numbers or measures which denote exact quantities. The exact number is followed by similar items as *about* or *around*; these items are always in the plural.

On the basis of the examples I have found, it seems that the meaning of the approximator, *approximately*, is similar to that of *about* and *around*; it denotes an interval of numbers which is symmetrical about the number given. There is no convincing evidence that *approximately* has a different meaning than *about* or *around*. In my opinion, the difference among these approximators is stylistic. *About* and *around* are used in more informal contexts but *approximately* appears to be more formal.

Here are the examples with *approximately* I have found:

Approximately 120 million of these barbaric devices lie unexploded in over 70 countries, waiting for unsuspecting passers-by, children at play or even animals to cross their path. (G, 9/01, p.11)

She is now approximately 3.200 lb. (STM, 6/03, p.62)

The rent is 5,000 Armenian drams a month, approximately nine U.S. dollars. (NG, 3/04, p.43)

But trains in the E.U., not counting subways, carried more than 5 billion passengers in 2003 – approximately 20 times the load of airlines. (T, 3/04, p.28)

6.4 Some

This vague expression can be used as a numerical or a non-numerical quantifier. As a numerical quantifier, it has occurred 21 times in my examples, which is quite frequent. It is put in front of the number to which it belongs. This number can be followed by:

- a countable noun in the plural (e. g. *spectators, students, wells...*)
- a time expression in the plural (e. g. *years*)
- a unit of length in the plural (e. g. *kilometres, feet*)
- a unit of currency in the plural (e. g. *pounds, dollars*)
- percentages (e. g. *some 70 percent*)
- no item – it is omitted

If *some* is used as a quantifier, the sentence gets a vague meaning. We imagine, similarly to *about* or *around*, a quantity which extends symmetrically around the given number, i. e. it extends in both directions. Thus, *some 50 cars* can mean less than 50 cars (e. g. 46) or more than 50 cars (e. g. 53) but the exact boundary of the interval of numbers is difficult to determine.

Here are some examples:

Now, some 70 percent of Brazil's population lives in what was once the Atlantic forest, with most people concentrated in two of the three largest cities in South America, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. (NG, 3/04, p.9)

Its floor – some 800 metres below – is ridged and rippled in strange, concentric forms. (NG, 1/04, p.8)

The trust spent some £500,000 on essential restoration work before passing ownership to the Dundee Heritage Trust in 1985. (G, 1/03, p.48)

Despite the feature's great size – some 500 kilometres wide and nearly 3,000 kilometres long – some scientists think the catastrophic releases of groundwater that carved the valley may have lasted only weeks or months. (NG, 1/04, p.19)

From these refugee camps, some 160,000 were eventually resettled in the United States, including their commander, General Vang Pao. (STM, 10/03, p.48)

A few minutes after this we have ourselves to go down some 20 feet into another chasm, and out over snow steps the other side. (G, 5/03, p.54)

The speck is named the Poço das Antas Biological Reserve and covers some 13,600 acres, about half forested. (NG, 3/04, p.16)

However, many problems remain: notably, where can some 35,000 or more displaced people find a permanent home on land that can support them? (G, 9/03, p.28)

Indeed during the past two winters some 400 swans and other birds from as far away as Siberia have been spotted at the lake. (NG, 3/04, p.85)

Indeed, every year in Yunnan Province some 500 people die in floods and landslides that wash away not just houses but entire sections of roads and railroads. (NG, 3/04, p.78)

6.5 Roughly

This approximator is very similar to the above-mentioned expressions. In my opinion, it is interchangeable with them. The structure is the same – *approximator + n*. It occurred 7 times in the sentences which I have found.

The number in approximations with *roughly* can be followed by:

- a countable noun in the plural (e. g. *roughly 200 million peasants*)
- time expressions in the plural (e. g. *roughly four hours*)
- percentages (e. g. *roughly 50 percent*)
- units of measurements in the plural (e. g. *roughly 240,000 barrels*)

Sentences with this approximator have a vague meaning and, similarly to *about* or *approximately*, *roughly* designates an interval of numbers which extends symmetrically around the number given.

Here again, the examples:

This year, roughly 2,000 sets of twins are milling about – the vast majority of them, though this is billed as an international event, from the United States. (STM, 11/03, p.24)

Stock prices have declined by roughly 50 percent from their peaks. (IHT, 10/98, p.8)

In this he is typical of a vast new group of Chinese, the roughly 200 million peasants who have left farming in the past 20 years. (NG, 3/04, p.74)

"They are the only internet service provider in Altamira, "a logging town located roughly four hours down river from the Indian reserve. (G, 1/03, p.28)

Radiation from nearby stars sculpts a rolling wave of gas and dust – a section of the Swan Nebula roughly three light-years across. (NG, 12/03, p.57)

Synchrude, the largest of the three major operators here, obtains roughly 240,000 barrels of oil from the sand every day. (NG, 6/04, p.107)

6.6 *n or so*

Another approximator which belongs to this group is *n or so*. I have found 9 sentences in which this approximator is used. The distribution of *n or so* is very interesting.

Quirk *et al.* (1987: 13.70) say that "the items preceding the *or so* approximation must be units of measurement (*year, pound*) or items contextually rendered units of measurement (*another N*).\" (1987: 929-930) They also give several examples where they illustrate the limitations of the distribution of this approximator: "We can speak of *a dollar or so to spend, a pound or so of butter*; we cannot speak of **a chair or so, *a child or so*." (1987: 929)

From that, it follows that nouns which denote units of measurement precede *or so*, while nouns denoting discrete items follow it. My examples confirm this theory.

The approximator *or so* is used with:

- a concrete countable noun in the plural (e. g. *blocks, exercises*)
- units of distance in the plural (e. g. *kilometres*)
- time expressions in the singular or in the plural (e. g. *half an hour or so*)

- degrees Celsius (e. g. 35°C or so)
- without the approximated item

In the examples I have found, the items being approximated are in the plural, only in one case (a time expression), is it in the singular. However, Channell (1994: 60) says that in her examples, time units are "particularly favoured" and they are very often in the singular (*a minute or so, a week or so, a year or so*).

As regards the meaning of *or so*, I think that this approximation denotes a longer interval of numbers than the approximation with *about* or *around*. And, in my view, we usually imagine a number that is higher than the given number. Thus, if the approximation is *five pounds or so*, we usually imagine an amount larger than five pounds.

Examples:

Many of the 80,000 or so who have moved back are old people, returning to their original houses. (N, 6/04, p.40)

After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm. (HP, 2000, p.149)

When the poles dip by 35°C or so, the residual polar ice caps will no longer be stable in summer. (NG, 1/04, p.20)

From a distance of 335 million kilometres or so, THEMIS had lit up a light bulb over its creator's head. (NG, 1/04, p.17)

In 1920, physical trainer Joseph H. Pilates designed a series of 500 or so exercises that fuse Eastern and Western philosophies. (TM, 10/02, p.51)

Either way, after five days scientists transfer the embryo's inner cell mass – with its coveted 40 or so stem cells – to a lab dish lined with feeder cells. (NG, 7/05, p.12)

The day I give him a lift I am surprised by how effusively he thanks me, until he explains that most days he walks the 40 or so blocks from the Dinzell studio to the institute. (NG, 12/03, p.49)

Today's catches are approaching levels of those a century ago – between 200,000 and 300,000 a year, excluding the hundred thousand or so taken annually by sealers in Greenland. (NG, 3/04, p.66)

Scientists have long dreamed of plucking those naive cells from a young human embryo and coaxing them to perform, in sterile isolation, the everyday miracle they perform in wombs: transforming into all the 200 or so kinds of cells that constitute a human body. (NG, 7/05, p.6)

6.7 Partial specifiers

Wachtel (1981) uses the term *partial specifiers* for expressions which specify the upper or lower limits for quantities on the number continuum. They belong to this group of approximating quantities with numbers because it is again the case of adding a lexical unit (or lexical units) to a precise number or quantity. Some of them are: *at least*, *at most*, *(not) more than*, *(not) less than*, *under*, *over*, *or more*, *nearly* and *almost*. They occur quite often, I have found 59 examples with partial specifiers (*at least* – 6, *more than* – 19, *less than* – 1, *over* – 14, *or more* – 4, *nearly* – 11, *almost* – 4).

The distribution of partial specifiers is the same as that of the above-mentioned approximators; they are followed by a precise number or quantity, with the exception of *or more* – the number precedes it. The number or quantity can be followed by:

- a countable noun in the plural (e. g. *at least 600,000 people*, *nearly 50,000 letters*)
- a unit of length in the plural (e. g. *nearly 1,500 miles*, *over 6,000 kilometres*)
- a unit of time in the plural (e. g. *over 60 years*); in the case of *over* there is one example in which I have found a time expression in the singular – *over a month*
- square measurements (e. g. *over 7,000 acres*)
- a unit of currency in the plural (e. g. *at least \$ 10 million*)
- percentages (e. g. *nearly 80%*, *over 40 per cent*)
- the item being approximated is missing

They differ from the approximators described above in their meaning. The above-mentioned expressions *about*, *around*, *approximately* etc. denote an interval of numbers which extends above and below the given number. If someone says the sentence: *There were about 20 people in the room*, we usually suppose that in the room there were, for instance, 23 or 24 people or there could have been 17 or 18 people as

well. However, partial specifiers designate an interval of numbers which extends either above or below the number, but not in both directions.

I have divided partial specifiers into two groups according to their meaning, the first group being partial specifiers denoting an interval of numbers which extends above the number given belong to one group – e. g. *at least, more than, not less than, over and or more*. The other group consists of specifiers which denote an interval of numbers extending below the given number – e. g. *at most, less than, not more than, under, almost and nearly*.

Here are some examples of partial specifiers:

Stretching nearly 1,500 miles from the Rio Colorado in the north to Tierra del Fuego in the south, the immense arid wilderness – the steppe – is the heart of Patagonia. (NG, 1/04, p.58)

Nearly 400,000 IVF embryos are in storage in the U.S., but less than 3 percent have been donated for research. (NG, 7/05, p.14)

At least 600,000 people have been stranded in airports – and many more have or will cancel trips – since American Airline pilots began a sick-out 10 days ago over issues related to the Reno merger. (UT, 2/99, p.8A)

A federal judge's plan to fine American Airline pilots at least \$ 10 million and his tartly worded back-to-work order will have a chilling effect on future "sick-outs", labor experts say. (UT, 2/99, p.8A)

Refugees from the drought-stricken Hararghe region – in total, their numbers have been estimated at 35,000 or more. (G, 9/03, p.30)

In some places it extended inland for 300 miles or more, covering a range of habitats from coastal mangrove thickets to mountain massifs averaging 3,000 feet high, blanketed with broad-leaved evergreens and conifers. (NG, 3/04, p.9)

With over 6,000 kilometres of cold glacial rivers rushing down from some of the world's highest mountains, Nepal is providing some of the most challenging white waters in the world. (G, 9/01, p.46)

Despite the fact that he has spent over 60 years living with primitive people in Africa and Asia, his first words betray the education that he received at Eton and Oxford. (G, 9/01, p.40)

"You realise Bertha Jorkins has been missing for over a month now?" (HP, 2000, p.58)

But once again, as in the Croatian war of 1991 and the Bosnian war of 1992 – 95, Mr. Milosevic has contrived to push his violent ends a long way – in this case, through the eviction of more than 200,000 Kosovo Albanians from their homes – before apparently looking in his gains by accepting the deployment of international monitors. (IHT, 10/98, p.1)

Of the several senior pilots who testified Friday before Judge Kendall, all said they earned more than \$ 150,000 last year in jobs in which they can work no more than 100 hours, or 2 ½ standard workweeks, a month. (UT, 2/99, p.8A)

Almost 200 years elapsed before the next explorer, Captain James Cook, chanced upon them. (G, 9/01, p.66)

There are now almost 2,000 private health clubs in the country. (TM, 10/02, p.31)

The BLM, seeking public comment, received nearly 50,000 letters and e-mails, 99 percent of them opposed to drilling. (NG, 7/05, p.107)

Researchers at the University of Port Elizabeth say AIDS is one of three main factors that cause nearly 80% of the country's start-ups to fail. (T, 4/04, p.50)

The ranch now spreads over 7,000 acres, but Rappold leases 6,000 more from neighboring landowners. (NG, 7/05, p.106)

6.8 Numbers in approximations

Any number approximator can be combined with any numbers – with whole numbers, decimal numbers, *round numbers*. Channell (1994) uses the term *round number* for such numbers that are multiples of 5 and 10, hundreds or thousands.

In approximations one usually finds an approximator with the round number, it is much more common, but I have also found several approximations where a non-round number occurs. If a number approximation contains a non-round number, it creates a special effect which does not appear with round numbers. If we, for example, hear a sentence: *About 121 people died in the earthquake last week*, we tend to understand a narrower interval of numbers than in the approximation: *About 120 people died in the earthquake last week*.

Some examples with non-round numbers:

They're now around 2.5 m and they've done serious damage to BBC2's quiz show The Weakest Link. (STM, 6/03, p.22)

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. (HP, 2000, p.67)

"Seriously, this compound you're talking about is about eight people who live there on a regular basis and are overshadowing the beauty of the other 100,000 people who live in this county." (UT, 2/99, p.7A)

Due to the natural invasion of simal and sisso trees, the grassland of Chitwan, which now covers around 19 per cent, is slowly shrinking, leaving only pockets of habitat for the rhinoceros. (G, 9/01, p.49)

About 71.3 mg, distilled down from 4 oz. of root, should be enough to kill – barely a teaspoonful. (STM, 10/03, p.30)

I remember when, for Frankie's 10th birthday (he died when he was 11), I must have been about 17, I took him to the pictures. (STM, 10/03, p.61)

7 Approximating quantities with non-numerical vague quantifiers

7.1 Introduction

In English there are many ways of expressing different kinds of quantities without using numbers. In this chapter I would like to describe non-numerical vague quantifiers. There are many of them such as *bags of*, *heaps of*, *some*, *several*, *a touch of*, *lots*, *a high rate of*, *a lower* and many others. I am going to concentrate only on such quantifiers which I have found and not on all those which are described in the literature (Crystal and Davy (1975), Channell (1994), so it will only be a selection of them, by no means a complete analysis.

I am going to analyse non-numerical vague quantifiers in terms of their meaning, distribution and in terms of their syntax. As for their meaning, three main groups can be distinguished: quantifiers meaning “many or much” (*lots of*), or “few or little” (*few*), or quantifiers that are neutral with respect to quantity (*several*). In terms of their syntax, there are several models. The structure of some of them looks like this: *a....of....* or *.....s of.....* (e.g. *a lot of*, *lots of*). Then, there are quantifiers which stand in front of a number as determiners in a noun phrase (*several months*). Some of the expressions may form several models, so they may enter into relationships with different quantifiers.

Now, I am going to analyse the particular groups.

7.2 A + singular quantifier + of + noun

Vague quantifiers *a lot of*, *a load of*, *a bit of*, *a couple of* and *a number of* belong to this group. Channell (1994: 104) mentions *a scrap of*, *a touch of* and *a mass of* as well but I have not found them in written materials because they are restricted to spoken language only.

These quantifiers appear to be common partitives but some of them can be found in other frames – for example *a bit* can be used as a time adverbial, too.

A LOT OF

The quantifier *a lot of* is quite a frequent quantifier, I have found it in 14 sentences. It appears not only in the form of *the indefinite article + lot + preposition of*, but also in the form *the indefinite article + lot*. The quantifier *a lot of* denotes large quantities.

A lot of collocates with both countable and uncountable nouns. In the examples I have found, *a lot of* is followed by:

- a concrete, countable noun with the definite article; the noun is in the plural (e. g. *a lot of the shoes*)
- a concrete, countable plural noun without the definite article (e. g. *a lot of aunts, people, things*)
- a demonstrative pronoun + a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *a lot of those things*)
- an abstract, uncountable noun (e. g. *a lot of success, goodwill*)
- an adjective + a concrete, uncountable noun (e. g. *a lot of organic material*)

A lot of can undergo ellipsis in its plural form: *How many flowers did you buy? – a lot.*

Mainly in spoken language, there appear models *an awful lot* and *a whole lot*. I have found one example of using the former quantifier in written English, too:

The resulting album, Talking Timbaktu, performed well up to par for a Cooder release – winning heaps of critical acclaim as well as a Grammy while selling not an awful lot. (STM, 8/03, p.33)

A lot is equal to *much/many* on the scale *much/many, some, few, a few*. I think that it is associated with both positive and negative contexts.

There is another usage of *a lot* without *of*, different from the usage of *a lot of* described above. It suggests a large quantity of an unspecified referent in sentences such as *He learns a lot, She reads a lot, He has a lot to say about this problem* etc. These examples cannot be treated as ellipses because the referents cannot be recovered from the context.

Here are some examples of sentences with *a lot of*:

A lot of the shoes are shared, so I make them nice for the next pair of feet. (TM, 11/03, p.13)

"It's a lot of organic material: bits of dead animals, plant cells, fecal pellets." (NG, 6/04, p.48)

I have a lot of goodwill. (T, 3/04, p.6)

"You have a lot of success on your trip," he said. (HP, 2000, p.155)

"But there were a lot of people in Birkenstocks standing shoulder to shoulder with people in cowboy boots and hats." (UT, 2/99, p.2A)

There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. (HP, 2000, p.147)

Boby came back to say he had lost a lot of money and would she mind waiting for a while until he retrieved some of it. (AWM, 1965, p.144)

She waved and smiled at Harry, who slopped quite a lot of water down his front as he waved back. (HP, 2000, p.78)

"If you are a nonmobile person, Frankfurt does not offer a lot of those things". (IHT, 10/98, p.16)

According to An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts. (HP, 2000, p.145)

This is because our human brain has evolved to be a rapacious problem-solver, but, rapidly finding itself in a danger-free environment, it has a lot of spare capacity. (TM, 11/03)

A LOAD OF

I have not found this quantifier as many times as *a lot of*; it occurred only three times. In one example, it occurs without the indefinite article *a* at the beginning. The quantifier *a load of* denotes large quantities as well as the quantifier *a lot of* which can always substitute for *a load of*. The expression *a load of* always appears with *of*, it cannot be omitted. The whole expression is invariable but it is possible to insert a modifier between the indefinite article and *load* (e.g. *a big load of rubbish*).

It is worth mentioning that there is a strong tendency of the quantifier *a load of* to collocate with expressions which have a negative connotation. Channell (1994) gives these examples: *a load of old rubbish*, *a load of old codswallop*, *a load of muck*, *a bloody load of work*. (1994: 106) However, positive collocations are also possible but they are less frequent.

A load of can be combined with both countable and uncountable nouns.

In the examples I have found, the expression *a load of* is followed by:

- a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *load of children*)
- an abstract, uncountable noun (e. g. *a load of rubbish*)

Here are the examples:

“Load of children with red hair?” (HP, 2000, p.34)

“It’s a load of rubbish to call it a sophisticated attack,” says British defense consultant Michael Dewar of the terrorist bombings in Madrid. (T, 3/04, p.28)

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry’s camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. (HP, 2000, p.138)

A BIT OF

I have found this quantifier in six sentences. I think that it is more frequent in spoken English than in written language. As for its structure, it occurs in more forms. Apart from *a bit of*, *bit* can be seen in *a bit of a ...* (e. g. *a bit of a cold*), *a bit* and *bit of*.

A bit of denotes small quantities and amounts. However, dictionaries also suggest that it can designate large amounts but they note that it is an informal usage of this quantifier. In *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2003: 113) there is this example which explains the case when *a bit of* denotes a large quantity: *The new system will take a bit of getting used to* (= it will take a long time to get used to). If *a bit of* denotes small quantities, *a lot of* may be used as an antonym. Maybe that in such cases, the best quantifier that can replace *a bit of* is *some* which means “not many or much”.

A bit is neutral as to quantity; it occurs in both positive and negative contexts. It can collocate with size and quantity adjectives (*a small bit*, *a large bit*). In these cases, *a lot of* cannot be used as an antonym.

I have found in the above-mentioned dictionary that *a bit of a ...* is used in informal language when we talk about unpleasant or negative things or ideas. However, in the examples I have excerpted, this claim has not been confirmed.

In my examples, *a bit of* collocates with:

- an abstract, countable singular noun (e. g. *a bit of a favour*, *a bit of a walk*, *a bit of a show*)
- a concrete, uncountable noun (e. g. *a bit of blood*, *a bit of water*)

Here are the examples:

“I did him a bit of a favour: his brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble – a lawnmower with unnatural powers – I smoothed the whole thing over.” (HP, 2000, p.58)

“We’ve got a bit of a walk,” said Mr. Weasley. (HP, 2000, p.64)

Oolong tea is a bit of a mix of the other two. (T, 3/04, p.57)

“National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know, to put on a bit of a show.” (HP, 2000, pp.90-91)

But it’s a quirk that could save him, his mother jokes, if he ever commits a crime and leaves a bit of blood behind. (NG, 7/05, p.27)

They show that it is rich in sulphates known to form in the presence of water as well as a mineral called jarosite, which not only forms in water but also actually contains a bit of water trapped in its matrix. (T, 3/04, p.55)

A COUPLE OF

This approximator is used in both written and spoken language. I think that it is more frequent in spoken English. It is informal and it denotes a small quantity. It has the same meaning as *a few*. *A couple of* occurs only in this form, it must always have *the indefinite article* and *of*. It collocates with countable nouns. I have found it in 19 sentences in which it is followed by these nouns and expressions:

- a countable plural noun (e. g. *a couple of people, a couple of blankets*)
- time expressions in the plural (e. g. *a couple of minutes, a couple of days*)
- distances in the plural (e. g. *a couple of miles, a couple of kilometres*)

Time expressions are the most frequent collocations with *a couple of*.

Here are several sentences which I have found with this approximator:

A couple of years ago my daughters went through a phase of choosing outfits for me. (TM, 11/03, p.95)

A couple of miles south-east, Nike’s rivals, Reebok – who created the STEP fad of the Nineties – have just built Britain’s largest sports club at Canary Wharf. (TM, 10/02, p.32)

After a couple of weeks their silky white fetal hair – the lanugo – starts falling out, revealing a dappled grey coat beneath. (NG, 3/04, p.58)

They had only been at it for a couple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air. (HP, 2000, p.67)

“He was there with conveniences, I had nothing, I had just walked in, I didn’t carry any rations, just a couple of blankets.” (G, 9/01, p.43)

After suffering a trauma in 1999, Cintia Mignone, a bubbly salsa dancer in her 30s, took antidepressants for a couple of months, but they left her dozy. (N, 6/04, p.59)

“The Department of Magical Transportation had to fine a couple of people the other day for operating without a license.” (HP, 2000, p.63)

Malin, who designed MOC and set up the company that operates it, and Edgett, who actually targets the camera, saw gullies up to a couple of kilometres long and a few tens of metres wide on crater rims, canyon walls, and other inclines all over Mars’s midlatitudes. (NG, 1/04, p.14)

A NUMBER OF

This expression does not occur as frequently as *a lot of*. I have found it in four sentences. As an approximator, it always consists of *the indefinite article, the quantifier* and *of*. The indefinite article may be followed by an adjective (*great, vast, large, small*) which specifies the meaning of this approximator. If there is an adjective such as *great* or *large*, then *a number of* denotes a large quantity. It has the meaning of *many, a lot of*. On the contrary, it denotes small quantities with the adjective *small*. If it is used without any adjective, it is neutral with respect to quantity. It is used both in positive or negative contexts.

It collocates only with countable nouns. In the examples I have found, *a number of* is followed by:

- a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *a great number of young people*)
- an abstract, countable plural noun (e. g. *a great number of abuses*)

Here are the examples which I have found with *a number of*:

"There's a great number of young people who are excellent musicians and who are standing ready to take over. (NG, 12/03, p.52)

But promising as all this is, it still seems that every environmentally friendly measure is offset by a great number of abuses. (NG, 3/04, p.81)

Lacking any other means of survival and desperate for cash, a number of men joined South Africa's army in its fight against guerrillas seeking Namibian independence. (NG, 1/04, p.36)

Each was squirming slightly, and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid. (HP, 2000, p.172)

PLENTY OF

This approximator does not contain the indefinite article but, in spite of that, I have included it in this group. The quantifier is not in the plural so it does not belong to the following group, and it does not belong to the next group of vague quantifiers because it must always contain *of* before a following noun.

I have found this expression in 7 sentences. It designates large quantities or amounts. It is interchangeable with *a lot of* or *lots of*, but not in all cases. It means "enough, or more than enough" and therefore it is not likely in certain contexts. For example, in the sentence *She does not look well, she's lost a lot of weight - plenty of* would be unlikely.

Plenty of collocates with both countable and uncountable nouns. In the examples I have found, *plenty of* is followed by common nouns which are concrete or abstract, countable or uncountable. In the examples, no time expressions or distances etc. occur as with other approximators.

Here are several examples:

There are plenty of tame and tethered elephants in Sri Lanka – just the previous night in Kandy, we had seen 80 of them paraded at the Kandy Perahera, the country's biggest religious festival. (T, 3/04, p.57)

There are plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. (HP, 2000, p.63)

"Mum, no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure," said Bill patiently. (HP, 2000, p.59)

Fred, George and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all of them looking nervously over their shoulders towards the commotion back at the campsite. (HP, 2000, p.111)

No matter how much Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy-fat, and that he was a growing boy who needed plenty of food, the fact remained that the school outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him any more. (HP, 2000, pp.29-30)

7.3 Plural quantifier + of + noun

Channell (1994: 100) mentions quantifiers such as *bags of*, *loads of*, *lots of*, *masses of* and *oodles of* but I have found only two of them – *lots of* and *loads of*. In my opinion, quantifiers *bags of*, *masses of* and *oodles of* are restricted only to spoken language.

LOTS OF

The expression *lots of* has occurred five times in my excerpts. In the written language, it appears to be restricted to direct or reported speech. It denotes large quantities. In most cases, it is followed by *of* but, sometimes, *of* can be omitted.

Lots of collocates predominantly with countable nouns but there are also examples where it collocates with uncountables. *Lots of*, similarly to *a lot of*, is associated with both positive and negative contexts.

In my excerpts, *lots of* collocates with:

- a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *lots of aunts and female cousins, lots of skulls*)
- an abstract, uncountable noun (e. g. *lots of spunk*)
- a personal pronoun (e. g. *lots of them*)

Here are the examples:

"I had lots of aunts and female cousins – which is why I feel so relaxed around women – but by the time I was about nine I was pretty independent." (STM, 10/03, p.61)

"And I want you to have lots of spunk in you and if you're going to do a good, do a big good and don't go offering shillings around because they won't get anyone far." (AWM, 1965, pp.93-94)

Outside on a ramshackle shelf were lots of skulls and remembrance book. (STM, 8/03, p.11)

"I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn't resist reminding us all that lots of them are still at large." (HP, 2000, p.128)

"Lots of homework?" said Hermione brightly, catching up with them. (HP, 2000, p.178)

LOADS OF

I have found the quantifier *loads of* three times. In written English, similarly to *lots of*, it seems to appear mostly in direct or reported speech. *Loads of* designates large quantities and in this sense, it always collocates with *of*.

It goes with both countable nouns and uncountable nouns, but more frequent are countables. It is associated with positive and negative contexts. In my opinion, *loads of* is more informal than *lots of*.

In the examples I have found, the expression *loads of* is followed by:

- a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *loads of foreigners, loads of enemies*)
- a concrete, uncountable noun (e. g. *loads of stuff*)

Here are the examples with *loads of*:

"Loads of foreigners." (HP, 2000, p.72)

He made himself loads of enemies, though ... the families of people he caught, mainly ... and I heard he's been getting really paranoid in his old age. (HP, 2000, p.144)

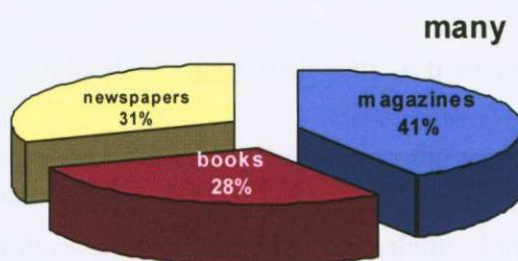
Fake wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. (HP, 2000, p.52)

7.4 Vague quantifier + countable noun

In this group, I have included quantifiers which behave like numbers in the sense of being distributed like numbers. They collocate with the noun directly or they may be followed by *of*, similarly to numbers. The quantifiers belonging to this group are: *many* (*more*, *most*), *few* (*fewer*, *fewest*), *a few*, *some* and *several*.

MANY

Many is a very frequent quantifier, I have found it in 39 sentences. *Many* is used to talk about quantities and amounts. In positive sentences, it denotes large quantities; in negative sentences, it is used to emphasise that we are talking about small or smaller quantities than expected. If we use *many*, it sounds more formal than using *a lot of*, *lots of* or *plenty of*.



The expression *many* can be used with its noun directly or it can be followed by *of*. Let us compare these two sentences:

Many girls enjoy dancing.

Many of the girls enjoy dancing.

In the first sentence, we speak about girls in general while in the second sentence we speak about a particular group of girls.

Many goes with countable nouns. Between *many* and its collocated noun, there can sometimes occur an adjective (e. g. *many deep-ocean species*).

In my excerpts, *many* collocates with:

- a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *many scientists, students, owls*)
- an abstract, countable plural noun (e. g. *many problems, memories, confrontations*)
- no item – it is left out

Obviously, the comparative forms *more* and *most* belong to this group.

Here are some examples:

“Many of our (weaker) supporters have cowered and fallen away,” Butler says. (UT, 2/99, p.7A)

However, many problems remain: notably, where can some 35,000 or more displaced people find a permanent home on land that can support them? (G, 9/03, p.28)

For a while, many scientists thought that placebos might work by releasing the body’s natural morphinelike substances, called endorphins. (IHT, 10/98, p.4)

They are the site of many confrontations between the Indian and Pakistani armies. (IHT, 10/98, p.6)

Scientists remain unsure as to why so many deep-ocean species need to shine, but since nearly 90 percent of the animals here can do so, there must be a strong advantage. (NG, 6/04, p.54)

Some 6,000 normally voluble Greek spectators fell silent, many with tears in their eyes. (T, 4/04, p.57)

Most dramatic are the hundreds of colour photographs documenting life on the western front, many unseen and unpublished for 90 years. (STM, 8/03, p.124)

Now, some 70 percent of Brazil’s population lives in what was once the Atlantic forest, with most people concentrated in two of the three largest cities in South America, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. (NG, 3/04, p.9)

The day I give him a lift I am surprised by how effusively he thanks me, until he explains that most days he walks the 40 or so blocks from the Dinzel studio to the institute. (NG, 12/03, p.49)

Worldwide recovery depends in too many cases on US willingness to bear costs and suffer risks – massively unbalanced trade and interstate whipsaws, for example – that no one else will share. (IHT, 10/98, p.8)

(A) FEW

This expression is also one of the most frequent non-numerical quantifiers. I have found it 28 times. *A few* is used in a “positive” way – to talk about a small quantity to indicate that this is enough or that it is more than we expect (e. g. *She has a few close friends.*). *Few* is often used in a “negative” way – to suggest that the quantity is not enough or that it is surprisingly low (e. g. *She has few close friends.*). Quirk *et al.* (2003: 5.10) mention this usage and give these examples:

I play a few games (i.e. “several”).

I play few games (i.e. “hardly any”). (2003: 77)

A few, similarly to *many*, can be followed either with the noun or with *of* and the noun. It collocates only with countable nouns:

- abstract, countable plural nouns (e. g. *a few moments, hours, seconds*)

- concrete, countable plural nouns (e. g. *a few people, flowers, tins*)

It is worth mentioning that this quantifier collocates with nouns denoting time very often – *a few minutes, a few seconds, a few hours, a few months, a few days*.

Here are some examples with *a few*:

A few minutes after this we have ourselves to go down some 20 feet into another chasm, and out over snow steps the other side. (G, 5/03, p.54)

A few seconds later, they heard Mr Diggony shout. (HP, 2000, p.118)

For a few seconds Crouch remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. (HP, 2000, p.118)

Within a few days she rang a friend who put her onto a nice lady doctor in a very exclusive part of outer London. (AWM, 1965, p.167)

Within a few hours it was all over and the men, together with their cargo of 60,000 Spanish silver coins and 840 tusks of ivory, lay deep beneath the waves. (G, 1/03, p.22)

If you've got a few hundred dollars to spare, then I suggest you subscribe to The Hideaway Report, which, coming as it does from the US of A, is undoubtedly the mother and father of all exclusive travel reports. (TM, 11/03, p.17)

The shops offered only a few tins of beans and some packets of rice. (NG, 6/04, p.21)

"Hedwig's not going to manage that journey in a few days." (HP, 2000, p.134)

NASA has had its share of setbacks in recent years – including a few disastrous missions to Mars. (T, 3/04, p.54)

The stone entrance arch was covered with vine and bell wisteria and there were a few flowers still in bloom, their light mauve phalloids hung limply over the green soft leaves. (AWM, 1965, p.136)

SOME

As we have seen above, *some* can function as a quantifier with numbers but it is used as a non-numerical quantifier, too. However, I have found more examples in which *some* is used as a numerical quantifier. As a non-numerical quantifier, it has occurred 18 times.

Some seems to denote a neutral quantity but in certain contexts, it is not neutral. For example, the sentence *They've known each other for some weeks* denotes rather a large quantity. On the contrary, the sentence *There is some hope that the situation will be better* indicates a small quantity. It depends on the situation in which *some* is used.

The quantifier *some* is used with plural countable nouns or with uncountable nouns. In the sentences which I have found, it collocates with:

- a concrete, countable plural noun (e. g. *some pilots, some scientists, some packets*)
- a concrete, uncountable noun (e. g. *some wood, some sign*)
- no expression – the item is omitted

Here are the examples:

Some in the gas industry and a few irrigators, however, treat the wastewater to make it usable. (NG, 7/05, p.104)

Even some pilots express doubts about the union. (UT, 2/99, p.9A)

Despite the feature's great size – some 500 kilometres wide and nearly 3,000 kilometres long – some scientists think the catastrophic releases of groundwater that carved the valley may have lasted only weeks or months. (NG, 1/04, p.19)

The shops offered only a few tins of beans and some packets of rice. (NG, 6/04, p.21)

“Well, why don't you, Harry and Hermione go and get us some water, then” – Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a couple of saucepans, “ – and the rest of us will get some wood for a fire.” (HP, 2000, pp.74-75)

For years Thomson and his colleagues have been expanding some of those original stem cells into what are called stem cells lines-colonies of millions of pluripotent cells that keep proliferating without differentiating into specific cell types. (NG, 7/05, p.15)

With over 6,000 kilometres of cold glacial rivers rushing down from some of the world's highest mountains, Nepal is providing some of the most challenging white waters in the world. (G, 9/01, p.46)

In some places it extended inland for 300 miles or more, covering a range of habitats from coastal mangrove thickets to mountain massifs averaging 3,000 feet high, blanketed with broad-leaved evergreens and conifers. (NG, 3/04, p.9)

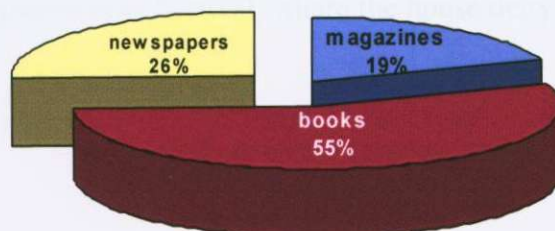
I can fly one hour in practically any direction in the Rocky Mountains and look down and see some sign of oil and gas development. (NG, 7/05, p.98)

“When you realize this dispute is about the pilots wanting more money retroactively for flying the same airplanes to the same places merely because American bought a small airline many have never heard of, and you have been sleeping on the floor with your kids for a couple of days in some airport 1,500 miles from home, it is hard to see the pilots being mistreated,” Kendall said in finding the union and two of its leaders in civil contempt. (UT, 2/99, p.9A)

SEVERAL

The quantifier *several* is used very often. It occurred in 31 sentences which I have found. It has a similar meaning to *some* but it is different from

several



it because it refers to members of a certain group individually. It denotes a quantity or amount which is more than two but not very many.

Several can be used with the word which belongs to it or with *of* and the noun. *Of* must be used if we quantify over a closed set (... *several of the plans that have been agreed to...*). It collocates only with countable plural nouns which are concrete or abstract.

The nouns which the quantifier *several* collocates with can be:

- a concrete or abstract countable noun in the plural (e. g. *prisoners, tents, attempts, elephants*)
- time expressions in the plural (e. g. *years, weeks, minutes*)
- units of length in the plural (e. g. *inches, yards, feet*)

Here are some examples to illustrate the meaning and distribution of the quantifier *several*:

Several feet from the entrance, he was able to see a narrow slice of the room beyond. (HP, 2000, pp.11-12)

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas and Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, extremely forgetful boy who had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. (HP, 2000, pp.148-149)

Although several major expeditions had already visited Antarctica, no-one knew whether it was a single continent or an archipelago. (G, 1/03, p.34)

After several hours in the zone one's mouth goes dry and one's head starts to hurt. (N, 6/04, p.40)

As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot. (HP, 2000, pp.164-165)

It took several minutes to get a strong paper bag. (AWM, 1965, p.150)

Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. (HP, 2000, p.73)

In fact she would have to be careful and keep several yards away from him in case he detected anything. (AWM, 1965, p.159)

Still, these works remain indestructibly popular, and the place of "Porgy and Bess" as serious opera for serious opera producers was probably secured for good several seasons ago by a superb production at the Glyndebourne Festival, where the house deity is Mozart. (IHT, 10/98, p.53)

There would be several stages in between, but the broad idea, as explained by the chairman of the London Stock Exchange, John Kemp-Welch, was "the first step along the road to a single European stock market. (IHT, 10/98, p.16)

round numbers

1995 1996 1997 1998 1999

The first stage was to be the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999.

3.1 Using an old currency for a new meaning

The first stage was to be the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999.

The second stage was to be the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999.

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The fourth stage was to be the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999. This would be followed by the creation of a single market in Europe, which would be achieved by the end of 1999.

8 Approximating quantities with round numbers

As we have seen so far, there are many ways of expressing vagueness in English. We can use numerical quantifiers, non-numerical quantifiers and the next way of not being precise is the use of a particular number without any approximating expression. The last mentioned way of expressing vagueness occurs very often and so I am going to devote this chapter to it.

8.1 Using an exact number with a vague meaning

Sometimes, we are not aware of using a precise sentence with a vague meaning. However, readers or hearers deduce from the context supplied by the writer or speaker that the amounts or quantities given are not regarded as exact. If the speaker uses a precise number with a vague meaning, as, for example, in the sentence *The fire destroyed 99 percent of the wood*, he usually wants to stress that most of the wood was destroyed.

As we have seen in one of the preceding chapters, approximations occur more often with round than with non-round numbers. Channell carried out a research in which she asked the respondents why they would use an approximation when they in fact knew the exact number. The respondents said that it was "easier". The results of her research confirm that the way we interpret approximations in English depends on perception of the number system, which also includes culturally-defined features.

Someone may ask how we know that an apparently precise number is an approximation. One signal is the presence of a round number. However, it is not valid in all examples. It depends on the purpose of the utterance in which a number occurs. Thereafter we decide if it is as an approximation or not.

Using an exact number with a vague meaning is very frequent. I have found 93 examples. Round numbers are used in all of them, i.e. numbers that are multiples of 5 or 10. As for their distribution, they are followed by items which are usual with other approximators. All items occur in the plural.

- Concrete or abstract countable nouns in the plural (*900 jobs, 60 countries, 1,500 people, 200 kids, 80,000 pages*); the word *people* is the most frequent. I have found 41 examples which belong to this group.

Here are some of them:

On Friday, 1,500 people marched from Berlin's Brandenburg Gate to the Spanish embassy. (T, 3/04, p.21)

The release of the bodies and of dozens of Iranians held by the Taleban has been among demands raised by Iran, which said it has massed 270,000 troops on the Afghan border. (UT, 2/99, p.7)

In a warning Tuesday from the European Union's point man on expansion eastward, five central and East European countries hoping to join the EU were told to "match their rhetoric with reality" and get on with the job of bringing their countries into line with the organization's 80,000 pages of rules and regulations. (IHT, 10/98, p.5)

A thousand of the 13,000 islanders fish for a living, and a similar number process the catches of lobster, crab, herring, and mackerel. (NG, 3/04, p.59)

Out came Maddux, who nailed down the first save of his professional career, leaving the 59,000 previously frenetic fans at Qualcomm Stadium in utter disbelief. (IHT, 10/98, p.22)

- units of length in the plural (*4,000 miles, 228,000 km, 1,000 metres, a hundred feet*) – 12 examples

So what is Capt. John Case, a computer system manager from Washington, Del., doing 4,000 miles from home in Bosnia, where there is no war? (UT, 2/99, p.1)

Europe has 228,000 km of track along which bombs could be planted. (T, 3/04, p.28)

Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. (HP, 2000, p.99)

Launched in January, the flyby craft has carried the impactor to Tempel 1, 83 million miles from Earth. (NG, 7/05, p.4)

They have migrated 2,000 miles south from the Arctic to reach their traditional spring quarters in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland. (NG, 3/04, p.55)

- percentages (*99 percent of them*) – only 1 example

The BLM, seeking public comment, received nearly 50,000 letters and e-mails, 99 percent of them opposed to drilling. (NG, 7/05, p.107)

- time expressions in the plural (*12,000 years, 20 minutes, 3 hours*) – 11 examples

They estimate the artwork, which is located in a cave called Church Hole, to be 12,000 years old. (G, 9/03, p.14)

The county of 120,000 people is in a remote and breathtakingly beautiful area of Western Sichuan Province, 7 hours by train and another 3 hours by bus from the provincial capital Chengdu. (UT, 2/99, p.9A)

A hundred years ago Blancetts were running more than 600 head in San Juan County. (NG, 7/05, p.107)

They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side, and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. (HP, 2000, p.87)

For 2,000 years, it has been treasured for its remarkable durability, strength and heat resistance. (UT, 2/99, p.2A)

- units of weight in the plural (*6,800 kilograms, 11 million tons*) – 2 examples

But no Chinese would benefit from the watches, nor from the 6,800 kilograms of silver the Hartwell also carried. (G, 1/03, p.22)

China continues to rely on coal for 75 percent of its energy, spewing out some 19 million tons of sulphur dioxide a year (the U.S. produces 11 million tons a year) and contributing mightily to acid rain. (NG, 3/04, p.80)

- currencies (*£ 51,000, \$750 million, 5,000 Armenian drams*) – 9 examples

Built by the Dundee Shipbuilders Company at a cost of £ 51,000, Discovery was 52 metres long and ten wide, and made of oak and elm with an ice casing of greenheart. (G, 1/03, p.48)

In 2001, customers spent £ 580 million on these lines and it's estimated this grew to around £1 billion in 2002. (C, 7/03, p.67)

Although \$ 2 billion of Iraqi funds have been identified and \$ 750 million recovered, U.S. officials believe several hundred million more remain to be found. (T, 3/04, p.14)

Mel Gibson's controversial The Passion of the Christ has earned \$ 250 million at the U.S. box office in just three weeks. (T, 3/04, p.12)

American Vice President Timothy Ahern confirms that the airline lost \$ 40 million from the sick-out by Friday alone. (UT, 2/99, p.9A)

- square measurements in the plural (*11,300 hectares, 32,000 acres*) – 4 examples

The total land available has now increased to 11,300 hectares. (G, 9/01, p.34)

They range across 60 million acres managed by the federal government, plus millions of acres of state and private land, from New Mexico north to Montana. (NG, 7/05, p.98)

Now, on 32,000 acres of grazing land, most of which they lease from the BLM, Liun Blancett and his wife, Tweeti, are running no herd at all. (NG, 7/05, p.107)

He bought 1,200 acres of lushly forested and mountainous land near San Francisco and built a family home for his second wife and two children, naming the ranch SMIP – "Syntex Made It Possible". (TM, 11/03, p.65)

- the item is omitted – 7 examples

But he adds, "When 2,500 have the same disease on the same day, that's a strike." (UT, 2/99, p.8A)

And as we fly south beyond the mesa, we can see the more tightly spaced well pads of the Jonah Field, with 500 more wells in place and the BLM proposing to increase that number by 3,100. (NG, 7/05, p.98)

Built by the Dundee Shipbuilders Company at a cost of £51,000, Discovery was 52 metres long and ten wide, and made of oak and elm with an ice casing of greenheart. (G, 1/03, p.48)

Whatever the precise number, the death toll will be enormous and far outnumber asbestos-related deaths in the USA, which peaked at 7,500 in 1991. (UT, 2/99, p.2A)

Of the thousand estancias that had made it the woolshed of Patagonia, only 600 survive today. (NG, 1/04, p.59)

- I have found 6 examples in which the precise number was used attributively. (*2,800-metre peak, a 15-minute session, the 100-square-kilometre reef*)

The group's headquarters are in a modern glass-and-concrete structure on a 200-hectare estate at Wakehurst Place in the West Sussex countryside. (G, 9/03, p.24)

Explorers from Geoscience Australia were researching the movement of sand from rivers that enter the Gulf when they discovered the 100-square-kilometre reef lying more than 20 metres below the surface. (G, 9/03, p.15)

Michihiro Tanobe, chief curator at the Japanese Sword Museum in Tokyo, was reluctant to let me touch, much less lift, a 600-year-old samurai sword valued at ten million yen, or about \$85,000. (NG, 12/03, p.114)

"They're hard to get to know," concedes Leann Crandall, one of the course's instructors and a co-author of the 85-page manual on their care and feeding. (NG, 7/05, p.17)

The boys, in separate parties of two and three, vanished Saturday from the 2,400-acre ski area in Idaho's panhandle. (UT, 2/99, p.4A)

The meaning of such approximations is similar to some of the above-mentioned approximators. The precise number given indicates an interval of numbers which is symmetrical around the used number.

8.2 Using a plural number name to express an approximating quantity

This is the second way of using the number names to approximate quantities. It is again without any approximator. The number name is used in the plural – e. g. *tens of*, *dozens of*, *hundreds of*, *thousands of*, *millions of* etc. The rules for this approximating depend on the structure of the base of the number system in the particular language. In English, the base seems to be *ten* but there also occur several examples with *dozens of*. However, it is certain that examples such as **twenties of people*, **fifteens of acres* are not possible.

It is possible to combine some of these number names: *tens of thousands*, *tens of millions*, *tens of billions*, *hundreds of thousands*, *hundreds of millions*, *thousands of millions*. I have found examples in which the same number names are used: *hundreds and hundreds of*, *thousands and thousands of*.

The plural number names are always followed by *of* and a plural countable noun. The plural number names can collocate with:

- concrete or abstract countable nouns in the plural (e. g. *thousands of flags*, *hundreds of thousands of people*, *millions of consumers*)
- units of length in the plural (e. g. *hundreds of thousands of air miles*)
- time expressions in the plural (e. g. *hundreds of years ago*)
- currencies in the plural (e. g. *millions of dollars*)
- square measurements in the plural (e. g. *millions of acres*)
- units denoting volume in the plural (e. g. *billions of gallons water*, *trillions of cubic feet*)

I have found 51 examples with the plural noun names. The most frequent of them is the expression *thousands of* which occurred 15 times. Here are several examples:

Thousands of people in trucks and taxis, beat-up jalopies and shiny Mercedes Benzes gathered in New York to say a last goodbye to a West African immigrant whose killing has sparked controversy over police brutality. (UT, 2/99, p.2A)

Every day a long line of trucks drove into the project, carrying thousands of labourers from all over Myanmar. (G, 9/01, p.14)

That provided jobs and promotion opportunities for thousands of pilots, but it pitted older pilots against newer hires. (UT, 2/99, p.8A)

To find out how many of the thousands of swans are owned by each, and how many young swans have hatched, a census is conducted each summer along a stretch of the Thames, as it has been for more than 900 years. (NG, 7/05, p.2)

Both *hundreds of* and *millions of* occurred 9 times; several sentences as an example:

She'd had hundreds of cups of tea. (AWM, 1965, p.156)

There must have been hundreds of hats in all. (AWM, 1965, p.74)

Most dramatic are the hundreds of colour photographs documenting life on the western front, many unseen and unpublished for 90 years. (STM, 8/03, p.36)

But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly with each other, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing more about the Tournament than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago. (HP, 2000, p.166)

Millions of Asian children are malnourished and face starvation as the regional economic crisis deepens, an official with the United Nations Children's Fund said Tuesday. (IHT, 10/98, p.6)

They range across 60 million acres managed by the federal government, plus millions of acres of state and private land, from New Mexico north to Montana. (NG, 7/05, p.98)

More recently, dialaround services (or "10-10 codes") have allowed millions of consumers to not just choose their carrier by the line, but also by the call. (UT, 2/99, p.7A)

Apart from the nightly fee of four pounds for her room, there were millions of incidental items. (AWM, 1965, p.156)

The combined expression *hundreds of thousands* appeared in 6 sentences. Just for illustration, here are three of them:

Hundreds of thousands of Africans served with the British forces in auxiliary roles, mostly as labourers and porters in the African campaign. (STM, 8/03, p.38)

Over the years Gordon has logged hundreds of thousands of air miles giving law makers and journalists the bird's eye view of landuse battlegrounds. (NG, 7/05, p.97)

Hpakant is Myanmar's black heart, drawing hundreds of thousands of people in with false hopes and pumping them out again, infected and broken. (G, 9/01, p.20)

As for the occurrence, the next expression is *dozens of* which I have found in 4 sentences. Here are two of them:

The release of the bodies and of dozens of Iranians held by the Taleban has been among demands raised by Iran, which said it has massed 270,000 troops on the Afghan border. (IHT, 10/98, p.7)

A delicate young man, who badly needed sun, told her there were dozens of places to go and gave her a free booklet to consult. (AWM, 1965, p.27)

Expressions *billions of, thousands and thousands and hundreds and hundreds* occurred twice each:

We're taking billions of gallons of water. (NG, 7/05, p.104)

The appeal reflected increasing world-wide concern about the unregulated activities of hedge funds, which use billions of dollars borrowed from banks and other investors to bet on movements in currencies, stocks and future markets. (IHT, 10/98, p.1)

Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction. (HP, 2000, p.104)

There are, as he says, thousands and thousands of young men just like that in Ireland, and in Britain, too. (TM, 11/03, p.45)

Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in the mid-air. (HP, 2000, p.153)

Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field towards a dark wood on the horizon. (HP, 2000, pp.70-71)

Trillions of and *tens of billions* are the least frequent expressions. Each of them occurred once only.

It happens that the Pinedale mesa not only sits athwart the migration corridor but also overlies the Pinedale anticline, a sandstone formation containing trillions of cubic feet of natural gas. (NG, 7/05, p.98)

Farmers – who are the West's biggest water consumers – use tens of billions of gallons each day to irrigate millions of acres of arid cropland. (NG, 7/05, p.2)

As for the meaning of these plural number names, I think that they are vaguer than approximations with the structure *approximator* + *n* (about, around... + a precise number) and they are also vaguer than approximations with round numbers. They do not contain any exact number so they cannot be analysed as intervals of numbers symmetrical around the number given. These expressions denote large quantities, they mean *a lot of* but it is not so in all cases. In some contexts, they have a more precise meaning than merely *lots of*.

Channell (1994: 92) suggests this analysis of meaning of each plural number name which is, in my opinion, quite reliable:

<i>hundreds</i>	<i>more than 200, less than 1,000</i>
<i>thousands</i>	<i>more than 2,000, less than 20,000</i>
<i>millions</i>	<i>more than 2 million, less than a billion</i>
<i>billions</i>	<i>more than 2 billion</i>

Apart from the plural number names, the plural of common names can also have a vague meaning but this is the subject of the next chapter.

9 Other ways of expressing vagueness

In this chapter, I would like to describe other ways of expressing vagueness which do not belong to the preceding ones. One of these ways is *the plural of common nouns* which can sometimes have a vague meaning. I have also included *hyperboles* (*heaps of, a sea of* etc.) in this chapter because they are also vague and occur quite often. Some *suffixes* provide another means of expressing vagueness in English.

9.1 Using the plural of common nouns to approximate a quantity

The plural of a common noun expresses not only the quantity “two or more” but it can also have a vague meaning. I have found 23 such examples. Various time expressions appear in the vast majority of these cases. There was a different word in only four examples (*doses, pots, volumes, millions*).

Time expressions which occur in the sentences which I have found are: *minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades* and *centuries*. The most frequent time expression is *hours*.

A time expression having a vague meaning designates a period of time which extends above the word given, but it is limited in this direction; it means “more than...” and at the same time “less than...”. Thus, for example, the expression *minutes* denotes a time interval which means more than 2 minutes but less than one hour. It is similar to the plural number names described above.

Here are some examples:

There was a pause that seemed to be unending but must only have been minutes or the operator would have interrupted. (AWM, 1965, p.150)

In China, patients wait hours at public hospitals for a 15-minute session, after which they'll generally leave with a prescription for drugs. (N, 6/04, p.59)

For days, Cedric has endured walloping doses of chemotherapy and radiation in a last-ditch effort to kill every cancer cell in his body. (NG, 7/05, p.15)

“Mr Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks,” said Percy swiftly. (HP, 2000, p.137)

“The whole Ministry's been working on it for months.” (HP, 2000, p.66)

Markham, Sir John Murray and Georg von Neumayer had spent years trying to get Antarctic exploration off the ground. (G, 1/03, p.34)

In use for decades, such transplants are an example of an “adult” stem cell therapy in which stem cells in donated bone marrow regenerate a patient’s blood and immune system. (NG, 7/05, p.5)

Centuries ago the swans that graced the Thames also graced the royal banquet table. (NG, 7/05, p.2)

Church believes Los Pinchudos and its surroundings will teach volumes about this extinct culture: “My mind races, thinking of what the forests will hold.” (NG, 6/04, p.58)

“While the union has millions in their war chest, the one place you can hurt a pilot is in his pocketbook,” says McLean, Va., airline consultant Morten Beyer. (UT, 2/99, p.8A)

9.2 Hyperboles

This is a special way of approximation: either an exact number (e. g. *a hundred times*) can be used to exaggerate the quantity, or a noun can be used to express, in most cases, large quantities.

As for exaggeration with the precise number, it is not the same case as those described above. Here, the precise number does not indicate a vague interval of numbers but the main emphasis is on the speaker’s reaction to the number. Here is the sentence I have found with exaggeration:

“If I’ve told him once I’ve told him a hundred times: carpets are defined as a Muggle Artefact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects, but will he listen?” (HP, 2000, p.87)

Regarding the hyperboles with nouns, they usually consist of *the indefinite article + a singular noun + of*. In three cases I have found, there is *a plural noun and of*. The hyperboles which I have found are: *a sea of*, *an ocean of*, *a mountain of*, *mountains of*, *heaps of*, *rooms of* and *a flood of*. They collocate with both countable and uncountable nouns and denote large amounts of something. Here are all nine examples that I have found:

Sadness began to wash over her, and thinking of lying in a sea of sadness she saw the waves as patient, painless and unceasing. (AWM, 1965, p.49)

Inside the eight gates of the shrine, a sea of people squatted and kneeled. (NG, 6/04, p.13)

For hours as I chased the horizon across the empty expanses, I saw no cars or buildings – just an ocean of grass and *mata negra* bushes, a dome of blue sky, and the occasional grubby sheep. (NG, 1/04, p.58)

Dali did, however, leave a mountain of artwork that, although bewildering in its disorder, compelled Bloodworth to search for a through-line. (TM, 9/03, p.56)

When he came across an unremarkable sports bag, he assumed it belonged to one of the victims and put it aside; at some point amid the grim triage the bag was taken to a local police station, where it was added to a mountain of unclaimed personal possessions - purses, briefcases, shoes, coats, laptop computers. (T, 3/04, p.22)

Most of America is sleeping, but deep within CIA headquarters in northern Virginia, officials pulling overnight duty are scoffing junk food, soft drinks and coffee as they surf mountains of intelligence reports for the latest potential threat to Americans. (T, 3/04, p.34)

The resulting album, Talking Timbuktu, performed well up to par for a Cooder release – winning heaps of critical acclaim as well as a Grammy while selling not an awful lot. (STM, 8/03, p.33)

In 1984 the first private vehicle appeared in Beijing amid a flood of bicycles. (NG, 6/04, p.94)

According to Roy Disney, there are rooms and rooms of unfinished projects in a similar vein to Destino, where Walt had begun work on more experimental collaborations with avant-garde artists for whom he was a magnet. (TM, 9/03, p.58)

9.3 Suffixes with a vague meaning

Not only approximators, non-numerical quantifiers or numbers can have a vague meaning but some suffixes can also have a similar function. I think that they occur more often in spoken than in written language.

In the materials which I have read, there occurred two suffixes: *-ish* and *-somethings*. Both of them are added to an exact number. Regarding the meaning of expressions with these suffixes, they denote an interval of numbers which is symmetrical around the number given. With numbers representing ages or times, *-ish* seems to have the meaning of *about* or *approximately*.

Here are the examples:

Mr. Farnham was fiftyish, she decided. (FF, 1994, p.6)

From teenagers through to seventysomethings and beyond, these men and women were regularly monitored with face-to-face interviews, questionnaires and medicals. (TM, 9/03, p.12)

In the second sentence, the expression *seventysomethings* is combined with *beyond* which indicates even vaguer meaning of the sentence and restricts the interval to higher numbers; i. e. people can be 68, 70 or 75 years old but they can also be 80 or over 80. In my opinion, if there was not *beyond*, the interval of numbers would be symmetrical around 70 and the age of 80 or over 80 would not be considered.

10 Combinations of approximators

From the material which I have gathered, it seems that some approximators can be combined and others not. However, the combinations of approximators are not so frequent. I have found only four sentences where the approximators are combined:

However, many problems remain: notably, where can some 35,000 or more displaced people find a permanent home on land that can support them? (G, 9/03, p.28)

Many of the 80,000 or so who have moved back are old people, returning to their original houses. (N, 6/04, p.40)

The units would be small, about 3,000 to 5,000 troops. (UT, 2/99, p.1)

Malin, who designed MOC and set up the company that operates it, and Edgett, who actually targets the camera, saw gullies up to a couple of kilometres long and a few tens of metres wide on crater rims, canyon walls, and other inclines all over Mars's midlatitudes. (NG, 1/04, p.14)

I think that these few examples are not sufficient from which to draw conclusions. Nevertheless, in all of them an exact number is used. In two examples, the number is followed by an approximator with *or* which suggests an interval of numbers. In one example, *to* occurs which has a similar function as *or*; but with *to*, the interval is more specified and determined by the two numbers given.

About and *some* alone express an interval of numbers symmetrical around the number given, so by adding one more approximator, the meaning is even vaguer. *Many* collocates with countable plural nouns. It can be combined with numbers only in the case of using *of*. As for the meaning of *many* with another approximator, it is also vaguer than if it is used alone.

It is difficult to deduce a rule for the combining of approximators from these observations because there are not enough examples. I think that the combinations are not so frequent and, if some approximators are combined, there is a tendency for combinations of these approximators which require an exact number and denote a symmetrical interval of numbers (*about*, *around*, *approximately*) with approximators containing *or* (*or so*, *or more*) or *to*. It is not possible to combine approximators which both require an exact number, for example **about approximately five miles*.

Regarding the plural number names, it has already been mentioned above that it is possible to combine some of them (e. g. *tens of thousands*, *hundreds of thousands*, *hundreds of billions*).

I have not found the combinations such as **hundreds of billions* or **thousands of billions* but I think that there does not seem to be any logical reason why these combinations should not be possible. In my opinion, *billions* is too high a number and there are only a few things in such a quantity which can be approximated in this way (maybe bacteria or cells).

Another reason for not using such approximations can be that numbers such as *billions* or *trillions* are too high and some people are not sure about using them, sometimes these numbers are not concise so we use different items. I think that these are the main reasons why such high numbers are not settled in the language usage.

11 Conclusion

The preceding pages have shown that vagueness in language is a complex area of study and that its study has important consequences for theory and practice in language studies.

I have tried to show that vagueness is an omnipresent phenomenon and that it should not be considered as something wrong which a writer or speaker should avoid. I have excerpted vague expressions from three registers – magazines, newspapers and fiction. The expressions have been divided into four main groups (approximating quantities with numbers, approximating quantities with non-numerical vague quantifiers, approximating quantities with round numbers and other ways of expressing vagueness) which are subdivided into several sub-groups.

One of the main aims of this work has been to find out the frequency of the occurrence of vague expressions in the particular registers. Magazines are the register in which they occur most frequently – in 280 examples (see enclosure one). Magazines are followed by newspapers – 129 examples (see enclosure two) and by books – 121 examples (see enclosure three). However, there is not much difference between newspapers and books.

Let us have a look at vague expressions which occur in magazines in a more detailed way. The most frequent means of approximation is by using a precise number with a vague meaning. It occurs in 55 examples. In the second place, regarding the occurrence in magazines, there is the approximation with *about* – 28 examples. The approximation with *some* which collocates with numbers is also quite frequent in this register – 21 occurrences. One of the most frequent approximators is *around* (16 examples).

On the contrary, there are some approximators which are very rare or which do not occur in this register at all. *Lots of*, *mountains of*, *hundreds of*, *billions of*, *trillions of*, *a load of*, *a sea of*, *an ocean of*, *less than*, *heaps of* are such cases. They occur only once each. *An awful lot*, *loads of*, *hundreds and hundreds of* and *dozens of* do not appear in magazines at all.

Regarding newspapers, the results are similar to magazines. The most frequent means of approximation is again using an exact number with a vague meaning – 27

examples. It is followed by *about* (19 examples) and *many* (12 examples). There are a lot of approximators which do not occur in newspapers at all, such as *around*, *approximately*, *a load of*, *loads of*, *a bit of*, *plenty of* etc. It is very interesting that *around* does not appear in newspapers, even if it belongs to one of the most frequent approximator in magazines. *Approximately* also does not occur in this register which I suppose confirms that this approximator is restricted to scientific or formal registers. I have not found any hyperboles in newspapers, which shows that the language of newspapers is more strict than in other registers.

The last register I have examined are books. Here, the results are different from magazines and newspapers. The most frequent approximators are, surprisingly, *a few* (17 examples) and *several* (also 17 examples). These expressions are followed by *many* (11 examples) and by the use of a precise number with a vague meaning (11 examples). In books, plural number names are rare or do not occur at all. As for hyperboles, only 1 example (*a sea of*) appears.

It is also interesting to compare the groups of approximators with each other. Approximating quantities with non-numerical vague quantifiers are the most frequent; I have found 178 examples which belong to this group. However, if this group is compared with the group of approximating quantities with numbers, there is no significant difference between these two groups because I have found 174 examples. Regarding approximating quantities with round numbers, they occur in 144 examples. Other ways of expressing vagueness such as the plural of common nouns, hyperboles or suffixes do not appear so often; I have found only 34 such examples.

Approximating quantities with numbers (*about*, *around*, *roughly* etc.) influences the meaning of the whole sentence, which results in a vague meaning. The resulting approximations are understood as intervals of numbers around the number given. Whether the given number is a round number or not, affects the length of the interval. The situation and language context in which the approximation occurs affect how it is understood.

Approximating quantities with non-numerical vague quantifiers denotes large, small or neutral quantities. In the case of neutral quantities, the context is important for deciding whether the writer or speaker means a large or a small quantity.

Regarding the expressions which follow the numbers in numerical approximations and non-numerical vague quantifiers, the most frequent are common countable nouns in the plural. They can follow all approximators. Time expressions in the plural are also very frequent, of course, with numerical approximators. They occur with *about*, *around*, *approximately*, *some*, *roughly*, *or so* and *partial specifiers*. Distances and currencies also occur very often with these approximators. Other expressions which are used in these approximations are units of weight, percentages and ages.

Some expressions collocate only with countable nouns, some collocate with both countables and uncountables. *About*, *around*, *approximately*, *some*, *roughly*, *a couple of*, *a number of*, *a few*, *some* and *several* collocate only with countables. *A lot of*, *lots of*, *a load of*, *loads of* and *plenty of* can collocate with countables and also with uncountables.

As I have mentioned in one of the preceding chapters, some approximators may be combined while others may not be. In my opinion, only such approximators may be combined which require a precise number and at the same time they designate a symmetrical interval of numbers; these approximators may be combined with others which contain *or* or *to*.

Not only lexemes are used to express vagueness in English, but there are also some suffixes which have a similar function. I have found only two (*-ish*, *-somethings*) but I think that in spoken language, there are more suffixes with this function.

Vagueness in language is a very interesting area of study, the analysis of which does not only entail the listing of vague expressions, giving their meaning and saying when they are used. This theme requires much more and deserves a more concise compilation. This diploma thesis is only a small contribution to the comprehensive research of vague language.

12 Summary (shrnutí)

Neurčitost v jazyce je všudypřítomný jev, ať už jde o jeho podobu mluvenou nebo psanou. Přesto je to oblast, které bylo v odborné literatuře věnováno až do nedávné doby minimum pozornosti. Studium této rozsáhlé oblasti je důležité pro další lingvistický výzkum a jeho následné praktické využití.

Tato diplomová práce se pokouší definovat neurčitost v anglickém jazyce a její možné příčiny a soustředí se na výrazy, které dodávají projevu neurčitosti. Při jejím zpracování jsem se zaměřila pouze na jazyk psaný. Neurčité výrazy jsem excerpovala ze současných anglických knih, novin a časopisů. Těchto výrazů jsem soustředila 530 a poté je rozdělila do skupin podle toho, s jakými výrazy se spojují, podle jejich morfologické struktury a distribuce.

Jednou ze skupin jsou přídavné výrazy vyjadřující přibližnost (*about, around, approximately, roughly, some* atd.). Tyto výrazy se vždy pojí s konkrétním číslem, jenž může být následováno obecným substantivem v plurálu, časovým údajem, údajem vzdálenosti, peněžní částkou, jednotkou váhy, vyjádřením věku nebo údajem v procentech. Tyto přídavné výrazy se pojí pouze s počítatelnými substantivy. Přidá-li se do věty nějaký z těchto výrazů, věta dostává neurčitý význam. Přídavné výrazy tak spíše vyjadřují číselné okolí, jehož středem je uvedené číslo. Rozsah tohoto okolí nelze přesně stanovit, je ovlivněn daným číslem, kontextem, v němž se aproximace objevuje, a interpretací čtenáře nebo posluchače.

Skupina těchto přídavných výrazů je v současné angličtině druhou nejfrekventovanější skupinou.

Další skupinou, pokud jde o frekvenci výskytu, jsou nečíselné neurčité kvantifikátory, které se vyskytují nejčastěji. Patří mezi ně např. *a lot of, lots of, a load of, loads of, a bit of, plenty of, many, (a) few, some and several*. Tyto výrazy jsem dále rozdělila do podskupin podle jejich morfologické stavby - výrazy skládající se z neurčitého členu + kvantifikátoru v singuláru + předložky *of* + substantiva (např. *a lot of*), dále výrazy, jejichž strukturou je kvantifikátor v plurálu + předložka *of* + substantivum (např. *loads of*) a neurčité kvantifikátory (např. *many, few, several*).

Pokud jde o význam těchto kvantifikátorů, označují velké částky nebo množství, malé částky nebo množství nebo jsou neutrální a pak je rozhodujícím faktorem kontext,

v němž jsou tyto výrazy užity. Velké množství označují například výrazy: *a lot of, lots of, a load of, loads of, plenty of*. Malé množství označují výrazy *a few, a couple of, a bit of*. *A bit of* však může při neformálním použití označovat i velké množství. Jako neutrální lze hodnotit výrazy *a number of, some, several a many*.

Tyto výrazy jsou následovány konkréty nebo abstrakty, některá se pojí pouze s počítatelnými substantivy (*a few, some, several*), některá s počítatelnými i nepočítatelnými (*a lot of, a load of, plenty of, lots of a loads of*).

Další skupinu tvoří konkrétní čísla, ke kterým se žádný kvantifikátor, ani přídavný výraz nepřidává. Tato přesně znějící věta pak může implikovat neurčitý význam. Tuto skupinu jsem dále rozdělila do dvou podskupin. Jednu podskupinu tvoří právě případy, kdy přesné číslo implikuje neurčitý význam (*I have 20,000 CZK in my savings account.*), druhou podskupinou jsou případy, kdy je k vyjádření přibližnosti použit plurál čísel typu desítka, stovky, tisíce apod. (*tens of, hundreds of, thousands of*).

Čísla, která patří do první podskupiny, mohou být následovány obecnými substantivy v plurálu, časovými údaji, údaji vzdálenosti, peněžními částkami a plošnými mírami.

Čísla patřící do druhé podskupiny lze mezi sebou kombinovat (*hundreds of thousands, tens of billions, tens of thousands* apod.). Některé kombinace se ovšem neužívají (např. **hundreds of billions*), což je dáno tím, že hodnota tohoto číselného vyjádření je příliš vysoká a není mnoho věcí, které by se vyskytovaly v takovém množství. Pokud se takovýto číselný počet v praxi vyskytuje (buňky, červené krvinky apod.), raději se toto množství přepočítá na jednotky, které si lze lépe představit.

Věty, v nichž jsou užity tyto výrazy, mají ještě neurčitější význam než věty, v nichž jsou užity výrazy typu *about, roughly* atd.

Do další a poslední skupiny jsem zařadila méně četné způsoby vyjadřování neurčitosti v anglickém jazyce, mezi něž patří plurál obecných substantiv, hyperboly a sufixy. Pokud jde o plurál obecných substantiv, ve většině případů se objevují různé časové výrazy (*minutes, hours, days, months, years* atd.). Časové výrazy mající neurčitý význam neoznačují přesný časový bod, ale spíše časový úsek.

Zvláštním způsobem vyjádření přibližnosti jsou hyperboly. Substantiva, která se v nich používají, označují ve většině případů velké nebo větší množství (*a sea of, an*

ocean of, a flood of, heaps of, mountains of atd.) a jsou buď v singuláru (a s neurčitým členem) nebo v plurálu.

Dalším prostředkem, plnící podobnou funkci jako přídavné výrazy, nečíselné kvantifikátory nebo konkrétní čísla, jsou sufixy. Domnívám se, že se častěji vyskytují v mluvené podobě jazyka. V psaném jazyce jsem našla pouze dva: *-ish, -somethings*.

Tyto přípony se přidávají k číslu (*fiftyish, seventysomethings*), které pak nemá přesný význam, ale vyjadřuje číselné okolí, jehož středem je dané číslo. Když toto číslo označuje věk, zdá se, že tyto přípony mají stejný význam jako aproximace s *about* nebo *approximately*.

Pokud jde o kombinace různých aproximátorů, některé kombinovat lze, jiné ne. Podle mého názoru lze kombinovat jen ty, které vyžadují jednoznačný číselný počet a zároveň vyjadřují interval čísel, který je dán rozsahem daného čísla. Tyto výrazy lze kombinovat s těmi, které obsahují *or (or so)* nebo *to*.

Nejvíce neurčitých výrazů jsem našla v časopisech – 280; knihy a noviny jsou poměrně vyrovnané co do počtu neurčitých výrazů – v novinách jsem jich našla 129, v knihách 121. Zajímavé tak je, že některé výrazy, ačkoli jsou v jednom registru velmi časté, se v jiném téměř nebo vůbec nevyskytují. Například výraz *around*, který patří mezi nejčastější výrazy v časopisech, se v novinách vůbec nevyskytl.

V časopisech se nejvíce vyskytuje použití přesného čísla implikující neurčitý význam, déle pak aproximace s *about*, se *some* a s *around*. Naopak nejméně časté jsou *lots of, mountains of, hundreds of, billions of, a load of, a sea of, an ocean of, less than, heaps of. An awful lot, loads of, hundreds and hundreds of a dozens of* se v časopisech nevyskytly vůbec.

Co se týče výskytu neurčitých výrazů v novinách, výsledky jsou podobné. Nejčastěji se vyskytuje použití přesného čísla s neurčitým významem, aproximace s *about* a s *many*. V novinách jsem vůbec nenašla aproximaci s *around, approximately, a load of, loads of, a bit of a plenty of*.

V knihách jsou nejčastějšími výrazy neurčitosti *a few, several, many* a užití čísla s neurčitým významem. Neobjevují se zde výrazy typu desítky, stovky atd.

Vyjadřování neurčitosti v jazyce je velmi zajímavá oblast a její studium v žádném případě neznamená pouhé vyjmenování neurčitých výrazů, popis jejich významu a užití. Tato problematika vyžaduje mnohem větší pozornost a podrobnější zpracování, které je daleko nad rámec této diplomové práce.

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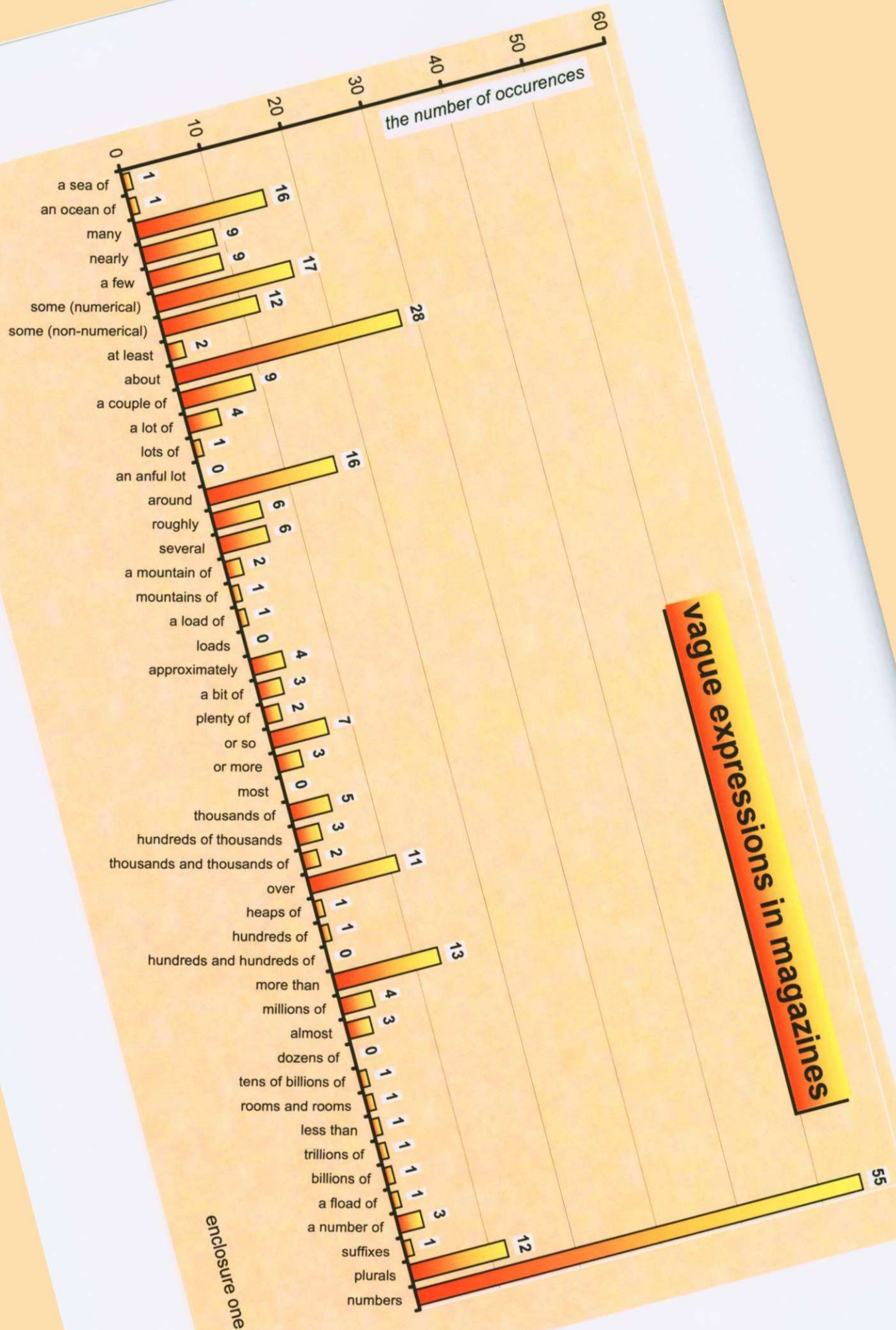
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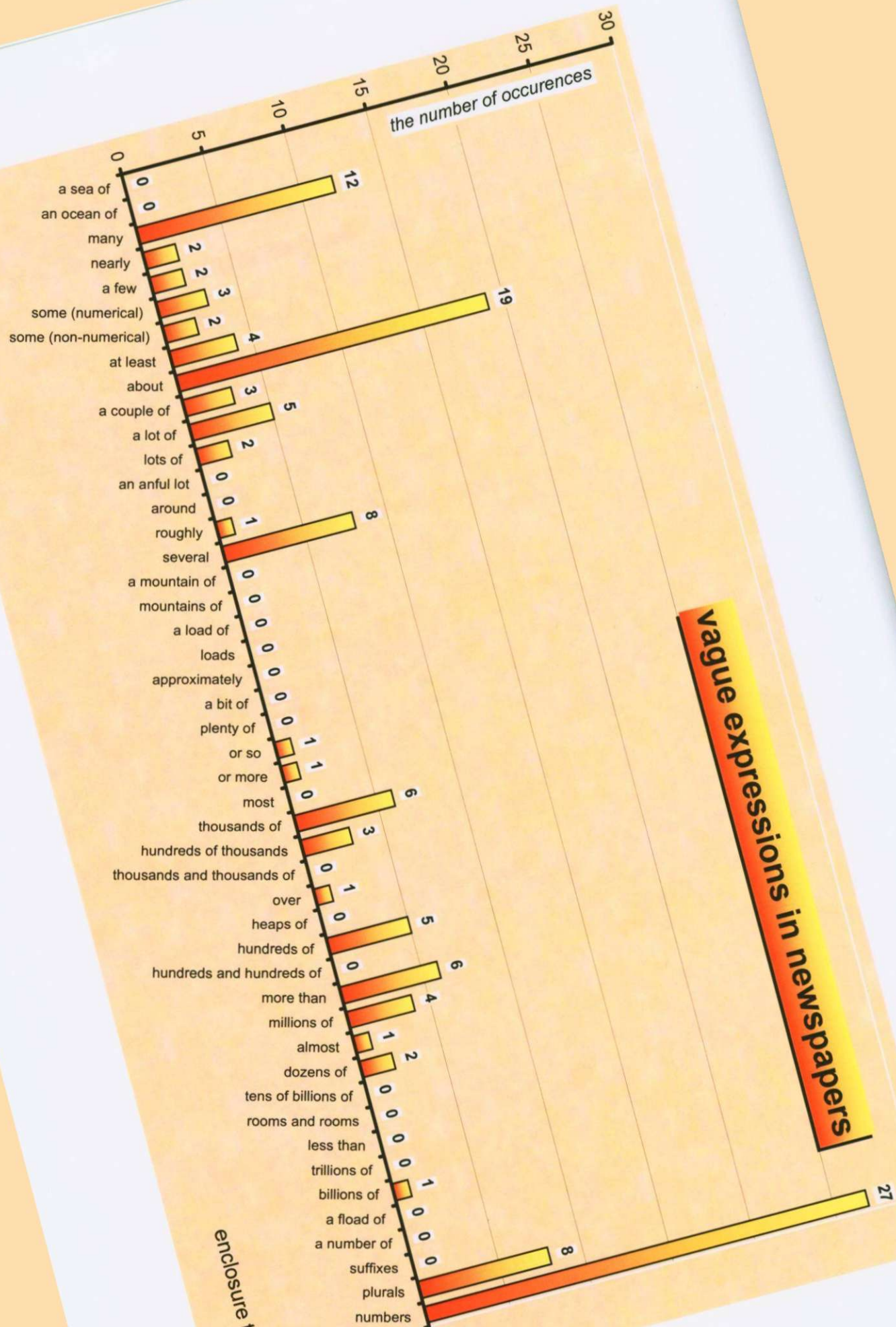
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14 Abbreviations

AWM		August is a wicked month
C		Cosmopolitan
FF		Farnham's Freehold
G	.....	Geographical
HH	.....	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
IHT	.....	International Herald Tribune
NG	.....	National Geographic
N	.....	Newsweek
STM	.....	The Sunday Times Magazine
TM	.....	Times Magazine
T	.....	Time
UT	.....	USA Today
n	.....	number

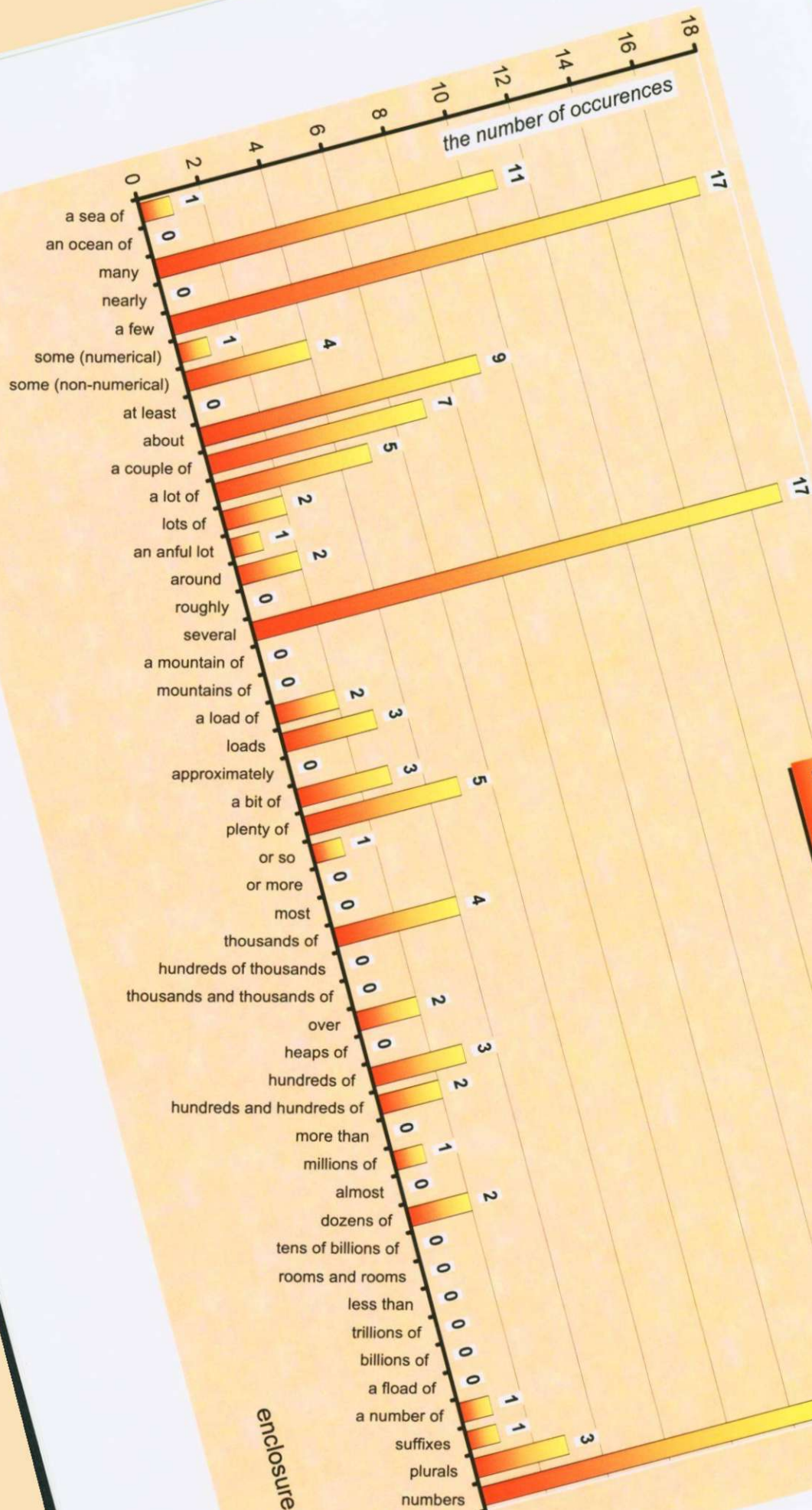


vague expressions in magazines



vague expressions in newspapers

enclosure two



vague expressions in books

enclosure three