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Language and the Socio-Cultural Worlds of Those Who Use it: A Case of Vague Expressions

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to investigate the use of vague expressions by intermediate EFL learners. More specifically, the current study focuses on the structures and functions of one of the most common categories of vague language, i.e. general extenders. The data include a 22-hour corpus of English-as-a-foreign-language conversations. A comparison is also made between this corpus and a 20-hour corpus of Persian conversations. The analyses show that the first language influences not only the structure but also the position of EFL general extenders. Additionally, the present study shows that some of the functions fulfilled by Persian general extenders can be transferred to EFL discourse. The current study can be interpreted as evidence suggesting that there is a complex intertwining between universal and language-specific features at least when one compares general extenders across languages.

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1. Introduction

As claimed by Guest (1998), English language teachers are generally aware of the differences between spoken and written forms of English, but such an awareness has often resulted in spoken forms being viewed as not only poor representations of the written but also as “aberrations” from “canonical” forms of language. Consequently, teaching the varieties of the spoken language is usually manifested in the insertion of “slang phrases, idioms, and points of register, largely as a supplement or addendum to presumably more central teaching points” (Guest, 1998).

Works done by Carter and McCarthy (1994) and McCarthy and Carter (1995) changed such attitudes (for a discussion, see Guest, 1998). They concluded that spoken language is not a variant of written language. Rather, as insightfully noted by Guest (1998), the spoken language includes forms that are consistent in usage and are also meaningful. In fact, the studies of the sort mentioned above, have shown that spoken forms cannot be realized in standardized written forms. Therefore, as discussed by Guest (1998), features that reveal “attitudinal, rhetorical, or relational factors” should also be taken into consideration.

Moreover, some researchers have criticized the overdependence on English and called for more cross-linguistic studies of discourse markers (DM) across other languages (Overstreet, 2005). The most notable of them is, perhaps, Schourup who insightfully contends that:

Of the most immediate importance among such issues are those concerning the extent to which generalizations which have been made about English DMs can be carried over to other languages. Are there functions which have been overlooked in DM research because of overdependence on English? Are

there languages for which the DM category is either more or less highly restricted grammatically than in English? Do some languages lack DMs altogether, and if so what, if anything, do speakers of such languages do to carry out the same functions DMs perform elsewhere? (Schourup, cited in Overstreet, 2005, p. 1846)

Therefore, if one aims to teach conversational skills, it would be advisable to treat written forms not as perfect models of the spoken language (Guest, 1998). In other words, as long as spoken forms reveal “unique and distinct means of realizing various interpersonal functions of real-time discourse”, language teachers and practitioners are advised to distinguish between spoken and written language (Guest, 1998). In fact, spoken and written forms are not “parallel systems separated only by degrees of register” (Guest, 1998).

Following this line of argument, McCarthy and Carter (2001) put on record the importance of spoken grammar to language teaching pedagogy in the following way:

Language pedagogy that claims to support the teaching and learning of speaking skills does itself a disservice if it ignores what we know about the spoken language. Whatever else may be the result of imaginative methodologies for eliciting spoken language in the second language classroom, there can be little hope for a natural spoken output on the part of language learners if the input is stubbornly rooted in models that owe their origin and shape to the written language (McCarthy & Carter, 2001, p. 57).

Vague expressions are an important feature of language and have attracted researchers’

attention over the last decade or so (Cotterill, 2007; Goh, 2009). Vague language is, following Channell (1994; see also Ball & Ariel, 1978; Crystal & Davy, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1986), categorized into ‘vague nouns’ (e.g., *things, stuff*), ‘general extenders, (e.g. *and stuff, or something*) and ‘vague approximators’ (e.g. *about, around*). The focus of this study is on general extenders (hereafter, GEs) such as ‘and such things’ or ‘or something like that’ in EFL discourse. This study will also examine expressions such as ‘væ in væ un’ (and this and that) or ‘jâ či’ (or what) in native Persian to see if any transfer takes place from L1 (Persian) into L2 (English). Tagliamonte and Denis (2010) consider GEs as a robust and vibrant feature of daily language use.

Pragmatic expressions have been examined in some languages other than English (e.g., Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2006; Cuenca & Marín, 2009; Furman & Özyürek, 2007; Roth-Gordon, 2007; Strauss, 2009), but studies of GEs, as a sub-category of pragmatic expressions, have been bound mostly to English (Overstreet, 1999, 2012; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010). Additionally, although in the past few years researchers like Terraschke (2007) have conducted some contrastive studies on GEs, no attempt has up to this point been made to investigate the use of such expressions in the speech of intermediate learners of English in EFL contexts (cf. Parvaresh, 2012; Parvaresh & Tavangar, 2010; Parvaresh, Tavangar, Eslami Rasekh & Izadi, 2012).

The current study has, therefore, been undertaken with the following specific questions in mind:

- A. Does any transfer effect take place from L1 into L2 with respect to the norms of construction and grammatical position?
- B. Which specific category of GEs occurs more frequently in both L1 and L2 of EFL learners?

- C. Are specific GEs employed by EFL learners to fulfill the same functions which have been identified in L1 Persian?

The findings are expected to have some implications for non-native speakers of English, scholars working on the fields of discourse analysis or pragmatics, and also those involved in communication training. In other words, the most important implications of this study may be:

- A. Helping non-native speakers of English to facilitate communication in cross-cultural interactions and thus to establish interpersonal rapport by increasing their awareness in terms of the construction and use of general extenders.
- B. Enabling scholars to claim with more assurance that a way to undertake a true cross-linguistic comparison has been found in the area of pragmatic function.
- C. Being applicable in communication training by trying to be an evidence-based and authentic approach to the investigation of both L1 and L2.

2. GE(s) in More Detail

GEs are features of language that occur at the end of utterances and are typically used to evoke some larger set. In these cases, they generalize from a preceding referent to the larger group of items to which that referent belongs (Overstreet, 1999, 2012). The literature contains as many names for these constructions as studies, including “set marking tags” (Dines, 1980), “extension particles” (Dubois, 1992), and “approximation markers” (Erman, 1995), among others. The notion of extension is found in many of these labels, but there is also common association of GEs with vagueness and approximation. As Dubois (1992) points out, speakers use a GE to

suggest the multitude of possible elements of the set that they are thinking or talking about. Examples in [1] demonstrate the use of GEs. In these examples, the underlined items are the referents and GEs are in italics (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010):

[1]

- a) . . . taffy-covered chocolate *or something like that*.
- b) . . . ripped or torn *or something*.
- c) . . . supplies *and things like that*
- d) . . . Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, The Who, *all that stuff*.
- e) . . . music and film, television *and stuff like that*.
- f) . . . vegans *and stuff*.

3. Methodology

The current study draws on two corpora, namely 'Persian' and 'EFL', collected by the participants themselves. The Persian corpus was collected with the help of 40 volunteers who recorded about 30 minutes of their own mother tongue (Persian) conversations with their close friends in dyads. The Persian corpus consisted of about 20 hours of interactions, informal in nature. All the conversations were transcribed (200,003 transcribed words). It is also worth stating that about 10 hours of this corpus (104,003 transcribed words) have already been analyzed in Parvaresh et al. (2012).

The EFL corpus consisted of about 22 hours of interaction (188,989 transcribed words), which included 80 intermediate EFL learners in dyads. These learners were selected based on

their scores on a sample TOEFL test. Prior to the recordings, all the EFL interactants had known each other for at least three years as they had been studying in the same institute. To further ensure informality, they were asked to form their own dyads. No restrictions were imposed on the EFL learners as to when and where they should record their English conversations; some of them recorded their conversations in a neutral room in their institute while others did so at home. These learners were encouraged to speak on whatever topic they deemed appropriate, although general discussion and narration topics were also provided (Terraschke, 2008).

Four MA students of TEFL were paid to transcribe the conversations (both Persian and English). In the Persian corpus the age of the participants ranged between 20 and 25 and in the EFL corpus between 18 and 24.

4. Findings

4.1. Frequency and Patterns

Table 1 presents the average frequency of GEs in the EFL discourse. The frequency rate was calculated by dividing the number of tokens by the number of words. From this, the approximate occurrences per 100 words were calculated. As the table shows, adjunctive GEs have been used much more frequently than disjunctive ones. This can be cautiously attributed to the speakers' first language since a similar pattern was found for native Persian speakers (see Table 2).

Table 1
Average Frequency of GEs in the Non-native EFL Corpus

Adjunctive			Disjunctive		
Form	Frequency	Percent	Form	Frequency	Percent
and and and	70	17.19	or something like that	49	20.50
and blah blah blah	55	13.51	or something	29	12.13
and so on	39	9.58	or these kinds of things	28	11.71
and this and that	38	9.33	or whatever	28	11.71
and other things	37	9.09	or these sort of things	28	11.71
and etcetera etcetera	37	9.09	or other things	27	11.29
and such things	30	7.37	or everything	26	10.87
and all the things	26	6.38	or somewhere	15	6.27
and everything	16	3.93	or what	9	3.76
and of such things	16	3.93			
and of all the things	15	3.68			
and things like that	15	3.68			
and things	13	3.19			
Total	407		Total	239	
Forms	13		Forms	9	
Frequency per 100	.16	100	Frequency per 100	.13	100
Total extenders			Total extenders	646	
Total frequency per 100			Total frequency per 100	.34	

Table 2
Average Frequency of GEs in the Persian Corpus

Adjunctive			Disjunctive		
Form	Frequency	Percent	Form	Frequency	Percent
væ inâ (and stuff)	178	33.27	jâ čizi (or something)	56	32.94
væ æz in hærf hâ (and of such talks)	51	9.53	jâ čî (or what)	42	24.70
væ in čiz hâ (and such things)	38	7.10	jâ nemidunæm čî (or I don't know what)	29	17.05
væ nemidunæm æz in hærf hâ (and I don't know of such talks)	22	4.11	jâ hærcî (or whatever)	17	10
væ hæme čiz (and everything)	20	3.73	jâ hærdžâ (or wherever)	15	8.82
væ æz indžur hærf hâ (and of such sort of talks)	19	3.55	jâ je hæmčîn čizi (or something of that sort)	11	6.47
væ æz in čæartvæpært ha: (and of such nonsense)	18	3.36			
væ æz indžur čiz hâ (and of such sort of things)	18	3.36			
væ æz in mozæxræf hâ (and of such flams)	17	3.17			
væ æz inqabil čiz hâ (and of such group of things)	16	2.99			
væ æz indžur kâ:r hâ (and of such sort of issues)	16	2.99			
væ in væ un (and this and that)	15	2.89			
væ væ væ (and and and)	14	2.80			
væ æz in džæfangjât (and of such hot air)	14	2.80			
væ æz indæst hærf hâ (and of such kind of talks)	13	2.42			
væ æz indæst xæbær hâ (and of such kind of reports)	13	2.42			
væ æz in qælat hâ (and of such big talks)	12	2.24			
væ æz in kâr hâ (and of such issues)	11	2.05			
væ æz in džærfjân hâ (and of such drifts)	11	2.05			
væ æz in qertibâzi hâ (and of such shows)	10	1.86			
væ æz in xoæ?bælat (and of such rubbish)	9	1.68			
Total	535		Total	170	
Total forms	21		Total forms	6	
Frequency per 100	.26	100	Frequency per 100	.08	100
Total extenders			Total extenders	705	
Total frequency per 100			Total frequency per 100	.35	

The EFL GEs were examined for the presence of specific modifiers but no instances of modified GEs were found. The Persian corpus did not reveal any instances of modified GEs either. However, the structure of Persian GEs seems to be somewhat different from native English ones in that in Persian GEs can include two optional elements as well, i.e. *nemidunæm* (I don't know) and *æz* (of). In fact the basic structural pattern of a Persian GE is 'conjunction + (I don't know) + (preposition) + noun phrase'. In fact, adding 10 more hours to the original Persian corpus (Parvaresh et al., 2012) did not reveal any new GE pattern.

Interestingly enough, the Persian preposition directly influenced the use of EFL GEs in such GEs as 'and of such things' and 'and of all the things':

[2]

Amirreza: I say that drinking some coffee together, em, and going to the (.) cinema together **and of such things** has no value these days . . .

[3]

Rahim: He talked about his mother, his (1) young days **and of all the things**. ((laughs))

Taken together, it can be argued that the basic structural pattern of an EFL GE is 'conjunction + (of) + noun phrase/determiner phrase + (like that)'.

EFL learners defied the above-mentioned pattern in such frequently-used unique GEs as 'and and and' and 'and this and that'. These forms might be the result of transfer from Persian. That is, it seems that these two forms have been directly translated into English because the native Persian corpus also included two novel GEs; one of them consisted only of a repeated conjunction (*væ væ væ*/and and and) and the other one consists of two conjunctions (*væ in væ un*/and this and that). The following

examples include these unique forms in the EFL discourse:

[4]

Akbar: I mean to prepare myself by repeating the new words, writing the spellings (.) **and and and**.

[5]

Khashayar: He was boring! (1) He only talked about his experiences of his life in New Zealand, his job in New Zealand (.) **and this and that!**

It is also worthwhile to note that EFL learners (see Table 1) used GEs at more or less the same rate (0.34 per 100 words) as did Persian speakers (0.35 per 100 words). Therefore, it can be argued that it is not only the nature of talk that gives rise to the use of GEs; rather, a speaker's first language may also have a role to play in the use of such expressions. It is also worthwhile to note that the first 10 hours discussed in Parvaresh et al. (2012) indicated a more or less similar rate for Persian GEs (0.32).

4. 2. Grammatical Position

The Persian SOV word order was directly transferred to the EFL discourse, probably because the participants were not advanced users of English. To be more precise, Persian GEs were used both at clause-internal and clause-final positions. The clause-internal use of Persian GEs can be attributed to the standard SOV word order in Persian, but the clause-final use of these expressions indicates that they are in the process of becoming more flexible with regard to their position. The following two examples show how a Persian GE has been used clause-internally and clause-finally:

[6] (Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 266)

Ali: *âxe xeire særeš dæm æz væfâdâri væ nemidunæm æz in hærf hâ mizæd hæmiše!* [She was the sort of person who

about loyalty **væ nemidunæm æz in hærf hâ** was always talking!]³

[7] (Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 266)

Ramin: ((esme do zæn)) migoftæn ke hæf bâr ke ((esme yek mærd)) næmâz mixune næmâzeš (*) do sâ::?æt tul mikeše (.) **væ nemidunæm æz in hærf hâ!**

[[name of two women]] say that when ((name of a man)) says his prayers, it (**) lasts for two hours (.) **væ nemidunæm æz in hærf hâ!**

This tendency influenced the use of EFL GEs; to wit, EFL GEs occurred both clause-internally and clause-finally. The following examples show the use of a non-native GE at clause-final and clause-internal positions:

[8]

Saghar: . . .and I think you believe the same as me! (1) I mean in the kind of car (.) and the cellphone **and blah blah blah**.

[9]

Ahmadreza: Car, cellphone **and blah blah blah** were the topics for today. I hate them! ((laughs))

4. 3. Functions

In what follows an attempt will be made to see whether or not any transfer takes place from L1 in to L2 as far as some of the functions of GEs are concerned. Yet, it should be stated in passing that in the present study a quantitative analysis of the various functions is not pursued because the referential and interpersonal functions of such expressions are difficult to keep apart.

³ The Persian excerpts used in this study are the same as the ones discussed in Parvaresh et al. (2012). This tendency will hopefully enable future researchers to see how the first language can influence the use of vague expressions by different groups of learners, i.e. the use of vague expressions by advanced EFL learners (Parvaresh et al., 2012) and by intermediate EFL learners (this study).

4. 3. 1. List Making

EFL speakers used the structure [2 items + GE] 145 times out of 646, but it was the structure [1 item + GE] that occurred more frequently (501 tokens) than the other structure. In fact, instances of [3 items + GE], [4 items + GE] and [5 items + GE] were not found in the EFL corpus. The following examples include these two structures. Note that the separate items are underlined:

[10]

Tamanna: They talked about their hobbies **and everything**.

[11]

Tara: The things that you like to do in future need money, (1) energy **and everything**. I think it is not possible to do that . . .

Of the 705 instances of Persian GEs about one sixth (119 tokens) of them were of the structure [2 items + GE], but the majority of the GEs (511 tokens) had the structure [1 item + GE]. There were also instances of GEs that had either the structure [3 items + GE] or [4 items + GE] with 45 and 20 tokens respectively. The Persian corpus included 10 tokens of the structure [5 items + GE] too. This structure has not been reported in native English yet.

4. 3. 2. Establishing Solidarity

In the EFL discourse, the adjunctive GE *and stuff* was totally non-existent. It has been established that in native English discourse, *and stuff* is used for the sake of establishing solidarity and rapport and that is why it is the most frequent GE in English (Overstreet 1999, 2005). The inability to use *and stuff* on the part of EFL finding makes more sense if one bears in mind the fact that the speakers who have learned English as their *second* language have been shown to use the structure *and stuff* to mark assumptions of solidarity even with near strangers. Terraschke's (2007) study of German non-native speakers of English living in New

Zealand, for example, revealed that the solidarity marker *and stuff* was highly frequent in the speech of such learners.

In Persian, the most noticeable marker of solidarity was *væ inâ*. An example has been provided in [12] below:

[12](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 269)

Marziyeh: bæʔd tâ mâ umædim bijâjm
dæbirestn **væ inâ** xejli ræft bâlâ.
[And then when it came to us
going through secondary school
væ inâ it went really high.]

4. 3. 3. Communicating Imprecision

In the EFL English corpus, the most frequent disjunctive GE was *or something like that*. Studies on GEs in English suggested that *or something* is often used to mark assumptions of uncertainty (see Tagliamonte and Denis, 2010). An example in which *or something like that* has been used is provided in [13] below:

[13]

Nastaran: =But I sometimes cannot find a good word about him. I guess he is unclear **or something like that**.

Behood: =He never explains the lessons //clearly.

It is worthwhile to note that in the EFL corpus there were no instances of the GE *or something (like that)* being used to mark potential noncompliance with the expectation of accuracy. Rather, they were used because the speakers were not sure about their word choice. Such instances were not frequent in the Persian corpus. More examples have been provided below:

[14]

Behood: =I think he has some problems in his personal behaviour, his style, **or something like that**.

[15]

Peyman: I don't know the exact word//

Misagh: =Aircraft?! ((laughs))

Peyman: I am not sure but (.) it was spaceship **or something like that**.

Misagh: Haven't heard about it.

It seems that in the Persian corpus it is the GE *jâ čizi* (or something) which is often used as a maxim hedge on the basic assumption that what is being said is accurate:

[16](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 270)

Elham: hâlâ mixâstæm bebinam je kam pul dâri
be mæn bedi?! je mântoji, **jâ čizi**
mixâm bærdâræm.

[I just wanted to know would you lend me some money?! I want to an overcoat, **jâ čizi** buy.]

4. 3. 4. Highlighting the Idea that 'There is More'

In the non-native English corpus, the message "there is more" had been highlighted mainly by the addition of *and and and, and blah blah blah, and so on*; these forms are either infrequent in informal English corpora (the second and the third one) or are the result of direct transfer from Persian (the first one). The following examples are from the EFL corpus:

[17]

Shifteh: He only (.) talks about his father and his life in a different country **and and and**.

[18]

Shahyad: Many people watch it each night (1) and send SMS to the channel to support (.) it **and blah blah blah**.

[19]

Sam: I have to talk to my instructor (***) and ask him to say yes to the project and then go to another department (.) **and so on**.

In the Persian corpus, there were many different versions of GEs available for those occasions when the message “there is more” needed to be marked. The GE *væ æz in hærf hā* in [20] fulfills this function:

[20](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 271)

Alaleh: *dærbâreje zehne bærtær væ tæqvijæte hæfeze væ æz in hærf hâ!*

[It’s about the greater mind and improving the memory *væ æz in hærf hâ!*]

Additionally, in the non-native corpus no instances of pejorative nouns were found; even instances of GEs featuring less pejorative nouns like *nonsense* were completely non-existent (see Table 1). However, in the Persian corpus there were a plethora of examples in which the GEs hosted a pejorative noun (see Table 2). Generally speaking, such GEs function to not only show the adherence to the Maxim of Quantity but also to downgrade the information that is not explicitly included. The following example clarifies the point:

[21](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 267)

Hamed: *âre, gofte hæmin ælân ke beri in pesære râ vel mikone væ æz in çært væ pært hâ!* [Yeah, she said that even if you talked to her now she would leave the guy *væ æz in çært væ pært hâ!*]

4. 3. 5. Avoiding Imposition

By using a disjunctive GE, speakers can manage to implicate alternative possibilities and increase the likelihood of receiving a preferred response. However, as noted above, in the non-native English corpus it was the preoccupation with the best word choice that had led the speakers to use the disjunctive GE *or something (like that)* and not necessarily the

maxim “don’t impose.” In the EFL corpus instances of disjunctive GEs employed by the interactants to highlight assumptions underlying the maxim “don’t impose” were completely non-existent. The following example is from the Persian corpus, showing how the speaker modifies her request by using the disjunctive GE *jâ çizi*:

[22](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 272)

Maryam: *goftæm šâjæd bexâj jelošun (.)*

hedzâb dâšte bâši jâ çizi. fek //kærdæm

[I thought you might like to (.) wear hijab *jâ çizi*. I // thought]

4. 3. 6. Urging an Answer

In the non-native English corpus disjunctive GEs were found to function as markers of emphasis too. In [23] below, the GE *or what* functions to urge an answer:

[23]

Parsa: I cannot do that because he may become angry!

Amirmasoud: =But you must talk to him. You have //to

Parsa: It is difficult!

Amirmasoud: I know that! But you have to!

Parsa: =It is very difficult!

Amirmasoud: Oh! Will you tell him **or what?**

Here, *or what* seems to have been used as an intensifier to urge Parsa to finally say whether he is going to talk to the third party (his roommate) or not.

The Persian corpus included a similar structure. It seems that in Persian the GE *jâ çî* can be used to urge an answer. Consider the following telephone conversation in which Samin is urging her sister to either pick out one of the two bakeries she has already mentioned or to provide her with the name of a third one.

[24](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 273)

Samin: =jâlâ dige! ((esme jek širini foruši)),
 ((esme širini foruši digær)) **jâ čī?**
 [=Come on! ((name of a bakery)),
 ((name of another bakery)) **jâ čī?**]

4. 3. 7. Expressing Outrage

As our Persian corpus shows, the Persian *jā hærčī* can be used to express outrage and frustration; this function does not exist in English (Overstreet, 2005). In this context, speakers echo the word they find offensive and add the GE *jā hærčī*. Consider the following example in which Sheida echoes the word ‘sneak’ and adds the disjunctive GE *jā hærčī*.

[25](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 274)

Mahtab: xob, mæn migæm ke næbâjæd in čizâ
 râ goft be māmân, mesle bæbæ?i.

[Yes, that’s what I’m saying you shouldn’t go telling everything to mom, just like a sneak.]

Sheida: =Jæni bæbæ?ijæm mæn dige?!
 [=So now I’m a cry sneak?!]

Mahtab: vâ?! jæni če?!
 [What do you mean by that?!]

Sheida: =xob dâri migi mesle bæbæ?i hæme čī
 râ beheš goftæm dige // mæn.

[=Well you’re saying that just like a sneak I’ve told them eve//rything.]

Mahtab: bâ to nemiše hærf zæd!
 [There’s no talking to you!]

Sheida: =âre dæqiqæn. hæmine ke hæst.
 [=Yeah exactly. That’s just the way it is.]

Mahtab: (5) væli in qæzije šæhrijeje mæno to
 hæm beheš begu ke (.) be bâbâ bege.
 ((mixændæd))

[(5) But you tell her about my tuition fees as well so (.) she tells dad.]
 ((laughs))]

Sheida: ((bâ æsæbânijæt)) â:::h, begæm
 beheš?! bæbæ?i **jâ hærčī**.
 ((angrily)) [Oh ye:::ah, I should tell her?! Sneak, **jâ hærčī**!]

This function seems to have been directly transferred to EFL discourse. That is, Persian non-native speakers of English used GEs to express their outrage too, mainly by using the transferred disjunctive GE ‘and this and that’. In the following excerpt, Hamidreza seems to have found Behrang’s ‘His exams are difficult’ offensive:

[26]

Behrang: I am not sure about his exams! They say that they are difficult!

Hamidreza: =Why you are so negative?!

Behrang: I am not negative. They say that his exams are difficult!

Hamidreza: Oh! His exams are difficult **and this and that**. Stop thinking negative please!

4. 3. 8. Arousing Sense of Curiosity

The Persian corpus featured several instances of the lengthened *væ inâ:::* used to arouse curiosity on the part of the addressee. This function seems not to have been found in English or in any other languages so far (Overstreet, 2005; Terraschke, 2007). The non-native corpus did not reveal such a function either. The following excerpt shows how the extended *væ inâ* can function to bring about a sense of curiosity:

[27](Originally discussed in Parvaresh et al., 2012, p. 276)

Mahnaz: diruz ((esme yek doxtær)) râ didæm?!
 [I met ((name of a girl)) yesterday?!]

Fahimeh: =jeddæn? (1) če tor bud?
 [=Really?! (1) How was she?]

Mahnaz: =æmæl **væ inâ:::**
 [=Surgery **væ inâ:::**!]

Fahimeh: dæmâqeš?!
 [Her nose?!]

In the EFL corpus, a more or less similar tendency was found, which can be attributed to transfer from Persian. In that corpus, there were 13 instances of the GE *and things* that had been lengthened by the speakers. The following

excerpt includes two instances of *and thi::ngs*, which serve to arouse Mobina's curiosity about what a school owner has done recently:

[28]

Mehrzad: ((laughs)) he has emmm no::! They say that he bought a new building for his school **and thi::ngs!**

Mobina: Oh! Say more please!

Mehrzad: **And thi::ngs!**

Mobina: Did he employ new secretaries fo//t

Mehrzad: Sure!

Mobina: ((laughs)) He always employs these types of people to have fun with and...

5. Discussion

We are always confronted with vagueness (Janney, 2002). However, vague language use has received only scant attention in EFL contexts. The current study was a step in this direction (see also, Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2006; Zhang, 2011). In other words, this study was undertaken to see if any transfer takes place from Persian into EFL discourse as far as GEs—one of the most frequent categories of vague language—are concerned.

The results show that the first language influences not only the structure but also the position of GEs in intermediate EFL discourse. Additionally, the analysis of about 42 hours of native and non-native talk in the present study shows that Persian GEs fulfill the two unique functions of expressing outrage and arousing curiosity, which are transferred to EFL discourse (cf. Parvaresh et al., 2012). Put more succinctly, despite similarities between English and Persian, there were also some differences that were transferred to non-native English discourse.

Last but not least, as discussed by Bhatia et al. (2008), contemporary approaches to language have their origin in a number of developments that occurred in the twentieth century in such

fields as philosophy, anthropology, and sociology. Such contemporary approaches tend to study language in use, that is, in the social context in which it occurs (Bhatia et al., 2008). In line with these developments mentioned in Bhatia et al. (2008, p. 2), it seems that the ELT industry also needs a more balanced methodology concerned with “the relationship of language to social actions and to the socio-cultural worlds of those who use it” (with regard to ‘culture’ see also Parvaresh, 2013).

There are many further research questions that merit exploration. In what follows an attempt will be made to single out some of the most important and most urgent of these questions:

- A. One of the main purposes of this study was to investigate the frequency and function of general extenders used by Iranian EFL learners. To achieve this end, the study was concerned exclusively with intermediate learners of English. In other words, the current study did not focus on EFL learners of varying language proficiencies. In this context, future researchers might be interested in pursuing this line of research by focusing on different groups of EFL learners who demonstrate different levels of English proficiency.
- B. Longitudinal analyses of general extenders by Iranian non-native speakers of English should also be pursued.
- C. This study addressed the frequency and function of general extenders in the speech of EFL learners, that is, in the speech of those who study English as their major. Another fruitful area of research might be the analysis of the frequency and function of vague language items in general, and general extenders in particular, in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms in Iran. This kind of study may address the instances of vague language in the speech of both ESP teachers and learners.

- D. This study also focused on the use of general extenders by native speakers of Persian. To achieve this end, the study was limited to the analysis of a ten-hour corpus of informal conversations, which was personally collected and transcribed. Future researchers may want to try to explore the extent to which the Persian general extender formula presented in this study can account for instances of Persian general extenders in larger corpora. Another fruitful area of research will be to investigate the function of Persian general extenders in more formal contexts (Terraschke, 2008).
- E. This study did not take into consideration gender as a moderating variable although it did its best to include both same-sex and cross-sex dyads. In this connection, future researchers may also focus on the role of social variables such as age, gender, and social background on the frequency and range of general extenders used by speakers in different languages including Persian (Terraschke, 2008).
- F. The EFL corpus which was collected and transcribed in this study featured a sample of EFL learners who were learning English as their first additional language. It goes without saying that there are certain groups of individuals who are learning English as their second additional language. A case in point is provided by those language learners who speak Azeri as their mother tongue and Persian as their first additional language. For this group of individuals English counts as the second additional language. Accordingly, a cross-linguistic study between Azeri and Persian general extenders may yield interesting findings, which may, in turn, be used to see how they affect the acquisition of English general extenders.
- G. Future research might also explore the vague features of content classroom language in different countries, languages and cultures (Rowland, 2007). Furthermore, it would be valuable to know whether and in what ways vague language is used in classrooms “where other subjects are being taught and learned, and whether it is associated with uncertainty (Rowland, 2007, p. 95).
- H. Research into processing may also reveal much about how learners or non-native users process vague expressions. Here “corpus observations and more psycholinguistically oriented research can fruitfully contribute to each other” (Evison, McCarthy & O’Keeffe, 2007, p. 156).
- I. Future researchers might be interested in exploring the range of vague language items available to speakers (Warren, 2007). They might also be interested in describing the relationship between vague language and intonation. Such studies are likely to show how discourse intonation can function in context to add meaning to vague expressions (Warren, 2007).
- J. Another fruitful area of research will be L2 learners’ ability to use discourse markers as a conversational skill “in maintaining coherence and in engaging their interlocutors” (Jalilifar & Hashemian, 2010, p. 105). Svartsvik claims that:
- Spoken language has been comparatively little studied and the use of items which are typical of or practically restricted to conversation is largely pragmatic and not describable in ordinary grammatical terms. The use of such items whose functions are related to phatic communication rather than intellectual reflection is parallel to the role of intonation. A native speaker, naive or otherwise, may be aware of violations of such a rule, yet will be incapable of providing a rational explanation of it. To take an

example, if a foreign speaker says “five sheeps” or “he goed,” he can be corrected by practically every native speaker. If, on the other hand, he omits “well,” the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to, but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an “error.” (cited in Jalilifar & Hashemian, 2010, p. 105)

In this connection, special attention should be directed toward less investigated discourse markers such as *OK* and *you see* in the speech of Iranian EFL learners (see Jalilifar & Hashemian, 2010).

- K. Future searchers may also set out to investigate non-native (EFL) use of the pragmatic device *like* by Iranian EFL learners. The researchers in this area may also be interested in investigating the equivalent(s) of this pragmatic device in Persian in order to point out possible similarities and differences, which might either facilitate or hinder the acquisition of the English *like* (see Terraschke, 2008). Up to this point, it seems that no specific study has targeted the acquisition of the pragmatic device *like* by Iranian EFL learners.

Transcription Conventions

.	a stopping fall in tone
,	continuing intonation
!	an animated tone
?	a rising tone
:	a lengthened segment
(.)	a half-a-second pause
(1)	a pause in seconds
(())	a description by the transcriptionist
//	where the next speaker begins to speak (in overlap)
=	no interval between adjacent utterances
*	one-half second of material that is in doubt

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