

Vague Language in Academia *by Miranda Kozman and John Swales*

This Kibbitzer examines the phenomenon of vague category markers (VCMs). These are defined as utterances within a dialogue, in which a speaker gives a list of exemplars, followed by a vague language tag or phrase such as: *and so on and so forth, et cetera et cetera, and that kind of thing*. The listener is then assumed to fill in, or implicitly understand the reference.

A recent study by Walsh, O’Keeffe, and McCarthy (2008) found that VCMs occur fairly frequently in the academic discourse of the LIBEL corpus (the Limerick-Belfast Corpus of Academic Spoken English), but less frequently than in corpora of general spoken Irish and British English.

Following the Walsh et al. article, we here examine VCMs in MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English). The table below shows the vague language tags studied by the LIBEL team (occurrences per million words), and the corresponding occurrences of these exemplars in MICASE. (Phrases in parenthesis indicate optional additional elements).

Table 1:

Word/Phrase	MICASE	LIBEL
and so on (and so forth)(like that)	128	524
etcetera (etcetera)	66	136
and/or [something/anything/everything] (like that)	346	126
and all (of) that	31	77
and/or stuff (like that)	102	67
and all this/that (kind/sort of) thing	33	52

(and) things like that	41	46
and all this/that sort of thing/stuff	4	21
and all	2	13
and all the rest (of it)	1	4
this that and the other	1	4
**yadda yadda yadda?	6	**na
**and on and on	5	**na
**blah blah blah	19	**na
**this and that	6	**na
**and whatever	4	**na
TOTALS	796	1129

**phrases were not explored in the LIBEL study, but have been added to the MICASE data as possible uniquely 'American' exemplars

As table 1 shows, MICASE appears to have somewhat fewer occurrences of VCMs than the LIBEL corpus. However, this study does confirm Walsh et al.'s finding that a small number of formulae seem to

fulfill the VCM function. We also note that although the overall total in LIBEL is larger, two common formulae were more common in the American data: *and/or something like that*, and *and/or stuff like that*.

We also examined the MICASE database to see whether vague language is more frequently used by students or professors, and whether there were differences in student and professor choice of VCMs. However, we only looked at faculty and undergraduate speech. We exclude graduate students because they could either be teaching a class or participating in a class. The results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2:

WORD/PHRASE	Faculty (per mil)	Undergrad (per mil)
and so on (and so forth)(like that)	249	8
etcetera (etcetera)	117	30
and/or [something/anything/everything] (like that)	233	784
and all (of) that	33	43
and/or stuff (like that)	30	276
and all this/that (kind/sort of) thing	58	24
(and) things like that	35	106
and all this/that sort of thing/stuff	3	0
and all	2	0

and all the rest (of it)	2	0
this that and the other	0	0
yadda yadda yadda?	1	14
and on and on	5	8
blah blah blah	15	40
this and that	n/a	n/a
and whatever	n/a	n/a
TOTALS	783	1303

As Table 2 shows, the choices of VCM by these two classes of speakers are surprisingly different. Faculty are much more likely to use *and so on and so forth* and *etcetera etcetera* than students. We suspect there might be two explanations for this. One is that these two expressions are more “formal” than some of the others such as *and stuff like that*. The other is that these types of VCMs are more confident sounding, in the sense that they give the impression that the speaker could easily further exemplify if needed. On the other hand, undergraduate preference for *or something like that*, seems to indicate a greater uncertainty as to what the further exemplars might be.

One probable reason for the more frequent use of VCMs by undergrads than faculty, was the undergrads’ heavy use of the exemplar *or something*, especially as a way of finishing a question or query. This was used 239 times by undergraduates, while it was used only 131 times by faculty, even though there is almost twice as much faculty speech as undergraduate speech in MICASE. Here are a few examples:

1. okay, like hot dense gas **or something**?
2. ...you need a delta H of negative thirty, point-five **or something**?
3. ...does it help to bind them **or something** like that?

References:

Walsh, S., O'Keeffe A. and McCarthy, M. (2008) '...post-colonialism, multi-culturalism, structuralism, feminism, post-modernism and so on and so forth': A comparative analysis of vague category markers in academic discourse in A. Ädel & R. Reppen (eds.) *Corpora and Discourse: the challenges of different settings*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.