

# An Investigation of General Extenders in a Corpus of EU Parliamentary Debates

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## 1. Introduction

In what is considered her “seminal book on vagueness” (Jucker, Smith and Lüdge 2003: 1738; Drave 2004; Cutting 2007: 5), Channel (1994: 1) wrote:

People have many beliefs about language. One important one is that ‘good’ usage involves (among other things) clarity and precision. Hence, it is believed that vagueness, ambiguity, imprecision, and general woolliness are to be avoided.

Channel is not alone in pointing out the negative connotations attached to language which is not precise. Jucker, Smith and Lüdge (2003: 1737) open their article saying that “vagueness is often seen as a deplorable deviation from precision and clarity”, “an inadequacy of human language” and “a defect to be avoided whenever possible” (ibidem: 1738).

Far from being a defect, however, vagueness is in fact an essential feature of language and competent users are generally able to use “a degree of vagueness which is right” (Channel 1994: 3) for their purpose. The key concept here, as stated by Channel (1994: 3), is *appropriateness*, which can be defined as

the extent to which a use of language matches the linguistic and sociolinguistic expectations and practices of native speakers of the language  
(Richards and Schmidt 2002).

In applied linguistics the ability of being vague has been recognized as a crucial component of communicative competence against which the success in informal conversational English should be measured, as pointed out by Crystal and Davy (1975) and Carter and McCarthy (1997), whose books reproduce excerpts from naturally occurring conversations for the benefits of teachers and students of English as a foreign language.

Though taxonomies of vague language vary (cfr. e.g. Crystal and Davy 1975; Carter and McCarthy 1997), most studies refer to Channel (1994), who distinguishes:

- vague approximators, like *about, lot(s) of, a bit of*;
- vague category identifiers, like *and so on, or stuff, or a whole range of things*;
- placeholder words, like *thingy, whatsisname, whatsit*.

Since vague expressions, as observed by applied linguists, are particularly appropriate in informal situations, the first studies of vagueness were based on corpora of naturally occurring conversations. Overstreet and Yule (1997) and Overstreet (1999), for example, are based on a corpus of “informal, spoken

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interactions among familiars” (Overstreet 1999: 9), which comprises ten hours of recorded telephone conversations and face-to-face interactions. In other studies, the participants were asked to engage in conversations for research purposes (Jucker, Smith and Lüdge 2003: 1740; Terraschke and Holmes 2007).

The interest in the use of vague expressions has recently been extended from informal conversation to other contexts, all traditionally associated with a need for precise language. Koester (2007) found vague expressions occurring in workplace meetings and training sessions, Rowland (2007) in mathematics classrooms, Adolphs, Atkins and Harvey (2007) in healthcare settings, and Cotterill (2007) in courtrooms.

A few studies of vague expressions contrast the use of some vague expressions in conversations between native and non-native speakers. Drave (2004), for example, has found that, although native and non-native speakers used a similar range of expressions, native speakers use more vague expressions than non-native speakers, while Terraschke and Holmes (2007) have observed that one type of vague expressions - general extenders – has similar functions in native and non-native conversations.

The present study deals with general extenders in a setting where speakers are thought to employ very precise language - the European Parliament – and explores whether native and non-native MEPs using English to deliver their speeches resort to a similar range of vague expressions. The functions and forms of the top two frequent general extenders found in a corpus of parliamentary debates, ‘and so on’ and ‘etc.’ are illustrated.

## 2. The terminology of general extenders

According to Overstreet, general extenders, which are expressions like ‘and so on’, ‘etcetera’, ‘or something’, “represent a distinct set of linguistic elements which have received little attention from linguists” (Overstreet 1999: 3). They are referred to in the literature using various terms. Crystal and Davy call them *summarizing phrases*, pointing out that this type of vagueness “occurs at the end of a sequence of lexical items (such as a list), where completion in specific terms is unnecessary” (1975: 113). As they explain, summarizing phrases are used, for example, when somebody is asked about the contents of their shopping bag: in this case, such phrases are more appropriate than a detailed indication of every single item. As regards their form, Crystal and Davy underline that they are introduced by ‘and’, which is in some cases elided. For the same expressions, Lerner (1994) employs the term *generalized list completers*.

Channel (1994) enlarges the category to include not just expressions introduced by ‘and’, but also those introduced by ‘or’, like ‘or something’, ‘or stuff’, ‘or whatnot’, and calls these expressions, on the basis of the main function she attributes to them, *vague category identifiers*. To clarify what she considers to be their main function, Channel (1994: 121) gives the following example:

- A: So you’d like some bread?  
B: Or something. Anything edible will do.

In the author’s words, the expression ‘or something’ “directs the hearer to access a set, of which the given item is a member, whose characteristics will enable the hearer to identify the set” (Channel 1994: 122), which in this case is the category of edible

things. The structure of the expressions consists of two parts, an *exemplar* and a *vague tag*, respectively ‘bread’ and ‘or something’ in the above example. As for their functions, Channel mentions that of being verbal fillers and serving politeness purposes (1994: 119-121) and thoroughly investigates the specific function of cueing the reader to identify a category, by means of a test she administered to native speakers (123-131).

The range of functions played by vague category identifiers is also investigated by Overstreet (1997; 1999; 2005). In an article written with Yule, the term *general extenders* is introduced “in the absence of a traditional grammatical label for this class” (Overstreet and Yule 1997: 250). In 1999, Overstreet further explains her decision not to adopt Channel’s terminology, claiming that “it is misleading to assume that these forms function simply to indicate other members of a category or set” (Overstreet 1999: 12).

The term *general extenders*, on the other hand, is found by Overstreet to be “appropriately neutral with regard to possible competing functions” (ibidem). Explaining the reasons for her terminological choice, Overstreet writes, “I call these expressions [...] ‘general’ because they are nonspecific, and ‘extenders’ because they extend otherwise grammatically complete utterances” (Overstreet 1999: 3).

The reasons why a speaker may resort to a general extender in everyday conversation are exhaustively examined in Overstreet (1999) and summarized below:

- s/he does not know or does not remember the name of the category;
- s/he assumes the reader may not be familiar with a given category;
- s/he wants to emphasize that many exemplars belonging to a given category exist (iconicity between message and content);
- s/he wants to emphasize the members of the category mentioned, versus the ones not mentioned;
- s/he wants to highlight assumed closeness, thus marking, or inviting, solidarity, between the participants;
- s/he wants to avoid imposing on the hearer, expressing tentativeness in speech events such as invitations, offers, proposals, or requests;
- s/he wants to mark the content of the message as surprising or extreme;
- s/he wants to mark the content of what is said as potentially inaccurate;
- s/he wants to suggest that more could be said about a given topic;
- s/he wants to downgrade the information which is not mentioned.

In the following paragraphs, after presenting the data used for this study, I will illustrate the functions of general extenders in native and non-native discourse and comment on the extent to which they are similar to, or dissimilar from, those found in natural conversation. In so doing, I will also briefly mention their forms. To avoid confusion, I will adopt the term *general extenders* even when referring to the studies by authors who have opted for a different terminology<sup>2</sup>. Following Overstreet (1997, 1999, 2005) expressions beginning with ‘and’ will be referred to as *adjunctive general extenders*, while those beginning with ‘or’ will be called *disjunctive general extenders*.

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<sup>2</sup> In recent studies on the topic, Jucker et al. (2003: 1748); Koester (2007); Adolphs et al. (2007: 66) use the term *vague category identifiers* introduced by Channel (1994). Similarly, Drave (2004), Cotterill (2007: 99), Evinson et al. (2007: 138) use *vague category markers* and Warren (2007: 187) opts for *vague tagging*. Cutting (2007: 7). Terraschke and Holmes (2007: 201) choose the term *general extenders*.

### 3. General extenders in a corpus of EU parliamentary debates

The corpus on which this research is based consists of 62 transcriptions of debates in the European Parliament which took place in 2006. To enable the EU to retain its fundamental feature, i.e. its “linguistic and cultural diversity”, during parliamentary debates “all [...] representatives are entitled to speak their own language” (Wilson 2003: 2). Nevertheless, although MPs have the right to use their own mother tongue, they are not obliged to do so. EU parliamentary debates are in any case multilingual, with simultaneous interpreters allowing MEPs who speak different languages to understand each other. The multilingual version is published on the Internet and it is later replaced by versions in all the EU official languages, so that citizens can access information in their own language.

This paper is focused on the multilingual version of the debates, which amounts to 4.697.915 words. To allow comparison between native and non-native English, speeches delivered in English have been tagged, on the basis of the speakers’ nationality, with the labels <NatEng> and <NNatEng> respectively. The native English subcorpus amounts to 543.301 words, while the non-native English one totals 405.344 words.

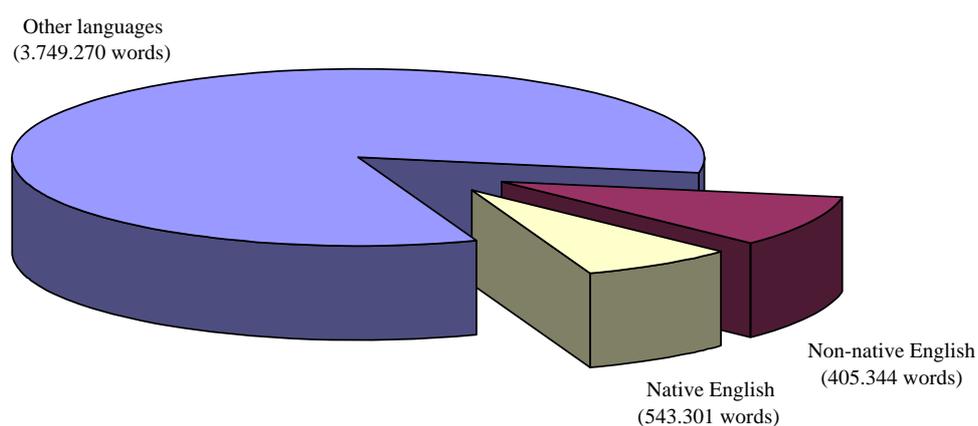


Figure 1: Native English and non-native English subcorpora

The general extenders I looked for in the two subcorpora of EU parliamentary debates are those listed in Evinson, McCarthy and O’Keeffe (2007: 143), who searched the CANCSOC corpus, a 1 million word subcorpus of the CANCODE corpus of socialising and intimate conversations, for the most frequent general extenders. Their list is reproduced below:

and/or [something/ anything/everything] (like that)
(and/or) (X) stuff (like that/X)
and (all) (of) that
(and/or) thing(s) (like that/X)
(all) [this/that/these/those/] [kind(s)/sort(s)/type(s) of X]
(or) whatever
and so on (and so forth)
et cetera (et cetera)
Xs like that
and all the rest of it
and this that and the other

**Figure 2:** General extenders in the CANCSOC corpus

The use of their list was convenient since it contains, in a synthetic form, the general extenders which, in previous studies, have been found to occur in both natural conversations and in some professional settings.

Using Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1999), I searched for the above-listed general extenders in the native and in the non-native subcorpora, and the raw figures of the results are listed in Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6:

native speaker 'and'	occurrences
and anything else	1
and so on	21
and so forth	5
etc.	23
and all the rest	2
Tot.	52

**Figure 3:** Adjunctive general extenders in the native English subcorpus (543.301 words)

native speaker 'or'	occurrences
or anything	1
or whatever	3
Tot.	4

**Figure 4:** Disjunctive general extenders in the native English subcorpus (543.301 words)

<b>non-native speaker ‘and’</b>	<b>occurrences</b>
and everything else	1
and so on	11
and so forth	3
etc.	28
Tot.	43

**Figure 5:** Adjunctive general extenders in the non-native English subcorpus (405.344 words)

<b>Non-native speaker ‘or’</b>	<b>occurrences</b>
or something of that nature	1
or whatever	1
Tot.	2

**Figure 6:** Disjunctive general extenders in the non-native English subcorpus (405.344 words)

The results show, first, that the range of general extenders used by both native and non-native speakers is similar and, in both cases, more restricted compared to that used in everyday conversation. In addition, the most frequent general extender in socializing and intimate conversation – ‘and/or [something/ anything/everything] (like that)’ - occurs only once in the two subcorpora. Furthermore, the most frequent forms in both subcorpora are ‘and so on’ and ‘etc.’. These forms were absent in Overstreet’s corpus of conversations among familiars but were the most frequent general extenders in her corpus of 10 hours of spoken interaction among non familiars in formal settings (i.e. face-to-face academic discussions, news radio interviews, televised courtroom deliberations and televised courtroom debates) (Overstreet 1997: 253; 1999: 7), which clearly points to the formal tenor of parliamentary debates.

In the following paragraphs I will focus on the use of ‘etc.’ and ‘and so on’, illustrated in Figures 3 and 5, used by both native and non-native speakers, since these two forms occur in the two subcorpora with far greater frequency compared to the other general extenders.

#### **4. Native vs non-native use of ‘etc.’ and ‘and so on’ in EU parliamentary debates**

While native MEPs use ‘etc.’ and ‘so on’ with the same frequency, 0.04 per hundred words of the native English sub corpus, non-native MEPs prefer the latinate form ‘etc.’, which accounts for 0.06 per hundred words, with ‘and so on’ occurring 0.02 per hundred words in the non-native subcorpus.

In order to show the way ‘and so on’ and ‘etc.’ may function as vague category identifiers, allowing the listener to infer a category the speaker has in mind, two examples from the two different subcorpora are reproduced below:

Europeans are on the move. I go to your country, you come to mine. It is a wonderful thing, yet when it comes to driving in safety it is a fact that some are used to driving on the right and others on the left, that drivers are used to varying acceptable levels of

speed, different weather conditions and vastly differing roads and, critically, that drivers are trained, tested and licensed to different levels of competence. [...] The principle of progressive access regarding two-wheeled vehicles would surely improve safety. It is also clearly not practical to have 110 different-looking driving licences, which can be displayed but not understood, so the idea of having a single format and code for categories is reasonable. However, the traffic laws, roads, weather, etc. are so different that a national test and licence will remain essential for a driver. (Kathy Sinnott, 13/12/2006)

**Example 1:** Native English subcorpus.

I think it is very important to support the audiovisual sector and European cinema in order to ensure diversity and plurality in Europe and to work towards the main aims of the European Union. I think that it is also very important for endangered cultures, for the languages of stateless nations, for minority languages and so on. (Bernat Joan i Marí, 24/10/2006)

**Example 2:** non-native English subcorpus.

In example 1, where the MEP is talking about the opportunity of having a European driving licence, the category to be inferred could be named ‘possible differences among countries which make a national test and driving licence important’, while in example 2 a category that could be named ‘sectors that would benefit from support to European cinema’ is implied.

The above categories are, as Overstreet (1999: 42) calls them, non-lexicalized, i.e. not “encoded as a single lexical item” as opposed to ‘natural’ or ‘common’ categories, such as *bird*, *fruit* or *furniture*. The reason why MEPs seem to use general extenders can be expressed in Overstreet’s words:

these expressions provide a way of talking about entities or actions that spontaneously need to be referenced together when no established referring expression for the group is known

(Overstreet 1999: 43).

More often than not, however, a mention of the category is present in the previous context in both the native and the non-native subcorpus, as can be seen in the following examples, where the categories are highlighted in italics:

Our constituents are rightly worried about many aspects of the urban environment. We have just had a debate on air quality: that is very central to it. However, it is more than that; it is *the noise that we have to put up with in the urban environment, from neighbours* as well as *from vehicles, from ghetto blasters and so on.*

(John Bowis, 25/09/2006)

**Example 3:** Native English subcorpus

We have to make the effort now to do our utmost to ensure that Palestine, which is probably the most secular part of the Middle East, does not revert to something that probably the majority of Palestinian people do not want. But at the same time there have

to be people in government who are able to produce *the results that the majority of people want: social services, no corruption, democracy, etc.* (Javier Solana, 5/04/2006)

**Example 4:** Non-native English subcorpus

In examples 3 and 4 the phrases in italics fit Overstreet's definition of non-lexicalized categories given above, but the category, instead of being implied, is mentioned in the cotext. Therefore, the label of *list-completers*, used by Lerner (1994) and discarded by Overstreet (1999: 29) on the basis of the functions played by general extenders in her corpus, seems often to be more appropriate to refer to 'etc.' and 'and so on' in the corpus of EU parliamentary debates. In this respect, it should be noticed that O'Keefe (2004) does not include the forms which are preceded by an explicit mention of the category. On the other hand, although she does not deal with the problem explicitly, Overstreet (1999) seems to include the general extenders preceded by an explicit mention of the category, as shown by the following example where the category (in italics) is lexicalised:

William: Are any of the uh trees turning?

Julie: U:m they don't really turn much here I don't think.

William: They don't

Julie: Yeah.

William: Yeah. Most of 'em are *evergreens* around there I guess. Pine trees an' stuff.

(Overstreet 1999: 44-45)

Regardless of whether 'and so on' and 'etc.' function in the native and in the non-native subcorpora of EU parliamentary debates as list-completers, or as vague category identifiers, it seems possible in some cases to simultaneously attribute to them additional functions, as will be shown in the following paragraph.

## 5. Additional functions of 'and so on' and 'etc.' in EU parliamentary debates

In both the native and the non-native corpus, the most obvious reason why MEPs use 'and so on' and 'etc.' is to indicate that more could be said. Thus, as highlighted by Overstreet (1999: 125-140) regarding adjunctive general extenders, these forms allow the speaker to adhere to the Maxim of Quantity (Grice 1975), avoiding giving more information than is needed. In particular, in both corpora, one or two exemplars before the vague tag seem - in most cases - to be enough to refer to previous discussion (shown in bold). This is illustrated in examples 5 and 6.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present to you the White Paper on a European communication policy adopted by the Commission at its meeting yesterday. This is **not the first time I have spoken** about the White Paper in this House. **I first announced** it during the debate on the Herrero report, which has been an important reference for my subsequent work. During the preparation stages for the White Paper **I regularly informed** the European Parliament about my ideas, meeting with the different political groups, committees etc., and **I am sure that several of you will find the key concepts and messages** of the White Paper **quite familiar**. (Margot Wallström, 2/02/2006)

**Example 5:** non-native English subcorpus

I have two points. First of all, a few months ago **we were hearing** about *problems around the hosting of the agency in Poland: inadequate provision of accommodation and so on*. Have those problems been resolved? (Sarah Ludford, 25/10/2006)

**Example 6:** native English subcorpus

Although example 5 does not contain a previous mention of the category to which the two exemplars ‘different political groups’ and ‘committees’ belong, while example 6 does contain an explicit mention of the non-lexicalized category ‘problems around the hosting of the agency in Poland’, of which ‘inadequate provision of accommodation’ is an exemplar, it is clear that the function of ‘etc.’ and ‘and so on’ is the same. In both cases, the items discussed are familiar to the fellow MEPs, because they have already discussed them.

As Overstreet points out, a speaker might use an adjunctive general extender to indicate that “the ‘more’ that might be said has low value or, for any number of reasons, is simply not worth the expenditure of communicative energy” (Overstreet 1999: 134). There are only two examples of this function in the EU parliamentary debates, one with ‘etc.’ and one with ‘and so on’, and both are in the native subcorpus. In both cases the vague tag is preceded by just one exemplar, as can be seen from example 7:

if we are ultimately to have a European driver’s licence, we should look at a different model from the one-test-for-a-lifetime model that we have in Europe. With such a model, the quality of the test can be very high, which makes it very difficult and very expensive for young people to get, and yet no one looks at the skills of a driver 20 years on. I would recommend the American model of repeat tests: a written test is taken every four years and a road test every eight years and skills must be kept up. The level of safety is high in the test, probably the level of technical knowledge, etc. would not be as great, but people continue to drive... (Kathy Sinnott, 13/12/2006)

**Example 7:** Native English subcorpus.

In the above example, the MEP is clearly downgrading the importance of the level of technical knowledge and of any other kind of knowledge that might derive from the one-test-for-a-lifetime driving licence currently existent in Europe, thus highlighting that it is much more important to ensure safety.

A function mentioned by Overstreet that seems to be present in both the native and in the non-native subcorpus is that of emphasizing that many exemplars belonging to a given category exist, as can be seen in examples 8 and 9:

In Europe we have three doctors per 1000 people and, as she has said, we are still short of health professionals. In Africa they have under five doctors per 100 000 people. In Europe it is our fault and in Africa it is also too often our fault. And why is it our fault? Because the developed countries take 63 000 doctors and nurses a year from developing countries and return just 1300 to those countries. That is an unethical, immoral imbalance. In Europe we must do **much more** to recruit and retain health professionals through training, through pay, through working conditions, through research facilities and so on, but with developing countries we must do so much more and above all we must stop this recruitment rape of their skills. (John Bowis, 5/04/2006)

**Example 8:** Native English subcorpus.

As you know, at the moment we are discussing how we can have enough resources to do everything Parliament has put on its wish-list. I have heard **so many** proposals for *things that ought to be added to the list and things that you have missed – initiatives or legislative proposals – that should be on this list: energy initiatives, migration initiatives, the single market review, the social reality stocktaking, the emissions trading scheme, a European strategy for social services, a Community framework for efficient health services, etc.* (Margot Wallström; 14/11/2006)

**Example 9:** Non-native English subcorpus.

As noted previously, it makes no difference whether the non lexicalized category is mentioned in the cotext, as in example 9 (in italics), or not, as in example 8. In both cases the function of ‘and so on’ and ‘etc.’ is highlighting that many more items could be mentioned. The iconicity between form and content is stressed in the examples by the occurrence in the cotext of ‘much more’ and ‘so many’. On other occasions adjectives like ‘numerous’, ‘different’, ‘various’, quantifiers like ‘many’ and ‘a number of’ and the adverb ‘widely’ occur in the cotext, thus confirming that general extenders have the function of stressing that much more could be said. In the current data, the minimum number of exemplars preceding the vague tag when the function is stressing that much more could be said is three.

Regarding the number of exemplars preceding the vague tag, it may be observed that in both the native and the non-native subcorpora any number of exemplars can precede the vague tag, with a maximum of eight in the cases where the category is stated in the previous cotext. Instead, five is the highest number of exemplars when general extenders function as vague category identifiers. This seems to suggest that it is easier for speakers to produce exemplars once they have already stated the category they belong to.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, the exemplars are noun phrases or prepositional phrases in both the native and the non-native subcorpus. In the native subcorpus there are two cases of exemplars which are adjectives, and one in which, out of seven exemplars, five are adjectives and two are nouns. Two examples, the first with ‘etc.’ and the second with ‘so on’ are given below:

We are also very wary about campaigns to extend the scope of international conventions to include cluster and other munitions. We support moves to minimise the negative after-effects of conflict, such as explosive remnants, and to introduce '*smart*' (self-destructive, precision-guided, etc.) weapons (Geoffrey Van Orden; 16/11/2006)

**Example 10:** Native English subcorpus.

PROGRESS will hopefully take the competition out of the allocation of funding and other resources to social partners representing people who, because of their *situation in life* - physical, mental, social, ethnic, economic, employment or lack of employment, and so on - need the support of the wider community. (Kathy Sinnott; 26/09/2006)

**Example 11:** Native English subcorpus.

This confirms Channel’s observation (1994: 136) that the form ‘adjectives + tag’ is rare. Also, since all the cases are in the native subcorpus, this might indicate a greater conformity to supposed norms on the non-natives’ part.

## 6. Conclusion

After illustrating what is meant by vague expressions and the important role they play in native speaker communicative competence, the present paper has investigated the use of a particular type of vague expressions, general extenders - like 'and so on', 'or something', 'etc.' - in two subcorpora of 62 EU parliamentary debates comprising native English and non-native English. Results show that by far the most frequent general extenders occurring in the two subcorpora are 'and so on' and 'etc.', which Overstreet (1999) has found to be typical of formal settings. These data confirm Drave's (2004) finding that native and non-native speakers use a similar range of vague expressions but differ in that native speakers do not use more vague expressions than non-native speakers. This may be due to the fact that the non-native MEPs who choose to express themselves in English rather than in their own mother tongue presumably have a very good command of English and know how to deploy a degree of vagueness which is suited to their communicative purposes. However, while native English MEPs use 'and so on' with exactly the same frequency as 'etc.', non-native speakers of English prefer the Latinate form 'etc.'

In keeping with Terraschke and Holmes (2007), who investigated the use of general extenders in conversations, this study has shown that native MEPs and non-native MEPs use general extenders with similar functions. In the two subcorpora, more often than not the previous cotext contains a mention of the category to which the exemplars preceding the vague tag belong. This suggests that the label *generalized list completers* (Lerner 1994) could - in most cases - suitably describe the function of 'and so on' and 'etc.' in these data. In the other cases, 'and so on' and 'etc.' seem to function as vague category identifiers (Channel 1994), cueing the listener to access a category which is implied by means of the exemplars. The function of indicating that more could be said, suggested by Overstreet (1999), is particularly evident in both subcorpora. In both the native and the non-native subcorpus there are examples of iconicity, where the speakers suggest much more could be said. In such cases, lexical items such as 'numerous', 'different', 'various', 'more', 'many', 'widely' occur in the cotext.

Interestingly, the function of downgrading information which is not considered relevant is present only in the native English subcorpus, albeit in two cases. This may point to the fact that non-native speakers are not familiar with the use of general extenders to express this function. Another difference between native and non-native use of 'and so on' and 'etc.' observed in these data consists in the occurrence of the form [adjectives + general extender] exclusively in the native subcorpus, albeit in three cases, which may indicate a greater conformity to the norm on the part of non-native-speakers.

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