

# “Words are more or less superfluous”: the Case of *more or less* in Academic Lingua Franca English

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*Abstract* In the past fifty years, English has turned into the leading language of international communication. Despite its well-established status as a global lingua franca, there is a lack of descriptive research on how people actually use English as a global language. The aim of this paper is to contribute to knowledge of lingua franca English, and more specifically to investigate a linguistic phenomenon that is common to all languages, namely lexical vagueness.

This study provides a detailed description of how non-native speakers of English use the vague expression *more or less* in international settings. Concordance analyses showed that *more or less* is among the most frequent markers of vagueness in academic lingua franca English. A detailed contextual analysis indicated that the expression is used to carry out various communicative functions in lingua franca discourse. This paper aims to show that non-native speakers of English are aware of the communicative potential vague expressions have and that divergence from native use does not result in communication breakdown.

## *1. Introduction*

English has become the first global lingua franca, that is a contact language between people from different linguistic backgrounds. In fact, it has been argued that the number of non-native speakers of English has already outgrown the number of native speakers and this trend seems likely to continue in the future (Graddol 1997). Although lingua franca English (ELF) is much talked about among linguists and language teachers alike, the number of empirical studies on this type of language is

still relatively small<sup>16</sup>. Meanwhile, discussions tend to turn into debates about whether ELF can be referred to as a new variety of English and whether non-native speakers of English should be regarded merely as language learners aiming to achieve native-like performance or as true and legitimate users of the language.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the young yet growing field of empirical research on English as a lingua franca in global settings. On a more specific level, this article focuses on vague language which is common especially in spoken discourse. Speakers often add imprecision to the utterance by using various kinds of vague expression. This study describes the use and functions of one such expression, namely *more or less*, in academic lingua franca English.

## *2. Vague language and what we know so far*

All natural language, and especially its spoken form, is full of different types of elements which convey vagueness. Firstly, many concepts lack clear definitions and are therefore imprecise. Classic examples of this kind of semantic vagueness involve gradable adjectives and concepts whose definitions include such adjectives. For instance, a typical borderline case is the paradox of hill vs. mountain. It is impossible to draw a line between these two concepts, since there is no clear definition of what constitutes a hill and what constitutes a mountain. The definition is largely context-dependent and a matter of local use. Secondly, in addition to this often unavoidable semantic vagueness, language may also be imprecise in terms of pronoun reference, metaphors, ellipses, and euphemisms.

However, since nearly all language can be said to be vague in one way or another, a more precise definition of the term ‘vagueness’ is in order. This paper takes a look at linguistic vagueness on a more pragmatic level, that is to say how speakers use words which explicitly

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<sup>16</sup> However, see papers in this volume and e.g. Knapp and Meierkord (2002) and Jenkins (2000).

convey vagueness and what linguistic functions these words serve. Spoken language in particular includes numerous expressions which carry little semantic information, especially if taken out of context, but which add an element of fuzziness to the utterance. In this respect, vague expressions are similar to hedges, defined by Lakoff (1972: 195) as "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy". According to Lakoff, hedges can be used to create categories and to give *ad hoc* labels to imprecise sets. They can also serve as modifiers which decrease the speaker's commitment to the propositional content of an utterance. Many of the words Lakoff calls hedges include an element of vagueness (e.g. *sort of, somewhat, in a sense, so to say*), but there are also words that make the utterance more precise (e.g. *literally, actually, strictly speaking*) and words that are used as intensifiers (e.g. *very, exceptionally*). From this follows that the term 'hedge' is too general for the purposes of this study. Therefore I will follow a more detailed definition of vague expressions proposed by Channell (1994: 20). Her definition is more comprehensive and directly aimed at expressions that can be considered vague, that is – using Lakoff's terminology – expressions whose job is to make things fuzzier. According to her, an expression 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's description of vagueness is based on the notion developed by Peirce (1902, quoted in Channell 1994: 7), in which he defines 'intrinsic uncertainty' as "not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habits of language were indeterminate". Hence the use of a particular vague expression instead of a more precise one is a choice made by the speaker. The speaker has, at least in theory, the possibility to make the utterance more precise by opting not to use the vague expression. The degree of precision expected depends on the speech situation and some level of generalisation is often required.

Of course, it has to be noted that a lexically more precise utterance, namely one without a vague expression, does not necessarily indicate

that the utterance is also more accurate in terms of its semantic truth-condition. In other words, the relationship between the chosen lexical item and the entity in the external world to which the speaker refers may be inaccurate regardless of the apparent precision. Let us consider the following examples.

- a. All the three lines in the graph are *more or less* the same.
- b. All the three lines in the graph are, *to some extent*, the same.
- c. *In a way*, all the three lines in the graph are the same.
- d. All the three lines in the graph are the same.

The first three examples have roughly the same semantic meaning, despite the choice of different vague expressions. In this case, the utterances propose that: 1) the lines have similar features and 2) the lines are not exactly identical. If we look at the last example, which does not include a vague expression and is therefore lexically more precise, we notice that it proposes only that the three lines have similar features. Therefore, if the graph in the external world to which the speaker refers contains three lines that have similar characteristics (e.g. they are all ascending instead of descending) but are not identical (e.g. their ascending grades are different), the first three examples are, in fact, more true in terms of their truth-condition than the last example. By using a vague expression, the speaker indicates that the utterance is imprecise and, at the same time, avoids compromising its truth-condition.

### *3. Functions of Vague Language*

In her study of vague language, Channell (1994) concludes that vague expressions are not just empty fillers whose purpose is to get processing time, but they are used to serve diverse functions. These functions can be divided into two groups: those concerning information and those concerning interaction. The first group includes, for example, situations where the speaker wants to give the right amount of information that is appropriate for the communication situation at hand, but not burden the listener with redundant and unnecessary information that would only obstruct the message. The following example taken from the ELFA corpus (see description below) illustrates this function.

S1: quite a few of the rotumans live as migrants in australia and new zealand USA  
**and so on**

In this case, the speaker uses the vague expression *and so on* to indicate that the countries mentioned are only exemplars of a larger set. The vague expression is used because in the light of the discussion, a full list of all the countries to which Rotumans immigrate would probably be too precise and irrelevant. Alternatively, in some situations the speaker may lack specific information and is therefore simply unable to give a more precise utterance.

A vague expression can also replace a particular and more exact word or phrase that the speaker for one reason or another cannot find or is unwilling to use. This may be due to lexical gaps in the speaker’s vocabulary or just temporary difficulties in rendering the right word. Channell lists a number of placeholder words that serve this function. These include for instance *thingy*, *thingummy*, and *whatsit*.

The second group consists of motives that are related to the communication situation and the relationship between the speakers. According to Channell, vague language can be used to create an informal and friendly atmosphere, to express politeness and sometimes even to add a humorous effect to an utterance. This is illustrated in the following example from the ELFA corpus, where the speaker talks about a ‘pet translator’ which is a device that translates barking into human speech.

S1: dogs it seems use only like er er 20 or 30 different patterns to express themselves it doesn’t matter the size or the breed er and so they built this little device which you keep in your hand and and your fido **or whatever** the name is says <IMITATES BARKING> and then you look at it in the i want go for a walk [or pet me]  
SS: [@@]

Here the speaker uses a stereotypical dog name *Fido* together with the vague expression *or whatever* as a general reference to any dog. This, together with the narrative style of the presentation, lends a humorous tone to his speech and is followed by laughter from the audience.

Vague expressions can also function as a safeguard against being later proven wrong, that is to say they may be used as markers of uncertainty and hesitation. This tentative usage of vague expressions is close to what Prince et al. (1982) call ‘plausibility shields’. According to

them, speakers use shields to reduce their degree of liability concerning the truth value of the proposition. Consider the following two examples from the ELFA corpus:

S1: when our president was elected and er the military came to greet her it was **sort of** the first inspectionals **or something like that**

S1: it was a famous estonian tele- television i don't know reporter **or something** he went on strike

In the first example, the speaker is describing the tradition whereby the president of Finland, after being appointed, inspects the guard of honour. Apparently the speaker does not know the word for this tradition and resorts to an unorthodox expression, *the first inspectionals* and marks it with two vagueness markers, namely *sort of* and *or something like that*. In this example, the hesitation seems to be caused by linguistic uncertainty, not by a gap in knowledge as such. Whereas in the second example, the expression *or something* can be seen as an indicator that the speaker does not know the exact job title of the person she is talking about and that she uses *reporter* only as a superordinate category term for 'someone who works in television journalism'. The explicit marker of hesitation, *I don't know*, further strengthens this reading.

Channell is by no means the only scholar who has studied vague expressions in the English language. One of the earlier studies by Crystal and Davy (1975: 112) emphasises that lack of precision plays a crucial role in informal conversations and it should not be avoided. They list four reasons for lexical vagueness, many of which are similar to those mentioned by Channell; namely memory loss, the lack of an appropriate word in the language or not knowing it, no need for precision, and maintaining informal atmosphere.

Overstreet's study (1999) on general extenders emphasises the interpersonal functions that vague expressions have. According to her findings, in using vague expressions such as *and so on*, *or something like that*, and *et cetera* the speaker "conveys to the hearer an assumption of shared knowledge" and thus "underscores a similarity between the participants" (1999: 72-73). Overstreet claims that this intersubjectivity is the main function of such vague language alongside the politeness function already mentioned by Channell. However, the way interpersonal talk is foregrounded in her study may at least partly be explained by the

data on which her study is based. Her research material comprises recorded telephone conversations and face-to-face interactions among close friends and such a context is likely to encourage highly interactive conversations where intersubjectivity is used to negotiate meanings and establish common ground among the participants. Furthermore, close friends and relatives are more likely to resort to shared knowledge in all communication since they share common experiences and know each other well. Different kind of data, for example semi-formal academic discussions among less familiar acquaintances, may reveal other functions that are more prominent than those described by Overstreet.

On the whole, vague expressions in spoken language have been examined fairly extensively, although the empirical work is often conducted on rather limited amounts of data. In addition to the research already mentioned, more recent studies have introduced findings that further attest the twofold function of lexical vagueness (see for example Aijmer 2002, Cheng and Warren 2001, and Jucker et al. 2003). Summing up the above, it can be concluded that vague expressions have many functions in communication. They can be used to create generalised categories and to direct the hearer's attention to the most relevant information. They can also fill gaps in the speaker's vocabulary or knowledge. When it comes to interaction, vague language functions as a marker of politeness and unreserved atmosphere.

#### *4. Vague language and the non-native speaker*

Earlier studies that have been conducted on vague expressions have mostly concentrated on English spoken by native speakers and they are often based on relatively small amounts of data, for example recordings of telephone conversations and face-to-face interaction among familiars, and semi-elicited group discussion. There are few studies that take a look at how non-native speakers use vagueness markers.

De Cock et al. (1998) have published a comparative corpus-based study on the phrasicon of EFL learners where vague expressions are also considered. The study was conducted on two comparable spoken language corpora: one consisting of informal interviews with advanced EFL learners whose L1 is French and another consisting of interviews with native-speakers of British English. In both corpora the informants

are young adult university students. According to their statistical findings, non-native speakers of English significantly underuse vague tags such as *and everything* and *or something*. In fact, the study shows that vague tags are almost four times more frequent in native English than in learner English. Moreover, it seems that non-native speakers tend to use some vague expressions strikingly often, for example the tag *and so on* was used almost ten times as often by non-native speakers as by native speakers. Their study also reveals that the vague expressions *sort of* and *kind of* were underused by learners of English. Based on these results, De Cock et al. (1998: 77) state that “learners’ underuse of vagueness tags may have a significant impact on how they are perceived by native speakers”. They also list possible causes for this underuse of vague expressions:

The apparent inability of advanced EFL learners to master the use of vagueness expressions has at least three possible causes: systematic differences in the way vagueness is expressed in their French mother tongue and in English; shortfalls in teaching (the use of vague language in the classroom may be stigmatised); and finally, lack of contact with native speakers, a particular problem for EFL learners. (De Cock et al. 1998: 78)

Similar findings that suggest the underuse of vague expressions by non-native speakers of English are introduced by Nikula (1996). Her qualitative study on pragmatic force modifiers exposed a slight underuse of expressions such as *more or less*, *kind of*, *and stuff (like that)*, and *and everything* by non-native speakers of English whose L1 is Finnish, although the overall numbers of individual expressions remain too low to draw reliable statistical conclusions.

Channell has also expressed her concerns about non-native speakers’ skills to properly use vague expressions:

It is often noticed by teachers that English of advanced students, while grammatically, phonologically, and lexically correct, may sound rather bookish and pedantic to a native speaker. This results in part from an inability to include appropriate vague expressions. (1994: 21)

Channell suggests that vague expressions should be included in the curricula of EFL classrooms. Moreover, according to Channell, teaching the use of vague expressions would also be helpful to L1 speakers of English in higher education, because at that educational level



presentation skills become important. She argues that the appropriate use of vagueness is, in fact, one dimension of the language of formal spoken presentations. This argument supports an earlier study of strategic vagueness in academic writing by Myers (1996: 12). He claims that vagueness is frequent and necessary in academic discourse and that "as teachers and students we need to see that, contrary to the advice of handbooks, vagueness is appropriate in some contexts".

However, a study by Cheng and Warren (2001) show that there are no significant differences in the way non-native speakers use vague language as opposed to native speakers of English. Their data consists of conversations between native speakers of English and non-native speakers whose mother tongue is Cantonese. The nature of the relationships between the speakers varies from acquaintances to close friends. The study reveals that both speaker groups employ vague language in a similar manner to achieve cooperative communication and that they are able to perform many interactive functions in conversation with the use of these expressions. The functions include solidarity, self-protection, filling gaps in linguistic skills as well as in knowledge, and reducing the amount of excess information. According to their findings, the linguistic and communicative competence of the non-native speakers as regards to the use of vague language is unproblematic.

Another perspective on the vagueness of non-native speakers' language is offered by Ringbom (1998) who, based on a word frequency study of the ICLE corpus, proposes that non-native speakers of English are, in fact, too vague due to the overuse of general words such as *people* and *things*. Contrary to linguists so far, Ringbom seems to regard vague language as a hindrance to effective communication by non-native speakers of English:

And it seems that the non-native features of the ICLE essays are less due to errors than to an insufficient and imprecise, though not necessarily erroneous, use of the resources available in English. (1998: 51)

The concern of researchers regarding English learners' ability to master the use of vague expressions suggests that non-native speakers of English may be unaware of lexical vagueness and its communicative potential and hence it should be taught at school. For example, in a recent article Cutting (2006: 177) suggests that vague language "should be a central part of the model taught to students of English as a Foreign

Language”. Both Cutting’s and Channell’s suggestions are not, however, based on studies of how well students of English master the use of vague language. They are prompted by previous research indicating the importance of imprecision in the English language in general and the notion that ELT textbooks tend to disregard this type of language use.

Before rushing into conclusions that non-native speakers are unaware of vague language because it is not systematically taught in ELT classrooms, we should look at the language produced by these speakers and study their use of vague expressions. The purpose of this study is to add to the empirical evidence on this issue by investigating the role of the vagueness marker *more or less* in a situation where non-native speakers from different linguistic backgrounds use English as a lingua franca in academic settings. The main focuses are on a functional analysis of the expression and on comparing its use in native and non-native Englishes. Before presenting the results an introduction of the data will be given.

### *5. Data*

This study is based on the English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA) corpus which is currently being compiled at the University of Tampere (for more information on the ELFA research project, see <http://www.uta.fi/laitokset/kielet/engf/research/elfa/>). At the time of making the analyses below, 600,000 words were available. The material includes recordings and their transcriptions of various academic situations: lectures, seminars, conference presentations, and doctoral defences. All these speech events are naturally-occurring and the speakers come from different parts of the world and from different linguistic backgrounds. In these academic settings, English is used as a vehicle for communication among people who do not share a common native language. If native speakers were present at the time of recording, their speech was included in the corpus. However, no presentations or other monologic speech forms by native speakers of English were recorded. Furthermore, occasions where all speakers share the same native language or where the English language is the object of study are not included.

The corpus consists of both monologues and dialogues, the latter being more prominent. In fact, dialogues comprise roughly two thirds of the corpus. The material has been further divided into four domains according to their academic nature: social sciences, humanities, technology, and medicine. For detailed description of the compilation criteria of the ELFA corpus, see Mauranen (2003 and in this volume).

The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) (<http://micase.umdl.umich.edu/m/micase/>) will be used as a reference corpus, to which the findings from the lingua franca corpus are compared. The MICASE corpus has been compiled according to similar principles as the ELFA corpus and it includes roughly 1.8 million words.

#### 6. Statistical overview

I first introduce the quantitative findings on the frequencies of the expression *more or less* in the ELFA corpus and compare them to figures from the MICASE corpus. The software program with which the corpus analysis was conducted is Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1998).

*More or less* is only one of many vagueness markers in the ELFA corpus. An overview of different types of vague expressions is shown in Table 1. It has to be mentioned that the list is not exhaustive; there are many expressions in the ELFA corpus which can be described as vague, but which appear rather infrequently. The list comprises only those expressions that occur repeatedly and in different speech situations. As can be seen from the table, *more or less* is one of the most commonly used vague expressions in the corpus. It occurs 88 times<sup>17</sup> in the data and, accordingly, its standardised frequency is 1.58 per 10,000 words. Furthermore, the expression appears as the 66<sup>th</sup> most common 3-word cluster in the word frequency list. If we bear in mind that the ELFA corpus is comprised of spoken language and contains repetition and

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<sup>17</sup> The total frequency of *more or less* in the ELFA corpus is 90 but one of the occurrences is by a native speaker. In addition, one occurrence is a repetition. Therefore only 88 occurrences are taken into account in this study.

fillers that crop up in 3-word clusters as in *in in in*, *the the the*, and *er er er*, this ranking is relatively high.

Table 1. Standardised frequencies of the most frequent vague expressions in the ELFA corpus.<sup>18</sup>

Vague expression	Per 10,000 w (f)
<b>and so on</b>	4.46 (249)
<b>in a way</b>	3.06 (171)
<b>or something (like that)</b>	2.65 (148)
<b>more or less</b>	1.58 (88)
<b>et cetera</b>	1.47 (82)
<b>in a sense</b>	0.95 (53)
<b>and things (like that)</b>	0.77 (43)
<b>or whatever</b>	0.71 (40)
<b>to some extent</b>	0.66 (37)
<b>so to say</b>	0.66 (37)
<b>and so forth</b>	0.45 (25)
<b>somewhat</b>	0.45 (25)
<b>and everything</b>	0.34 (19)
<b>and stuff (like that)</b>	0.30 (17)

Overall, *more or less* is used in one-third of the recordings in the ELFA corpus. The plot distribution shows that the expression is more frequent in five out of the 30 speech events in which it appears. In fact, nearly 40 percent of the occurrences come from these five recordings. The statistics also show that the standardised frequency for *more or less* is highest in monologues. Therefore we might surmise that there is a lot of individual variation, meaning that some speakers tend to use the expression considerably more often than others. Doctoral defence presentations, in particular, have the highest standardised frequency (3.98 per 10,000 words). Table 2 shows both the absolute figures and the relative frequencies of the expression according to different speech event types as well as the combined occurrences in monologues and dialogues.

<sup>18</sup> Utterances where the expressions are not used as vagueness markers are not included in the calculations, e.g. “It happened to be so long and so complex that *er and everything* is in Finnish language”.

Table 2. The distribution of *more or less* according to speech events in the ELFA corpus.

Event type	f	Per 10000 w
<b><i>Monologues</i></b>	36	2.13
<b>Lecture</b>	11	2.21
<b>Conference presentation</b>	15	2.14
<b>Doctoral defence presentation</b>	7	3.98
<b>Seminar presentation</b>	3	0.94
<b><i>Dialogues</i></b>	52	1.37
<b>Conference discussion</b>	4	0.98
<b>Seminar discussion</b>	22	1.38
<b>Doctoral defence discussion</b>	22	1.48
<b>Lecture discussion</b>	3	1.13
<b>Other</b>	1	0.75
TOTAL	88	1.58

In comparison with the native speaker data, it can be stated that *more or less* is considerably more frequent in the ELFA corpus than in the MICASE corpus. In the 1, 8 million word native-speaker corpus the expression *more or less* occurs 55 times but when non-native speakers of English are excluded, the figure drops to 35. Interestingly then, 37 percent of the occurrences of *more or less* in the MICASE corpus come from non-native speakers although only 12 percent of the total number of speakers in the corpus are non-natives. This supports the argument that *more or less* is considerably more frequent among non-native speakers than among native speakers of American English. Furthermore, the expression ranks as low as 926th in the 3-word cluster frequency list and its standardised frequency per 10,000 words is only 0.2 as compared to 1.58 in the lingua franca corpus.

The fact that *more or less* is more frequent in monologues than in dialogues implies that the main function of the expression in academic lingua franca English is perhaps not related to intersubjectivity or politeness, but to expressing ideas and organising thoughts. Of course, this needs further support from a more detailed and context-based analysis, which is carried out in the next section.

## 7. More or less *in discourse*

The numerical overview only describes how often the expression *more or less* occurs in the data. In order to study its functions, we need to look at the context in which the expression appears. Some of the functions can be detected by examining the utterance structure, whereas others require a more thorough analysis of the ongoing discourse. In this section, the most common functions of *more or less* are discussed.

### 7.1. *Hedging*

It is not at all surprising that the vast majority of the occurrences of *more or less* in academic lingua franca English fall into the broad category of hedging. In addition to Lakoff's (1972) theory on words that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy, hedges are described as expressions that convey the speaker's willingness to reduce his or her commitment to the propositional content of the utterance. Often hedging is associated with uncertainty and tentativeness.

Previous studies on academic discourse (e.g. Mauranen 2004 and Hyland 1998) have noted that hedging can be divided into two categories: they can either affect the propositional content of an utterance or underscore the interactive functions, such as politeness and saving face. This distinction is detectable also among the occurrences of the expression *more or less* in the ELFA corpus. I will refer to these functions as 'information oriented' and 'discourse oriented', respectively.

Examples (1) - (6) show typical instances where *more or less* is used to adjust the propositional content of the utterance, in other words it carries an information oriented function. *More or less* occurs in evaluative utterances and it functions as an approximator indicating that the description is not entirely 'black and white', but is at least to some extent subject to interpretation. In such cases, the use of *more or less* is similar to that of *approximately* or *roughly*. The first three examples illustrate this type of situation.

(1) it's **more or less** the problem of the set-top box as system is designed today

(2) stalin's period was **more or less** over then

(3) this is the **more or less** the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century border between the east and west

*More or less* can also indicate that something is the case to a reasonably large degree and in such utterances it could be paraphrased with adverbs such as *fairly* and *quite*. This type of use is frequently related to positive evaluations, as in the following examples (4) - (6).

(4) monolingual corpora are **more or less** common nowadays

(5) information technology services have been **more or less** functional

(6) they are represented **more or less** directly

There are also occasions where *more or less* is used in a paraphrase. In example (7), *more or less* occurs together with the adverb *almost* and it seems to convey the same semantic meaning. Quite similarly, in example (8) *more or less* is used to replace the adverbial phrase *at least*.

(7) that becomes for the individual almost impossible to to take up it becomes **more or less** impossible to survive in the urban jungle

(8) in order to make the language at least rich enough **more or less** rich enough to make something out of it

The distinction between the information and discourse oriented functions becomes more evident when we look at the cases where *more or less* is used to reduce the speaker’s commitment to the utterance and convey (personal) uncertainty, hesitation, or politeness. Such functions are shown in examples (9) – (11). Two of the examples include metadiscursive elements such as *I think we go* and *is asking*, which further indicate that the utterance is directed towards interaction rather than information.

(9)

S1: <S2> seems to er in her remarks as an opponent **more or less** erm support your the- your approach is that so?

S2: yeah [i’m]

S1: [yeah]

S2: only thinking if this is i don’t know , perhaps this is a bit too large approach at least there are very many questions you want to answer but er we’ll see @@

(10) i think we go **more or less** page by page and we both er said er the questions we have found

(11) <NAME> is asking whether we should have again an opponent on on er october maybe not maybe we could we are now **more or less** becoming socialised we know each other and it's a common discussion

In the first example, a teacher gives his interpretation of the opponent's remarks following a seminar discussion. He uses *more or less* as a marker of uncertainty to indicate that his statement is an outsider's view of the discussion. The verb *seem* together with the affirmative tag question *is that so* further implies that the speaker seeks confirmation to what he says. The opponent does confirm this interpretation with *yeah*, followed only by a brief remark on the size of the study. Example (10) is taken from a doctoral defence where the opponent who is leading the discussion makes a suggestion, or rather a directive, on how to structure the ongoing conversation. Since suggestions can be considered face-threatening, they are often softened with modifiers. In this example, the softening function is carried out with the use of *more or less* and *I think*. However, unlike in example (9), the expression does not appear to indicate uncertainty on behalf of the speaker. In the last example (11), a teacher answers a question raised by a student about the next meeting that the seminar group is planning. The teacher's utterance could be taken as a potentially face-threatening act since it entails a negation. He responds to this 'dispreferred' answer by stating that the group is comfortable enough to engage in common discussion and uses *more or less* as a softener in this utterance. Here again, the expressions *more or less* and *maybe* are not used to show hesitation but to smooth out the force of the utterance.

It is sometimes rather difficult to make the distinction between the two functions as they occasionally overlap. There are situations where it is almost impossible to perceive whether the speaker is talking about for example facts that are under dispute in science and hence need hedging or whether he is expressing uncertainty and personal opinion. This distinction is particularly difficult to make if the speaker uses several markers of epistemic modality, for instance the auxiliary verbs *could* and *may*, adverbs *perhaps* and *possibly*, or pragmatic modifiers such as *I think* and *you know*. One such borderline case is illustrated in example (12):



(12) basically i don't see jumping from from chapter to another as very let's say very difficult to obtain functionality but let's say **more or less** fast forward and (xx) could be something that requires extra resource

In the example above, the speaker conveys tentativeness by repeating the expression *let's say* and by using the modal construction *could be something*<sup>19</sup>. These expressions, together with *more or less*, make the utterance seem more like a suggestion or a hypothetical case than an ascertained fact and, apparently for this reason, the speaker wants to weaken his commitment to what he says. It can be concluded that the example under discussion is classified as having primarily a discourse oriented function.

An analysis of the occurrences of *more or less* indicates that the information oriented function is the most prominent one in the ELFA corpus. A detailed study reveals that roughly 70 percent of the expressions act as modifiers to the propositional content of the utterance. These are quite evenly distributed in the corpus and there seems to be no significant difference between monologic and dialogic speech events. In contrast, those utterances in which *more or less* has a more discourse oriented function are prominent in dialogues and particularly in seminar discussions. This can be expected since dialogues are, of course, more interactive and require more intersubjectivity. The few instances of discourse oriented *more or less* that appear in monologues are used to introduce the topic of the presentation, as in (13), or to sum up a presentation and provide a transition from one stage to another (14).

(13) erm well the title of my presentation is energy dialogue and the future of russia democracy regionalism and economic liberalisation but i think i'll concentrate er on er **more or less** on the conceptual side of erm whole er the whole text

(14) this was mo- **more or less** the background of of our interest in this field and now <NAME> will continue on why design researchers are interested in this area

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the use of *let's say* in lingua franca English, see Mauranen (2006).

When it comes to the MICASE data, it seems that among native speakers the information oriented use of *more or less* is also more frequent than the discourse oriented use. Approximately two thirds of the occurrences affect the propositional content of the utterance rather than the interrelationship between the speaker and the hearer(s). Similarly to non-native speakers of English, native speakers too tend to use the information oriented *more or less* in lectures, whereas the interaction based function is more prominent in dialogues. Consequently, in this respect there seems to be no difference between the two corpora.

However, when looking at the structure of the utterances in which *more or less* appears, we can detect differences across the data. In the ELFA corpus, *more or less* is exclusively used in a preceding position, in other words the expression is always placed before the noun, verb, or adverb which it modifies. Therefore it is usually fairly easy to identify the word that is being hedged. In the MICASE data, in contrast, *more or less* is sometimes used at the end of the utterance and this makes it difficult to pinpoint the exact concept which the speaker wants to modify. In such cases, *more or less* seems to be more of a general vagueness marker than a modifier of a particular concept. The following examples (15) – (17) are taken from the MICASE corpus and they illustrate this usage:

(15) and he also started thinking about sphere packings and he was thinking of these as atoms **more or less** and . uh trying to understand nature

(16) i know what they can expect to earn if they continue to work for this firm **more or less**

(17)

S1: and so when you have a mixture that's half R and half S you have a

S2: oh but wait that not even a stereo center.

S3: yeah that's true. um

S1: in the event that it were though, yes. **more or less**. good observation.

Since hedging is a very broad concept and it entails different types of language use, a more detailed analysis of the utterances of *more or less* is necessary in order to get an understanding of how the expression is truly used in academic lingua franca English. The following sections introduce a contextualised analysis of the hedging functions of the expression *more or less*.

### 7.1.1 Minimizing

A closer examination of the instances of *more or less* reveals one particularly interesting discourse function that can be described as 'minimizing'. In such cases, *more or less* is used in a similar manner to *simply*, *only*, or *just* and its purpose is to indicate that the concept is either small in scale or that it is not adequate. In fact, *only* and *just* sometimes co-occur with *more or less*. The minimizing function is particularly prominent in dialogues. It appears that the function is often used in doctoral defences and research seminars. These two speech events have quite a lot in common: they both follow a question and answer format where a researcher, after presenting a study, is faced with critical discussion about the pros and cons of the work. Examples (18) – (21) illustrate the minimizing function:

(18) whether it is typical reduced to **more or less** technical terms meaning usability and and clarity of of of font or or or clarity of pictures and er fast loading and everything like that whether i mean ho- how i see it i wouldn't like to define this quality in in of of a website only by technical terms or by usability terms i would like to include also the contents and and the purpose of a website

(19) we don't know exactly the evolution we just have hypothesis and er that that is a big problem how to assess a matter against another when you don't know anything for sure everything in this evolution is (either) er **more or less** hypothesis you can't make some measurements on on the evolution

(20) there is no more the question of defence [...] now it's **more or less** offensive organisation just you know

(21) do you think this **more or less** bureaucratic difference makes the situation so different that lithuania doesn't have the problem with the minority while the others countries they do have

According to Lindemann and Mauranen (2001) *just* is often employed to either limit the scope of a concept or to reduce its significance. In a similar manner, the expression *more or less* can be used to indicate that the concept modified is simply limited in scope without any criticism of it being too restricted, or that it is 'not enough' for the purpose at hand. In the latter case, *more or less* has a dismissive

connotation. Typical examples of these two types are presented in (22) and (23). The first example is taken from a defence discussion where the candidate (S1) is presented with a critique by the opponent (S2) concerning the methodology used in the study. At a later point in the same dialogue, the candidate answers to criticism concerning the length of the doctoral dissertation (23).

(22)

S1: i i i think it was also interesting to know that er how how these samples actually er behave in the in the let's say no- normal municipal compost

S2: for sure but but now this remains as **more or less** as er a demonstration and and and if if one would truly like to do more deeper and scientific research on this then then definitely he would er would would end up to this er controlled er degradation

(23) but of of course there are a lot of lot of er writing in the let's say the main writing is in the or- ore- original papers and and er this is **more or less** summary of of of the publications

In example (22), *more or less* is used in an utterance which signals disapproval and suggests that the part of the study that is being discussed is not conducted thoroughly enough. In example (23), however, *more or less* does not imply a negative evaluation or carry the connotation of 'not enough'; it is used to state that the part of the dissertation to which the opponent is referring is meant to be a summary of the findings, not an exhaustive account.

Minimizing with *more or less* is quite frequent in ELFA: approximately 17 percent of the occurrences of the expression are of this type. This function seems to be characteristic of non-native English since there are only three instances of such minimizing function in MICASE and, interestingly, they are all produced by non-native speakers of English.

### 7.1.2. Comparing similarities

Taking a look at the utterance structure around *more or less* immediately reveals one very clear pattern in which the expression appears. The prototype of the pattern is the following:

more or less + **the same**

Apparently, one of the most common ways of using *more or less* in the lingua franca corpus is to use it when comparing similarities between two or more concepts or entities. As many as 23 percent of the occurrences of the expression in the ELFA data are of this type and it emerges in monologues and dialogues alike. In fact, *same* is such a frequent collocate of *more or less* that it ranks fifth in the frequency list of collocations. Since all the other collocates of *more or less* are highly common function words such as *the*, *and*, and *of*, this ranking is quite significant.

When using *more or less* in comparison, the speaker implies that although the concepts are not entirely identical, in the light of the discussion they can be treated as the same. The expression thus works as a typical approximator and could be paraphrased as, for example, *roughly* or *almost*. The concepts that are being compared with this pattern vary from highly abstract (e.g. theoretical studies) to relatively concrete and measurable entities (e.g. currencies). This phenomenon is illustrated with running concordances in examples (24) - (26) below:

(24) in dollars that's about 50 cents as are it's in euros **more or less** the same

(25) all of these results remained **more or less** the same with the much larger set

(26) what it actually says is **more or less** the same that you would say in the hermeneutic way of thinking

A more detailed study of the concordance lines reveals that *same* is not the only word that is used together with *more or less* to indicate resemblance between different concepts. Other words include for instance *similar*, *equivalent*, and *alike*, as the examples (27) - (30) show.

Although these words are not frequent enough to appear in the list of significant collocates, they are examples of the same phenomenon.

(27) at the moment who is doing er er studies **more or less** in similar er from similar er

(28) lexicon building which is **more or less** equi- equivalent in a sense to what

(29) it's a metaphor (opening your eyes) no it's a **more or less** like er st paul on the way to (damascus)

(30) all the three lines are **more or less** somewhat alike

Sometimes the word indicating similarity occurs together with the vague general noun *thing* as in examples (31) - (33)<sup>20</sup>. In such instances, the general noun functions as a fuzzy superordinate for a category that the concepts form.

(31) power delay product it's a **more or less** one (or) the same things as energy

(32) it's **more or less** the same thing that you have done for this time

(33) attentive interfaces non-command user interfaces proactive interfaces all mean **more or less** a similar thing

The use of *more or less* together with *same* is also frequent in the MICASE corpus. Looking at the native speaker data, *same* ranks as the sixth most common collocate of *more or less*. It is used in a similar manner as in the ELFA corpus, although the general noun *thing* is not present in the native-speaker examples. This could be compared to the previous finding suggesting that such general words tend to be more frequent in non-native English than in native English (Ringbom 1998). However, the claim does not hold true if we compare the word frequency lists of the two corpora. In fact, both the singular *thing* and its plural

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<sup>20</sup> Earlier studies have shown that general nouns are among the most frequent words in spoken English (e.g. Mahlberg 2005).

form *things* are significantly less frequent in the ELFA corpus than in the MICASE corpus<sup>21</sup>.

### 7.1.3. Approximating quantities

In addition to *same*, there is also another word that forms a pattern with *more or less*, namely the quantifier *all*. In such cases, *more or less* is used to approximate the quantity of things and it denotes generalisation. This is demonstrated in examples (34) and (35). The expression *more or less* can also occur together with other quantifiers that indicate ‘entirety’, as in examples (36) and (37).

(34) that is shared or understood as intelligible by more or less **more or less** all people in the western societies

(35) **more or less** you all have the same problem

(36) luckily this er er like combined attributes erm that’s **more or less** erm everything that was there in the example

(37) until about sixth grade **more or less** a 100 percent people in kerala still going to school

This function is only found in the ELFA data where it is somewhat infrequent; only 7 percent of the occurrences of *more or less* are of this type. It may be that both the native and the non-native speakers of English resort to more traditional approximators as *nearly* and *almost*. In fact, a quick concordance search reveals that *almost* is by far the most common approximator of *all* in both corpora.

Although *more or less* can also be used to approximate numbers, this is not a common phenomenon in the ELFA corpus. There is only one

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<sup>21</sup> In the MICASE corpus, the standardised frequency per 10,000 words of *things* and *thing* are 15.3 and 14.9. In the ELFA corpus the same figures are 10.5 and 9.1 respectively. The chi-square test proves this difference to be highly significant ( $P < 0.0001$ ). It has to be noted, however, that these calculations are based on the entire MICASE corpus and include non-native speakers as well.

instance in the non-native data where the expression appears together with a number<sup>22</sup>:

(38) this summary part in this case **more or less** 30 pages is considered as the dissertation work as such and the papers are attachments to the dissertation and now in this case you have a o- i would say only six pages er theory part is that enough

Approximating numbers with *more or less* is not very frequent in the MICASE corpus either, since there are only three examples where the expression is used in such manner. Previous studies (e.g. Ruzaitė 2004 and Channell 1990) have shown that in academic English, number approximation is usually carried out through the use of adverbs such as *about* and *around*, or with round numbers. It seems that lingua franca English does not differ from native English in this respect.

#### 8. Conclusion

This study has shown that *more or less* is relatively frequent in academic lingua franca English. It is among the most commonly used vague expressions in the ELFA corpus and its standardised frequency is 1.58 per 10,000 words. It seems to be more frequent in monologic speech events, namely presentations and lectures than in dialogues, although this difference can partly be explained by the structure of the ELFA corpus. When we compare the frequency of *more or less* in the two corpora used in this study, ELFA and MICASE, we notice that the expression is considerably more common among non-native speakers of English. In fact, in the native speaker data the standardised frequency of *more or less* is only 0.2. Findings from the MICASE corpus further indicate that it is more often used by non-native speakers than by native speakers; over one third of the occurrences of the expression in the corpus are by non-native speakers of English, although they comprise only 12 per cent of the total number of speakers in the corpus.

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<sup>22</sup> In this example, *more or less* could also be classified as a minimizer.



Contextualised investigation of speech events shows that the functions of *more or less* in academic lingua franca English can be divided into those that modify discourse and those that modify information. This division follows the lines described by previous studies of vagueness indicators (e.g. Channell 1994, Overstreet 1999, Mauranen 2004) and it very much resembles the traditional perspective of the ideational and interpersonal functions in the systemic functional grammar initiated by Halliday (1994). The information oriented (or ideational) function is clearly more common of the two in both corpora examined in this study. This finding is understandable when we consider the academic context in which the discussions take place. Academic speech is often highly abstract and complicated and it tackles with concepts that are difficult to describe. Therefore modifying is often directed towards the content of the utterance, since that is the most challenging aspect of the discourse. The discourse oriented (or interpersonal) function is likely to be more common in other types of interaction, namely more casual ones where the relationship between speakers is more foregrounded.

A detailed study of the occurrences of *more or less* in the ELFA corpus identified three functions that are especially prominent. These are 'minimizing', 'comparing similarities', and 'approximating quantities'. Interestingly, the first function is present only in the non-native speaker data. *More or less* is often used as a minimizer in the lingua franca corpus and though this deviates from the standard or native use of the expression, it does not seem to cause any confusion in the interaction. This unconventional function supports the view that lingua franca speakers can come up with innovative ways of using the language and negotiate new meanings for old words. It also suggests that cooperativeness and the will to understand each other play a crucial role in lingua franca English and therefore the unorthodox use of language does not necessarily result in communication breakdown.

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