

Challenging Vagueness

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If you listen with even half an ear to staffroom talk you will hear bucket-loads of vagueness. How often do people come in, fling their books down and launch into sentences that begin: "My class...." How much of their talk is peppered with adverbs of frequency like **never**, **always** which make you wonder if they wouldn't be more accurate to use ones like **sometimes** and **occasionally**. How often do you decide you have understood what the other person has said to you without checking out if your understanding corresponds to their message? Suppose I say to you "I've got loads of marking to do" will you try and find out what this means to me, or will you picture and feel the scenes that you live through when you have a lot to mark? Will you impose your experience on mine?

In many social situations it doesn't too much matter how vague our listening is and to demand too much accuracy of communication could feel pedantic and unflowing.

If the encounter, though, is professionally and/or personally important then it does become vital to try and make sure we are reading the other person's map roughly the way she sees it. This is a basic, commonsense requirement.

What this article tries to do is to offer some simple sign-posting as to where the person you are listening to may offer you a woolly or restrictive picture of their world. Many of the vagueness sign-posts are linguistic and therefore rather easy for people in our trade to take on board and work with.

Abstract nouns and unclear reference

Supposing a teacher says "One doesn't get much recognition from the school," there are a whole stock of vaguenesses to be cleared up.

Does **one** mean I or we?

If it means **we**, who does this include and who does it exclude?

Who exactly is 'the school'?

What does the person mean by **recognition**? How would they know it if they got it?

Mind reading

It is extremely easy to imagine² that you know what people round you know and feel, even if they have not told you so. A trainee in a TT situation may say: "Everybody thinks I'm taking up too much of the group's time". How on earth does she know and how can she really be convinced enough to maintain that everybody thinks this?

I find that I am most prone to indulge in "mind-reading" when the speaker says something that I feel I instinctively relate to, that sounds right and looks clear. What has sometimes happened in these cases is that I have taken a split second to impose a whole world of my own on what the other has said, and so leave myself no space to check out what they actually meant to convey. I was talking to someone about family relations and they mentioned "behaving like a typical uncle". My first reaction was: "in a warm friendly way, not like a strict parent". Luckily I checked out and discovered that by saying "behaving like a typical uncle" the speaker had meant cool, detached and rather indifferent. "Mind reading" is easy to do and very natural but not intelligent.

The attempt to understand the other person's mapping

When someone tells me something there is no way I can avoid hearing it and seeing it and feeling it in my own terms. If someone says: "I was bad at maths", I immediately re-live moments of being hopeless in this area and also times when I had the problem beat. Some of you, gentle readers, may have had your own flash reaction in response to the sentence "I was bad at maths".

The communications mistake is not the creation of one's own meanings and representations - the mistake is to imagine that this creation corresponds in detail to what the other person has in mind. If I want to gain entry to what the other person has in mind I need to notice my own representation of it and then try and find out if this corresponds to the other person's mapping. My internalisation may be very close to their intention or it may be way off beam. There is exciting detective work to be done around the sentence "I was bad at maths": Which sort of maths?

At what age?

What does 'bad' mean for you?

Who said you were bad?

The answers to the questions may give me sufficiently interesting and other-person-centred information to make my own initial representation of the sentence become a lot less important and potentially communication blocking.

Training yourself

If you find the thoughts in this article potentially useful you may want to train yourself in quickly recognising the signs of vagueness and mis-communication in what others are saying. An easy way to do this is to arm yourself with a list of vagueness indicators and then listen in on conversations in which you do not yourself take part. This can be done in a bus, a train, a bar or a cafe. Here are the indicators again:

- **unclear reference:** vague use of pronouns like No one/they/one/you.
- **abstract nouns:** ones that have something much more concrete behind them in the mind of the speaker.
- **vague verbs:** "She hurt me" is vague compared to either "she pinched me" or "she made me jealous".

Seeing cause and effect where this may not be justified

This is when the speaker denies having choice, though maybe she does have. "She made me jealous" could well be a case of seeing cause and effect unjustifiably.

- **adverb[^] of frequency:** statements like "she's always late" are rarely accurate.
- **Restrictive modals:** "I can't" is a modal people sometimes use to disempower themselves.
- **Mind reading:** here the listener jumps to the conclusion that she really understands what the speaker has in mind, using looney phrases like "yes, I really know what it feels like".

When I listen for vagueness and distortion I find it useful to copy down bits of what the speakers on the train or in the cafe are saying. The speakers notice I am writing something and so are less likely to realise they are being observed.

A second way to train your awareness of these features of conversation is to practice challenging vagueness in what someone else is saying. For this you need to practice with a friend who is also interested in the area. Your dialogue could go like this:

- Friend:** People get on my nerves in the mornings.
- You:** Who exactly?
- F:** I suppose particularly François~~is~~, he's four....
- Y:** Does he actually bother you every morning?
- F:** Well, this morning was particularly bad.

What you have done here is to get the friend to translate the vague:

"People get on my nerves in the morning"

into the much clearer:

"Françoise bothered me a lot this morning"

Having become aware of the way people shroud their meaning in fuzziness and generality you are much better able to deal with crisis situations with children, colleagues and parents. It is vital, though, that you challenge vagueness in gently and friendly ways and that you only do it once you have established proper contact with the other. The challenging can only work with a climate of warmth. Without this it will seem grossly intrusive to the other person.

My sources

This article is based on research by neuro-linguistic programmers, principally Richard Bandler and John Grinder. The most succinct explanation I have found of their work on conversation comes in Leslie Cameron-Bandler's book *Solutions*, Future Pace, 1985. The NLP people have drawn heavily on the practice of the outstanding therapists of the second half of the century - they watched them work and heard them using the checking-out techniques I have outlined. What Bandler and Grinder have done is to clarify and systematise the signs of imprecision and this enables any of us working in communication to become aware of them and to challenge them usefully. The NLP folk have democratised the tools of the masters.

You may find that listening to formulaic conversations at home and at work becomes a lot more fun when you hear them with this new hearing aid.

Abstract nouns used to refer to a personal situation are often condensed sentences with an implied subject, verb and object. It's worth getting the speaker to turn cloudy abstractions into the clear sentence that often lies behind them. In the case of the abstract noun "recognition" it makes sense to ask:

- who gives/doesn't give the recognition?
- who is the recognition for?
- recognition of what?

Challenging vagueness is a delicate business and the speaker will clam up if she feels aggression in your questioning. It is not sensible to try to get the speaker to clarify her expression unless you have established a good rapport with her. This may happen naturally between you or you may have helped it happen by taking up part of the speaker's posture, modulated your voice to hers or noticed her breathing and adjusted your own to it.

It isn't always possible to challenge a vagueness the moment it is out of the other person's mouth. You may need to remember it and pop in with a discreet question a bit later.

Vague verbs and seeing cause and effect when there may not be any

A teacher is in despair about her class and says: "The children force me to punish them." Punish can mean a lot of different things. How does she punish them, with a tone of voice, with a look, by withholding something they want, by giving them detention, by withdrawal or by physical violence? The speaker knows what she means when she says punish but how can you unless she tells you?

In the speaker's mind the children's behaviour is the cause and the punishing is the effect. Worth asking her how they actually force her to punish them.

Insidious adverbs of frequency and restrictive modals

"He never hands his homework in on time" is the kind of sentence that easily floats round a staffroom or a home. The never carries considerable emotional force and you can challenge it by getting the speaker to wonder if there are exceptions to the rule.

The nasty modals to listen out for in another's speech are must/mustn't/can't/ought to/ought not to etc.... and other phrases of the same ilk like have to/it's necessary/etc....

If I say to you "I really must finish this article by tomorrow morning" I may be imposing a strait-jacket on myself. It might indeed be better to take longer over writing the article. You might challenge me by gently enquiring what the consequences of not finishing by tomorrow morning are. There may be real, external consequences or the "really must" may be a looney, self-imposed constraint. People are continually imposing boundaries on their world and their experience and negatively tinged modals are often the periscope that signals the presence of the self-restrictive submarine.