**‘Sort of’ across languages of the Asia and Oceania regions**

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“You see, they’re tennis shoes, and I'm *sort of* helpless without them.”

[Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*]

‘Sort of’, the investigation of which is the task that the contributors to this special issue have set themselves, has over the years been referred to in many different ways. While, as Miskovic-Lukovic (2009, p. 603) summarises, some researchers have simply preferred terms such as ‘phrase’ or ‘particle’ when referring to ‘sort of’, others have opted for such terms as ‘indicator’, ‘pointer’, ‘approximation marker’, ‘pragmatic particle’, ‘downtowner’, and ‘hedge’, among others. Despite the many terminological differences between researchers, they seem to agree on two points: (a) ‘sort of’ is not as well-represented in the literature as it should be (Beeching, 2016); (b) ‘sort of’, as a linguistic item, implies a certain degree of indeterminacy and vagueness (Channell, 1994) as far as its pragmatic and discursive functions are concerned (Aijmer, 2002).

That ‘sort of’ is under-represented in the literature is rather surprising given the fact that it has been found to be among the most frequently used words in some forms of communication, for example in business communication (Handford, cited in Zhang 2015). While the fact that ‘sort of’ is under-represented can be attributed to many different factors, not least the difficulty of obtaining authentic spoken data in different languages and discourse domains, the most noticeable cause appears to be the fact that de-intensification and hedging, which seem to be at the heart of the wide range of pragmatic functions served by ‘sort of’, manifest themselves in many different ways and at many different levels (e.g. lexical, epistemic, discursive, etc.). This tendency makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to pin down the entire range of functions fulfilled by this expression. To clarify, we can study the following examples in which the meanings of ‘sort of’ become increasingly “much more difficult to specify” (Holmes, 1988, p. 86; cf. Stubbe & Holmes, 1995):

1. Behind that there’s ***sort of*** like a big pile of sticks …
2. But in terms of ***sort of***body suppleness I knew I was really, really fit…
3. I don’t suppose it’s ever very nice to be not good at anything and you know you’re ***sort of*** obvious, aren’t you . . .
4. An enormous amount of sport, as far as I can see, right through school is dependent on competition. I think that’s a bad thing, especially the ***sort of*** individual competition and I suppose team competitions are a bit different…
5. And it’s got a ***sort of*** trough in front of it…

(Adapted and modified from Holmes, 1988, p. 86)

Earlier arguments on ‘sort of’ were made by researchers such as Bolinger (1972), Kay (1984), Ӧstman (1981) and James (1983), among others, and were later picked up, refined and enhanced by, notably, Aijmer (1984) and Holmes (1988); see also Channell (1994). Kay (1984, p. 157), for example, noted that a hedge such as ‘sort of’ “denote[s] the speaker’s attitude toward the denotational aptness of certain other word tokens” in the utterance in which it appears. Holmes (1988), however, while distinguishing between the hyponymous [‘type of’] relationship indicated by ‘sort of’ (e.g. What *sort of* people attend these seminars?), provided a thorough analysis of ‘sort of’ as a pragmatic marker. Unlike some of her predecessors, notably Coates (1987), Holmes emphasised the fact that the scope of ‘sort of’ can well be extended above and beyond the following lexical item to the extent that, at times, ‘sort of’ has scope over the entire utterance:

In my view *sort of* often has clause scope in its affective meaning where its function is to attenuate the force of a complete utterance. This is frequently realised by its occurrence in pre-verb position as in [the following example]:

The others *sort of* aren’t considered sane. (Holmes, 1988, p. 91)

Despite its pragmatic indeterminacy and vagueness, research has clearly demonstrated that ‘sort of’ rarely causes miscommunication, but it helps create and maintain rapport, intersubjectivity and common ground between interlocutors (Aijmer, 2002). In this context, as Aijmer (2002) reveals, it would not be surprising for ‘sort of’ to be used among younger people who are familiar with each other. Indeed, the current wisdom among researchers is that ‘sort of’ does not appear to imply a defective meaning, but rather serves to signal imprecision in ways which might, pragmatically speaking, be even more appropriate and relevant compared with precise language (cf. Sperber & Wilson, 1987).

Indeed, the different pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’ have always been a topic of extensive research for scholars working in the field; this includes research into its ‘hedging and mitigating’ functions (e.g. Aijmer, 2002; Beeching, 2016; Fetzer, 2010; Miskovic-Lukovic, 2009), its ‘expressing vagueness’ function, its ability to ‘reduce intensity’ (Zhang, 2013), its ‘self-protection’ function (Hyland, 2016), its use as a ‘politeness marker’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and its ability to ‘strengthen interpersonal connections’ (Aijmer, 2002), among others.

One of the main findings of the line of research delineated above appears to have been that, without such pragmatically ‘elastic’ (Zhang, 2015) items as ‘sort of’, speakers would not be able to achieve the same range of interactional functions and, therefore, the interactants’ range of linguistic choices would suffer (Jucker, Smith & Lüdge, 2003). However, despite the recent rise in the number of studies devoted to ‘vague language’, a gap still exists in the cross-linguistic investigation of ‘sort of’ as a vague expression. This is due in part to the fact that, to date, the majority of studies into ‘sort of’ have either been conducted exclusively using English data or have taken a holistic look at vague language, making it difficult for researchers to perform cross-linguistic comparisons.

This special issue collates studies that have focused exclusively on the use of ‘sort of’ in different languages and data sets including Australian English, New Zealand English, Chinese, Persian, and Indonesian. Broadly speaking, the languages and cultures included here belong to the Asia and Oceania regions. Given the fact that ‘sort of’ is a highly versatile vague language item, the overarching research question of this special issue is: What are the universal and culturally specific patterns in the use of ‘sort of’ across these different languages? The studies published in this special issue will examine what discursive practices affect the number and type of the vague expression ‘sort of’ used in TV discussion discourse. To facilitate cross-linguistic comparisons based on comparable data, the following measures have been undertaken:

1. The contributors to this special issue have based their analyses of ‘sort of’ on similar data sources, i.e. real-life data from TV discussions on social and political issues.
2. The data is of sufficient magnitude to ensure that conclusions are creditable.
3. The contributors have situated their analyses within the frameworks of vague/elastic language study (e.g. Channell, 1994; Zhang, 2015).
4. The main focus of the papers is on the pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’, although other relevant information (e.g. frequency and variance of ‘sort of’) has also been provided.

The findings of this special issue will contribute to a new cross-language understanding of the use of ‘sort of’ and will open up new areas for future research. Further detailed studies, such as the ones outlined here, are needed if we wish to elevate the current literature on cross-linguistic and intercultural pragmatics to a higher level. A summary of each paper has been provided, as follows:

The first paper, ‘*Sort of’ in Australian English: The elasticity of a pragmatic marker*, contributed by Jean Mulder, Cara Penry Williams and Erin Moore, sheds light on the use of ‘sort of’ in Australian English by analysing its role and functions in the context of a public discussion, namely the popular weekly television program Q&A by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. As the authors clarify, the data they have used is advantageous because, not only is it unscripted, i.e. spontaneous, but also involves ‘touchy’ topics which, theoretically speaking, may require a certain amount of rapport building among interactants/participants. Mulder and her colleagues use a data-based approach comprising 598,000 words, with the aim of investigating the pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’. Highlighting the complex uses of this pragmatic marker, the study reveals that, besides mitigation and self-protection, ‘sort of’ can also be used with a view to providing the right amount of information, establishing rapport and intensifying the claims of an utterance. Using Zhang’s (2015) elastic language framework, the authors lay bare the “multifunctionality of this pragmatic marker in terms of the distribution and co-occurrence of functions and its role in the negotiation of meaning between interactants” (p number to be added).

In the second paper, *On the functions of ‘sort of’ in New Zealand TV programs,* Peyman G. P. Sabet examines the collocations and pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’ in New Zealand English. Providing a thorough analysis of the history of ‘sort of’, and its prosodic features, semantics and pragmatic functions, Sabet’s study provides the reader with seminal background studies in the field. As with Mulder, Williams and Moore’s study mentioned above, Sabet’s investigation draws on data pertaining to 63 episodes of ‘Seven Sharp’, a New Zealand current affairs TV program. Each ‘Seven Sharp’ episode lasts approximately thirty minutes and consists of three separate, primarily unscripted and spontaneous semi-formal talks with celebrities, public figures and politicians. As the study reveals, the two most frequent functions of ‘sort of’ in the data under investigation are providing the right amount of information and mitigation, respectively, followed in decreasing frequency by the functions of avoidance and discourse management. Furthermore, Sabet’s data does not reveal any verbs collocating with ‘sort of’, a finding which, as the author clarifies, appears to be “in contrast to Fetzer’s (2009) finding of nouns and verbs collocating with *sort of*” (p number to be added). As Sabet concludes, “discourse type is a crucial factor in the frequency of occurrence and the dominance of pragmatic functions of pragmatic particles” (p number to be added).

In the next paper, entitled *The pragmatic use of ‘sort of’ in TV forums: A Chinese perspective,* Grace Zhang investigates the use of four Chinese vague words, namely *youdian* 有点, *yidian* 一点, *youyidian* 有一点, and *keyishuo* 可以说, each of which have similar meanings to ‘sort of’ in English. Zhang uses a corpus comprising transcripts of China Central Television’s (CCTV) popular current affairs program, *People in the News*, which span a period of three years. Like other studies in this special issue, the data consists of naturally occurring, unscripted data belonging to the more formal (i.e. official) style of communication. Zhang’s study confirms that, while ‘sort of’ is not that frequently used in public discourse, it still enables interactants to achieve certain strategic functions. Zhang’s study further reveals that the two most frequent functions of ‘sort of’ in Chinese are mitigation and approximation, respectively. Overall, the findings of the study reveal that, as a vague language item, ‘sort of’ is, pragmatically speaking, stretchable and can best be described on “a non-discrete continuum” (p. number to be added).

Drawing on a corpus of 120,000 words, in the fourth paper, *Pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’ in Persian: A vague language perspective*, Parvaresh and Sheikhan explore the pragmatic functions of ‘ye djurayi’ (sort of’) and some of its equivalents as used in two popular Persian TV shows. While Parvaresh and Sheikhan identify and analyse instances of ‘sort of’ according to Holmes’s (1988) classic categorisation of ‘sort of’, due to the unresolvability attached to the expression’s semantic and pragmatic functions, they consider ‘sort of’ as an example of vague language (cf. Parvaresh, 2018; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2014). Indeed, the study shows that, although ‘sort of’ does not appear to be a frequent expression in Persian, it still fulfils a wide range of interactional functions. The findings of Parvaresh and Sheikhan’s study show that in modern Persian, by highlighting an ‘epistemic modal meaning’, ‘sort of’ can discursively function as an imprecision signal. Furthermore, Parvaresh and Sheikhan’s study reveals that, on occasion, ‘sort of’ “can also serve functions which are not necessarily imprecision signals, but rather serve to protect the speaker or addressee’s ‘face’” (p number to be added).

The last paper in this special issue, ‘*Sort of’ in Indonesian television discourse*, has been contributed by Indah Tri Purwanti who has studied the use of ‘sort of’ in a number of TV talk shows involving a variety of social issues, which were broadcast by Metro TV, a national Indonesian television channel. In Purwanti’s 161,155 word corpus, she discusses three linguistic expressions: *semacam* ‘type of/sort of’, *agak* ‘rather’ and *rada/rada-rada* ‘rather’.However*,* although Purwanti reports that ‘sort of’ does not appear to be a frequent expression in Indonesian formal discourse, it still fulfils a range of important functions, including serving as a politeness strategy for saving positive face.

In conclusion, the five studies in this special issue draw their data from different languages and cultures and, although each study has shown that ‘sort of’ is not frequently used in formal TV discourse, it still has multiple functions ranging from mitigating to face-saving. While there are different emphases in each language, a common trend, evident throughout the studies, is that the pragmatic meanings of ‘sort of’ are fluid and stretchable. The findings also demonstrate that pragmatic devices, such as ‘sort of’, play an important and dynamic role in communication. Further research could involve studies into the use of ‘sort of’ in other parts of the world, for example Europe, and a comparison made with the results obtained from the Asia and Oceania regions revealed in this special issue.

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