**Pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’ in Persian: A vague language perspective**

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***Abstract***

It goes without saying that as a pragmatic phenomenon, vagueness has over the past few years been a topic of extensive research. However, a huge gap still exists when it comes to the investigation of how vagueness is expressed across different languages and cultures. In the present study, we have put under scrutiny the pragmatic functions of ‘sort of’, a vague expression, in Persian conversation with a view to making cross-linguistic comparisons between different languages possible. Besides confirming the fact that the vague item ‘sort of’ enables interactants to fulfil a wide variety of functions in interactional settings, particularly in face-to-face interactions, the current study reveals that the expression in question can also serve to signal ‘a moment of awkwardness’ as well as the presence of ‘inferable information’. With the former function, ‘sort of’ signals that the speaker is experiencing a feeling of inconvenience and embarrassment. When used as an inferable information signal, however, ‘sort of’ indicates that the utterance has been inferred from the previous or current exchange.

Keywords: ‘Sort of’, Persian, Inferable, Vague language, Vagueness, Pragmatic function

# 1. Introduction

To date, many scholars and researchers of language and communication have attempted to highlight the fact that, whilst *precision*, *accuracy* and *unequivocal communication* may on occasion be considered to be desirable phenomena, it is *vagueness*, *indeterminacy* and *imprecision* which, rather surprisingly, typically characterise how we as human beings communicate with each other (see, for example, Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2007). Studies undertaken by, inter alia, Pierce (1902) and Stubbs (1986), and later by Channell (1985, 1994) and Carter and McCarthy (2006), brought to the fore this important aspect of natural language. Indeed, as Lakoff (1972, cited in Channell, 1994, p. 1) has argued, “[s]ome of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy.” In other words, Lakoff’s assertion appears to be based on the sensible assumption that as human beings, we tend to deal with and tackle vagueness on a daily basis to the extent that vagueness is found in “a good deal” of the way we use language for communicative purposes (Channell, 1994, p. 1; cf. Bavelas et al., 1990).

We would like to clarify right from the outset, that the view of vagueness we have adopted in this paper is that of a strategic and pragmatic phenomenon utilised by speakers in moment-by-moment communicative interactions (cf. Hyde, 2016; Williamson, 1994). By way of illustration, let us focus on the following excerpt taken from one of the 2016 political debates conducted between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump during the United States Presidential election (adapted from Parvaresh, 2018, p. 175):

Trump: And when they made that horrible deal with Iran, they should have included the fact that they do something with respect to North Korea. And they should have done something with respect to Yemen **and all these other places**.

Evidently, in this excerpt Trump is expressing his frustration with the 2015 agreement signed between Iran and the P5+1 group (i.e. United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France and China, plus Germany), strongly believing that the deal in question was indeed a ‘horrible’ deal. As Parvaresh (2018) summarises, Trump appears to believe that the deal is a horrible one because it only concerns Iran’s nuclear program and has failed to control what he considers to be Iran’s relationship with North Korea. Additionally, Trump takes issue with this deal on the grounds that it also fails to control Iran’s influence in Yemen ‘and all these other places’. From a pragmatic perspective, Trump’s ‘and all these other places’ constitutes an example of a vague expression in that, while in the context under investigation it refers to a general category such as ‘countries on which Iran has influence’ or even ‘countries Iran interferes with’, it is not immediately clear [either for the hearer, or even the speaker, or both] exactly what other countries the speaker has in mind.

It is exactly against such a functional-pragmatic backdrop that an expression such as ‘and all these other places’ is viewed as preventing the speaker from mentioning a comprehensive list of ‘countries on which Iran has influence’ or even ‘countries Iran interferes with’ that should have been included in the agreement (Parvaresh, 2018, p. 175).

The above-cited understanding of vague language has, over time, attracted a considerable number of researchers resulting in a dramatic change in researchers’ attitudes towards vagueness, from something less desirable to being worthy of attention (see Cutting, 2007, 2012, 2015; Drave, 2001; Fernández, 2015; Gassner, 2012; Li, 2017; Metsä-Ketelä, 2016; Parvaresh et al., 2012; Parvaresh, 2015, 2017, 2018; Parvaresh & Ahmadian, 2016; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2014; Ruzaitė, 2007; Sobrino, 2015; Sabet & Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2011, 2015, to name but a few). No doubt, such a pragmatic view of vagueness seems to be consistent with the Continental European view of pragmatics, according to which pragmatics is a “superordinate field” of inquiry which has the potential to uncover a huge range of “topic areas” (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014, p. 7), such as the use of vague expressions in ordinary conversations.

As the above-mentioned studies reveal, while vagueness as a pragmatic phenomenon has recently been a topic of extensive research in different languages, linguistic contexts and interactive situations, further cross-linguistic studies are needed before we can assuredly claim that we, as researchers working in the field, have a clearer picture of how vagueness is portrayed across different languages and cultures. Theoretically, one possible method by which research into vague language use could be further developed would be one in which detailed and specific attention is paid to how a particular vague expression functions in different languages and contexts. Given the scope of the current issue, the present study is concerned with how the vague expression ‘sort of’ is used in Persian conversations with a view to making cross-linguistic comparisons between different languages possible. This endeavour would be theoretically appealing as classic research on, for example, the English language has clearly demonstrated that the vague item ‘sort of’ enables interactants to fulfil a wide variety of functions in interactional settings, particularly in face-to-face interactions (see, for example, Bolinger, 1972; Aijmer 2002; Holmes, 1988).

# 2. Vague language

Drave (2000, p. 25), in one of the finest definitions ever proposed for vague language, defines vague language as language which “modifies a linguistic item, phrase or utterance to make its meaning less precise.” According to Drave (2000), vague language is generally a purposeful attempt (see also Powell, 1985, p. 31). No doubt, as Cutting (2015) notes, vague language is so prevalent in our language that it would be unjust to consider the use of vague expressions in communication as being instances of woolliness and sloppiness. The frequent use of vague expressions in both spoken and written interaction points to the fact that these expressions serve important functions; otherwise they would not have been used so frequently (for a discussion see Cutting 2007). Drawing on a sizable corpus of intercultural interactions, Zhang (2011), for example, reveals how versatile and adaptive vague expressions are, thus enriching the entire range of communicative functions a speaker is capable of performing in an interaction (see also Fernandez, 2015).

Pragmatically speaking, in terms of the reasons for using vague language, one could specify two forms of vague language use. As summarised by Zhang (2011, p. 573), one form is *passive* vagueness, “where vague language is used because there is no choice (‘have to’)”, with the other form being *active* vagueness, “where vague language is chosen on purpose (‘want to’)”. As analysists, our understanding of what actually happens in interaction is limited to external evidence rather than internal, i.e. mental factors that influence speakers’ word choice, and this is illustrated by the following examples which clarify what we mean by *active* and *passive* vague language use:

[1]

A: Yesterday ((name of a woman)) phoned (.) me and asked for your telephone number, which I didn’t give her. She texted me this morning asking for your number again, but I didn’t reply!

B: That was very wise of you. If she did the same **thingy** again, tell her you don’t have my number.

A: Sure!

(adapted from Parvaresh & Tayebi 2014, p. 571; original conversation in Persian)

In the above-cited example, which is originally based on a causal conversation, the vague noun *thingy* could be attributed to a “temporary memory failure on the part of the speaker”, and therefore is an example of passive, or as Channell (1994) describes it, *intrinsic* vagueness. Indeed, in this example *thingy* is an example of vague language use, because although it could be taken as indicating “the girl in question’s contacts”, it is not really possible to specify the exact contact method A had in mind (e.g. a telephone call, a text message) (Parvaresh & Tayebi 2014, p. 571).

Unlike the vague item above, those used in [2] below are arguably examples of the active use of vague language. In this excerpt, the speaker is Nigel Farage, one of the most passionate supporters of the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union and then leader of the UK Independence Party. He was speaking immediately after the Brexit referendum in which the majority of voters voted in favour of UK’s withdrawal from the EU[[1]](#endnote-1):

[2]

Farage: An opinion poll in the Netherlands said that a majority there now want to leave. So we **may** well be close, perhaps, to a Nexit. And similarly in Denmark, a majority there are in favour of leaving […]. I’m told the same **may** apply to Sweden, and **perhaps** Austria, and **perhaps** even Italy too.”

Speaking favourably about the Brexit vote, and as an attempt to justify the result, Farage goes so far as to claim in [2] that other countries are likely to follow in the UK’s footsteps and may now want to leave the EU too. However, the claim is so controversial, at least to many observers, that it needs to be intentionally (i.e. actively) toned down (Jucker et al., 2003) presumably with a view to protect (i.e. shield) (Prince et al. 1982) the speaker from undue criticism. As the excerpt reveals, on this occasion the goal of moderating the tone of the claims or ‘self-distancing’ (Ruzaitė, 2007, Zhang, 2011) from the propositional content seems to have been linguistically achieved by using vague expressions such as *may* and *perhaps* which, while highlighting the speakers lack of epistemic knowledge, and consequently lack of responsibility about the propositional content of the utterances should they turn out to be untrue or too controversial, do not reveal specific information about how much commitment, or lack thereof, the speaker is willing to express.

Regardless of how vague items are used (i.e. *active* or *passive*), nowadays researchers tend to consider the following categories as examples of vague language (see Zhang, 2011, 2015, Parvaresh and Ahmadian, 2016):

1. Vague estimators (e.g. *a few, many, few, several, five-ish*);
2. Vague possibility indicators(e.g. *possibly, seem*);
3. Vague extenders (e.g. *or something, and the like);*
4. Vague boosters (e.g. *overly, extremely, very*);
5. Vague de-intensifiers(e.g. *sort of, kind of*);
6. Vague nouns (e.g. *someone, thing*);
7. Vague subjectivisers(e.g. *I believe, we think*).

As the above-cited categories demonstrate*, sort of*, which is the focus of the current study, belongs to the category of vague de-intensifiers*.* As the name suggests, a vague de-intensifier serves to decrease the tone of an utterance, as noted by Berndt and Caramazza (1978). This category of vague expressions includes items that, as Zhang (2015, p. 90) notes, “express vaguely a low intensity degree, and decrease the tone of speech.” De-intensifiers are also referred to as downtoners by some researchers (e.g. Jucker et al. 2003) as they generally serve to soften the tone of an utterance (see also, Meyerhoff, 1986).

It should, however, be noted that there is little consensus among researchers as to what exactly should an expression such as ‘sort of’ be categorically called; a situation which has resulted in different scholars adapting terminologies other than ‘de-intensifier’ and ‘downtoner’ while referring to this expression. As Miskovic-Lukovic (2009) notes, ‘sort of’ (and ‘kind of’) have

variously been referred to in the literature–starting from more general terms such as ‘words’, ‘metaphorical expressions’, ‘phrases’, ‘particles’, and ‘particle-like phrases’, to functionally more specific ones such as ‘indicators’, ‘pointers’, ‘approximation markers’, ‘pragmatic markers/particles’, ‘unit intensifiers’, ‘downtoners’, ‘fillers’, and ‘hedges’. (Miskovic-Lukovic, 2009, p. 603)

Regardless of the different terminologies used when describing an expression such as ‘sort of’, researchers seem to agree that ‘sort of’ is a tremendously versatile expression. However, as Miskovic-Lukovic (2009, p. 603) argues, two functions, namely *mitigation* and *hedging*, “feature most prominently” in the existing literature on an expression such as ‘sort of’ (cf. Aijmer, 1984, 2002; Beeching, 2016, Fetzer, 2010, Holmes, 1986, 1988, Nikula, 1996, Zhang, 2015).

While, as the studies mentioned above indicate, a general level of de-intensification, toning-down, mitigation and hedging of utterances might be at the heart of ‘sort of’, from a pragmatic perspective of vague language use, such de-intensification manifests itself in many different ways. Consequently, any in-depth analysis of ‘sort of’, or any other relevant vague expression, would be a worthwhile endeavour, particularly if it views the vague item ‘sort of’ as a pragmatic phenomenon (cf. Gassner, 2012) with strategic purposes. To clarify what we mean by saying that ‘sort of’ may manifest itself in many different ways other than straightforward de-intensification, let us examine the excerpt in [3] below, which has been taken from the *Corpus of Contemporary American* *English[[2]](#endnote-2)*:

[3]

What we saw is, if we gave students a choice in their learning and assisted them with some pretty high tech technology, that would help them buy into the system, take ownership of their own learning, and make it their own and **sort of** change their ways.

In the above excerpt, ‘sort of’ is evidently an expression with vagueness, as it appears to have been used to linguistically highlight the fact that the speaker is not confident enough that the phrase ‘change their ways’ would constitute a sufficiently precise and accurate word choice to describe the effect of the educational changes being mentioned (Coates, 1987). Indeed, as Holmes notes (1988), *sort of* can strategically be used “to indicate that the speaker is being approximate perforce - due to lack of vocabulary or performance pressures, for instance” (Holmes, 1988, p. 95). In other words, in this exchange, *sort of* appears to act “as a lexical imprecision signal: it signals that the word which follows is not as precise in its reference as the speaker would like” (Holmes, 1988, p. 95). Therefore, on a different level, ‘sort of’ discursively softens the tone of the utterance (i.e. *certainty* and *confidence* associated with the speaker) and the proposition being made.

Another almost similar example is found in [4] in which author Rushdie, in an interview with the weekly *Time,* recollects one of his rare encounters with Donald Trump:

[4]

He **sort of** surged past me with his entourage, going, ‘You’re the man,” snapping and pointing his fingers[[3]](#endnote-3).

Like in [3] above, the use of the vague expression ‘sort of’ in this excerpt highlights the fact that the speaker is not confident that the phrase ‘surged past me’ would have been sufficiently accurate wording to describe the encounter in question. However, on a different level, ‘sort of’ softens the tone of the entire utterance.

# 3. The current study

As was noted above, ‘sort of’ is more often than not used as a marker of uncertainty and imprecision on the part of the speaker (cf. Fraser, 2010; Hyland, 1996). Nevertheless, as was indicated above, more in-depth studies into different languages, contexts, communicative situations and speech genres are needed before we can claim with more certainty that a truly cross-linguistic knowledge of the behaviour of this particular vague item, or any other vague expression, is in widespread use. To this aim, this study is concerned with the use of ‘sort of’ in semi-informal Persian conversations as found in TV conversation.

## 3. 1. *Sort of* in Persian

Due to the versatility of ‘sort of’, the current researchers had difficulty specifying the closest Persian equivalent to this expression. While ‘ye jurâyi’ was, intuitively speaking, the closest pragmatic equivalent, we decided to conduct an online survey on forums such as *ResearchGate* to determine the opinions of Persian-speaking researchers. While many of the researchers agreed with ‘ye jurâyi’, other suggestions were also made. As Persian-speaking researchers, the suggestions that we received via the online survey were perfectly sensible; we therefore decided to adopt a liberal approach towards the data with a view to identifying not only the instances of the expression ‘ye jurâyi’ but also any other equivalents referred to in our online survey. This provided a greater opportunity to analyse the corpus in more depth because we were not only identifying a single expression, i.e. ‘ye jurâyi’, but also a range of other pragmatic equivalents. However, for ease of understanding and to avoid confusion, we will use the English word ‘sort of’ in the corresponding English glosses in this paper.

An important feature of ‘ye jurâyi’ is that, as in English, ‘sort of’ in Persian can also indicate a “hyponymous [‘type of’] relationship between the designated item” (Holmes 1988, p. 86). To clarify, consider the following examples (adapted from Holmes 1988, p. 86):

* They look like funny **sort of** trees to be growing there.
* What **sort of** people turn up to these displays?
* What **sort of** coffee do you want, perked or instant?

The instances of ‘sort of’ in the above three examples mean ‘type of’. Indeed,

the phrase *sort of* indicates a hyponymous relationship between the designated items, namely *they* and *trees* in [the first one]; the addressee is expected to give a hyponym of people in reply to [the question in the second example], and provided with a choice of two hyponyms in [the third example]. (adapted from Holmes, 1988, p. 86).

In Persian, a more or less similar situation exists in which an expression such as ‘ye jur’ (sort of) can be used to indicate a homonymous relationship such as the one found in [5], from a personal communication:

[5]

**ye jur** sup bærât dorost mikonæm ke sære hâlet biyâre!

[I will cook a **sort of** soup for you that will totally refresh you!]

As [5] shows, in this example *ye jur* can be paraphrased as a kind of/type of. Obviously, such instances of *ye jur* were excluded from our analyses.

## 3. 2. Data and method

The data for this study comprise transcripts of two immensely popular Persian TV shows broadcast on the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Channel 3. This channel is widely known among the Iranian community as the ‘youth channel’ because the majority of its programmes are devoted to such issues as sports, movies and talk shows which are popular with the younger generations.

Due to the nature of the issue in question, which is based on data pertaining to TV programs about social issues, we collected our data from two of the most popular social TV programs broadcast on the above-mentioned channel. It should also be mentioned that all the programs were freely available for download via the official website of the TV channel, so the researchers did not obtain permission for using such data as they clearly fell within the domain of public information. The programs under investigation are as follows:

* Mah-e Asal: Arguably one of Iran’s most watched TV programs. Hosted by Ehsan Alikhani, a popular reality TV personality, the program deals with the tragic life stories of ordinary people. In each episode, the person whose story is being featured, appears in a one-on-one interview with the program host and answers a wide range of questions, ranging from general to more private ones. As the invited guests have typically survived or experienced a tragic life event, the interview can, at times, become highly emotional for both the interviewee and audience.
* Mardom Geram: The main focus of this TV show is city life, in general and the expectations and concerns of people living in Iranian cities, in particular. The program is hosted by Najmeh Joodaki, and in each episode she conducts an in-depth interview with a guest who is often either a popular celebrity or a cultural activist. Each episode also includes documentaries and stand-up comedies.

For the purposes of the current study, initially a number of the most recent episodes of these two TV programs were retrieved. Then, due to the fact that each episode included a variety of items with limited linguistic and verbal interaction, only the interview sections were extracted for further analyses. At the next stage of the study, the interview sections were transcribed by the second researcher in conventional orthography. The approximate total number of words was 120,000, including 90,000 words of *Mah-e Asal* and 30,000 words of *Mardom Geram*. To ensure that the transcripts resembled natural speech as closely as possible, a set of transcription criteria was used which enabled us to include “basic non-verbal activities” (Zhang, 2015, p. 68).

Next, both researchers collaborated to identify any instances of ‘ye jurâyi’ and its pragmatic equivalents in the transcribed corpus. Regarding the identification of functions, and in order to further boost unanimity amongst ourselves, we considered, by following Tayebi and Parvaresh (2014, p. 80), each identified ‘sort of’ in its extended discourse context. In this respect, we also relied on such contextual elements such as ‘phonological cues’. Furthermore, in order to minimise the possibility of assigning inaccurate functions to the identified instances of ‘ye jurâyi’, each function had to be unanimously agreed on by both researchers before it was added to the list of pragmatic functions.

# 4. Analysis

While many scholars and researchers of language have, to date, proposed different functions for the vague item ‘sort of’ (see Aijmer, 1984, 2002; Bolinger, 1972; Brown, 1977; Coates, 1987; Crystal & Davy, 1975; Edmondson, 1981; Hubler, 1983; James, 1983; Lakoff, 1975; Quirk et al., 1972, 1985, to name but a few), little investigation has been conducted into the use of ‘sort of’ in different languages and cultures. To fill this gap, this study is an attempt to scrutinise the pragmatic functions of the vague item ‘sort of’ in modern Persian. However, in order to conduct a systematic analysis, the functions fulfilled by the identified instances of ‘sort of’ in the current study have been mainly categorised according to Holmes’s (1988) categorisation of ‘sort of’ with some modifications.

1) Semantic imprecision signal:

As our data illustrates, ‘sort of’ in Persian can be used to vaguely signal that the word or phrase that follows is semantically imprecise. Consequently, by using ‘sort of’ the speaker is suggesting that there is a concept which he cannot clearly explain. In this respect, the speaker signals that the following word is “not to be taken literally” but is an attempt “in the direction of the intended meaning” (Holmes, 1988, p. 97).Pragmatically speaking, it has long been suggested that when speakers resort to the use of vague expressions (e.g. ‘sort of’), they use words that have general meanings with a view to referring to people, things, activities and so on, in an imprecise way (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; see also Powell, 1985; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2014). The use of ‘sort of’ in the following exchange exemplifies how this expression can be used for this purpose:

[6] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Interviewee: šærâyet xeili sæxt bud. æmâ mæn kæm kæm xodæm kâr kærdæm.

[The conditions were extremely difficult. However, I started to strike on my own.]

2. Host: =yæni čikâr kærdi?!

[=What did you do exactly?!]

3. Interviewee:  **sort of** (.) værdæste ye ostâdi kâr kærdæm. bæ?d[[4]](#endnote-4) æz in ke šoru? kærdæm be kâr kærdæn shærâyet yekæm tæqyir kærd.

[I **sort of** (.) worked as an assistant to a master! After I started to work, the situation changed a bit.]

The interviewee in [6] above is a successful entrepreneur who experienced difficulties in life before he flourished as a successful businessman. The main topic of conversation revolves around the range of businesses the interviewee currently runs; however, in turn 2 the host also attempts to draw on the interviewee’s past endeavours and the long journey he has taken towards success, by asking him how he was able to make ends meet before starting his current businesses which led to him becoming rich and successful. When the interviewee is talking about his hard life at that time, the question of “what did you do exactly?” arises. In response to this question, the interviewee uses the semantic impression signal *sort of* to suggest that ‘working as an assistant to a master’ is not an exact description of what he actually did. In this context, it would not be an easy endeavour for the hearer to decide how close ‘working as an assistant to a master’ was to what the entrepreneur in question actually did, so ‘sort of’ constitutes an instance of vague language. Note that immediately after this response, he continues with what he was trying to say before the question was posed. This also indicates that answering this question requires more detailed explanation, which might not be relevant in this particular context.

Another example has been provided in [7] below, in which the interviewee, a young boy who used to be a video game addict, is recollecting those miserable days:

[7] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Host: ?un ruzâyi ke se šæb čâr šæb nemixâbidi, dærsâro vel kærde budi, hæme nârâhæt budæn (.) ?æsæn bærât mohem næbud (.) inqæd ke qærqe bâzi budi?

[Those days that you didn’t sleep for three or four nights; when you had left school, when everyone was unhappy (.), wasn’t it important to you (.) since you were only thinking of the game?]

2. Interviewee: =unqædrâ ke fekræm tu bâzi bud æsæn (.) bexodâ (.) æsæn **sort of** un ruzâ ro yâdæm næyâd!

[=Since I was thinking about the game ((Clash of Clans)) all the time, (.) I swear to God (.) **sort of** I don’t remember those days at all!]

In the above example, the host is enquiring about the interviewee’s mindset, as it would appear rather strange to both the interviewer and some of the audience that a person could totally forget about other important life-related essential activities and focus just on playing video games. In response to this rather challenging question, the interviewee states that he is unable to remember those days vividly; however, given the fact that it may appear to be quite irrational to be unable to ‘remember’ such an important period of his life, by using ‘sort of’ the interviewee signals that his failure to remember those days is nothing but an approximate description of the situation. In other words, in [7] above the pragmatic and discursive meaning of ‘sort of’ is so underspecified that it would be wise to consider it as an example of vague language use.

2) Special-style marker:

‘Sort of’ can also be used to vaguely signal that the word or phrase to be used is in some way marked. The marked utterance can be a technical, rare, foreign, formal, vulgar or idiomatic expression. As Aijmer (1984) asserts, and as also discussed by Holmes (1988), when such expressions are to be utilised, the speaker signals them. In other words, in some cases the speaker is using a word or phrase which does not belong to his/her ordinary lexicon and this marked use of the language is at times signalled by ‘sort of’ which precedes the marked expression (Holmes, 1988). For example in the following excerpt, the interviewee, who is a mine worker belonging to a lower social class, uses ‘sort of’ to mark what he finds technical, and thus difficult to understand, for ordinary people:

[8] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Host: xæste næšodi æz kâret?

[Aren’t you tired of your job?]

2. Interviewee: næ dige (.) âdæt kærdim be mæ?dæn o mæ?dæn kâri. kârâye sæxt o:: kârâyi ke **sort of** riske kâriš bâlâs.

[No (.) I got used to mine and working in the mine. Hard work and **sort of** high-risk jobs.]

In this example, the interviewee is using the phrase ‘high-risk job’ which he assumes to be a technical expression, i.e. jargon, and presumably not part of the everyday vocabulary of ordinary people, including even that of himself. In this context, ‘sort of’ signals the use of a marked expression. In the context of [8] above, ‘sort of’ is still insufficiently specified and as a result it would not be possible for the hearer to decide whether or not the technical term ‘high-risk jobs’ is really an accurate description of the sort of jobs the interviewee has in mind, or whether it is just a convenient categorisation. In the same interview, the host asks the interviewee a rather technical question about how they navigate their way through the mine in darkness, where the interviewee again resorts to the use of ‘sort of’ for the same purpose:

[9] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Host: kæmâkân in čerâq qovehâ vojud dâre ke mæsiro bærâtun rošæn mikone?

[Are there still those torches which light up the route for you?]

2. Interviewee: âre dige. bištære hærekâte mâ (.) bištær sohbætâye mâ bâ: **sort of** ælâmætâye čerâqe.

[Yes. Most of our activities (.) most of our talks is with: **sort of** torch signals.]

To answer the question directed at him, which requires him to name the instruments used to light up routes in the mines, the interviewee in [9] finds it more appropriate to use the expression ‘torch signals’, an expression which he considers to be of a more technical nature. To signal this awareness, the interviewee prefaces this expression with ‘sort of’, thus helping the hearer to realise that the expression used is a more technical and specialised one. In the context of [9], ‘sort of’ is again insufficiently specified (i.e. vague) so that it would not be entirely possible for the hearer to decide whether or not the technical term ‘torch signals’ is really an accurate description of the type of signals the interviewee has in mind or if it is just a technically convenient way of describing them.

3) Lexical imprecision signal:

While in the case of ‘semantic imprecision signals’ mentioned above the speaker is not necessarily suggesting “her awareness that there is a better word or phrase which she cannot access, but rather that there is an intended concept which she cannot explain precisely or for which she knows of no adequate word” (Holmes, 1988, p. 96), sometimes it is lack of vocabulary or performance pressures which force the speaker to choose to be imprecise. On such occasions, the speaker may use an expression such as ‘sort of’ to indicate that he is being approximate ‘perforce’ (Holmes, 1988, p. 95). Also, as Coates (1987, p. 119; also discussed in Holmes, 1988, p. 95) argues, this use of ‘sort of’ has the effect of encoding “the speaker’s lack of confidence in the precision of the choice of the following word or phrase.” In our data, this use of ‘sort of’ can be found in the following exchange:

[10] [Mardom Geram]

1. Host: be næzære šomâ, moškel in næbude este?dâde yâ âmuzeše? mixâm bedunæm moškel kojâs dæqiqæn? yâ æslæn hærdo?

[In your opinion, is has problem been caused by lack of talent or lack of training? I’d like to know what exactly the problem is? Or even both?]

2. Interviewee: kæsâi ke vârede in hite mišæn (.) ((sinæmâ)) bâyæd biyân ye âmuzeši bebinæn. **sort of** ye: sæn?æte! bâyæd yâd begiræn væ betunæn vâqe?æn bæxši æz kâro ke qærâre ænjâm bedæn (.) dorost ænjâm bedæn.

[The people who break up into this area (.) ((cinema)) have to get some instruction. It is **sort of** an: industry! They have to learn and be able to do the part they are supposed to do (.) properly.]

In the context of example [10] above, the interviewee is a famous Iranian actor who is discussing the current problems in the Iranian film industry. The interviewee is complaining angrily about untrained and uneducated young actors and actresses who have become overnight celebrities, solely on the basis of their appearance or connections. He is arguing that this, in conjunction with other problems, has destroyed Iranian cinema, which has now become amateurish, having lost its professional status. The interviewee suggests that training amateur actors and actresses could help improve what he does not consider to be a true ‘industry’. Consequently, the interviewee uses ‘sort of’ to signal that the word ‘industry’ is not an appropriate word by which to describe the Iranian cinema, because the Iranian cinema is arguably not as professional as it should be. In this context, ‘sort of’ constitutes an instance of vague language because it would not be an easy endeavour for the hearer to decide how close the Iranian industry is to what the interviewee in question considers to be a (true) cinematic industry.

4) Self-repair signal:

Sometimes, the speaker is unable to find the exact word or expression that he wants/needs and, therefore, has no choice but to abandon the original utterance and switch to an alternative one (Homes, 1988). While the speaker is searching for the right word or phrase, he may use other expressions, including ‘sort of’, in order to buy him/herself some additional time. At times, however, the search fails and speaker opts for another word/expression. In the following example, taken from an interview conducted with a prisoner, the host informs the interviewee (prisoner) for the first time that she has now been pardoned by the judiciary officials and will not be returned to prison after the show. Highly moved and excited by the news, the speaker fails to access the appropriate word or phrase:

[11] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Interviewee: vâqe?æn?! jedi migi?

[Really?! Are you serious?]

2. Host: âre. jediye jedi! če hesi dâri æl?ân?!

[Yes. I’m serious! How do you feel now?!]

3. Interviewee: inqæd xošhâlæm ke nemidunæm či begæm! hese:: **sort of** **(.)** bâværæm nemiše!

[I am so happy that I don’t know what to say! The feeling of **sort of** (.) I don’t believe this!]

As the exchange reveals, upon hearing the news that she will not be returned to prison after the show, the interviewee, arguably due to emotional excitement, fails to adequately express herself and thus uses ‘sort of’ to allow herself some time to retrieve the word/expression she needs. As the exchange shows, however, the search fails and the speaker resorts to another expression, i.e. ‘I don’t believe this’[[5]](#endnote-5).

5) A moment of awkwardness signal:

Within the course of an interaction, some propositions may impose a feeling of, or rather cause, embarrassment or inconvenience on the part of the speaker. The embarrassment may be the result of the speaker finding himself in a situation in which he has to discuss something he is not comfortable with, including talking about a (culturally) awkward situation or feelings of doing something he should not have done. On such occasions, speakers may use an expression such as ‘sort of’ to signal such inconvenience and/or uneasiness. This use of ‘sort of’ appears to be a unique function which has not yet been thoroughly discussed in other studies. To clarify, consider example [12] below, which is taken from an interview with a firefighter:

[12] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Host: šomâ hæm kâre sæxti dârin. ozâ četoriye?

[You also have a difficult job. How are things going on with you?]

2. Interviewee: mâ hæm kârgærim. fæqæt tu ye mohite dige. fæqæt mozu?i ke hæst in qešr æz jâme?e moto?æsefâne moto?æsefâne æksæriyæt ælân nârâhætæn (.) bâbæte hoquq o væz?i ke ?æl?ân dâræn. næbude emkânâte dorosto dærmun (.) **sort of** sækhte!

[We are pretty much like other workers. Just in a different workplace. The point is that the majority of us, workers, are unfortunately unhappy (.) due to the (living) conditions and the (small amount of) money they are paid. As well as lack of adequate facilities (.) **sort of** it’s difficult!].

In the above example, the firefighter is describing the harsh situation that himself and his colleagues encounter and the paltry salary they are paid in return. As the excerpt reveals, the interviewee feels uncomfortable when he talks about the financial difficulties they all have been experiencing, and ‘sort of’ appears to have been employed to highlight such awkwardness on the part of the firefighter. The awkwardness observed here appears to have been originally caused by a general expectation, which is prevalent among many Persian speakers, known as “âberu-dâri expectation”. This expectation, as Tayebi (2016, p. 8; cf. Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018; Tayebi, 2018) notes, is based on the concept of *âberu* “which is significant in Persian and has sometimes been compared to the Chinese notions of *mianzi* or *lian*.” As Tayebi (2016) further clarifies,

Âberu morphologically consists of two words: ‘âb’ (water) and ‘ru’ (face) (see Sharifian, 2007, 2011) and is explained and understood in association with the notion of ‘face’ (see Koutlaki, 2009; Sharifian, 2007, 2011). In Persian, âberu “embodies the image of a person, a family, or a group, particularly as viewed by others in the society” (Sharifian, 2007, p. 36). […] The notion of âberu may also be understood by the term “respectability face” proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2005) which refers to “the prestige, honour or ‘good name’ that a person or social group holds and claims within a (broader) community” (p.102). (Tayebi, 2016, p. 8).

Given the above, the interviewee’s use of ‘sort of’ in [12] can be taken as a discursive attempt at highlighting his awareness of the fact that speaking about his and his colleagues’ financial difficulties might culturally place both his and his colleagues’ “prestige, honour or good name” in jeopardy, while also vaguely pointing to the (financial) difficulty of the situation he finds himself in.

6) Inferable information signal:

Sometimes speakers draw a conclusion on the basis of the preceding or the ongoing conversation, thus signalling that the following utterance has been deduced from preceding utterances. In this context, ‘sort of’ can be used to signal the drawing of such an ‘inferable’ (Raclaw, 2013), which Haugh (2017, p. 286) drawing on Raclaw (2013) defines as “that which can be inferred from what is said (or not said), how it is said and when it said (or not) in conversational interaction.” In turn 3 of the following excerpt, which is the continuation of the exchange in [12], the expression ‘sort of’ is used in this manner:

[13] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Host: šomâ hæm kâre sæxti dârin. ozâ četoriye?

[You also have a difficult job. How are things going on with you?]

2. Interviewee: mâ hæm kârgærim. fæqæt tu ye mohite dige. fæqæt mozu?i ke hæst in qešr æz jâme?e moto?æsefâne moto?æsefâne æksæriyæt ælân nârâhætæn (.) bâbæte hoquq o væz?i ke ?æl?ân dâræn. næbude emkânâte dorosto dærmun (.) **sort of** sækhte!

[We are pretty much like other workers. Just in a different workplace. The point is that the majority of us, workers, are unfortunately unhappy (.) due to the (living) conditions and the (small amount of) money they are paid. As well as lack of adequate facilities (.) **sort of** it’s difficult!].

3. Host: šomâ xânevâdehâtun čikâr mikonæn? râziæn? čon **sort of** kâre por esteresiye! unâm bâ in dærâmæd (.) xeili xætærnâke (.) bærâ æmniyætetun, bærâ sælâmætitun.

[What do your families do? Are they content? Because it’s **sort of** a stressful job! With this income (.) it’s so dangerous (.) for your safety, for your health.]

In this example the host, based on the information given by the interviewee, his own background knowledge, and arguably his own understanding, infers that the interviewee in particular and most probably other firefighters in general, have a stressful job. This is indeed the host’s understanding and it would appear that ‘sort of’ has been used to highlight this inferential aspect of the utterance being made. Indeed, this use of ‘sort of’ is an example of vague language as it would be impossible for the audience to determine whether or not what the host has inferred is accurate and/or valid.

7) Protecting the speaker’s positive face:

Our data revealed examples of ‘sort of’ which have been exploited to attenuate the force of an utterance in order to protect the speaker’s positive face (also discussed by Holmes, 1988), and is defined as the individual’s expectation or desire to be liked or appreciated (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In the following excerpt, the interviewee is a teenager who was a video game addict when he was younger. As the interview reveals, such an addiction caused problems for him when he was growing up, which included him dropping out of school. At the time of the interview, he states that he is ashamed of his former addictive behaviours and that he is happy to no longer be addicted to video games. He is being interviewed in the presence of his elder brothers who used to openly criticize his behaviour during the time he was a video game addict.

[14] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Host: to či migofti væqti inqæd hey dâdâšet behet migoftæn ((bâzi)) nækon?

[What did you say when your brothers frequently told you not to do this ((playing games))?]

2. Interviewee: hæqiqæteš (.) xob (.) **sort of** delgir mišodæm xob. in tæbiye!

[Frankly (.) well (.) I was **sort of** bothered. it’s natural!]

In this example, the interviewee states that during the time he was addicted to video games his elder brothers’ criticism of his addictive habits did bother him; however, since he has realised that his brothers had every right to criticise his behaviour, he resorts to using ‘sort of’, arguably as an attempt to protect his own positive face. Indeed, given the fact that the brothers’ earlier criticisms now sound sensible, it appears that the use of ‘sort of’ could be viewed as the speaker’s attempt at preventing his positive face from being challenged. Indeed, the use of ‘sort of’ in this exchange is an example of vague language use because it would not be possible for the audience to determine how ‘bothered’ the speaker actually was.

8) Protecting the addressee’s positive face:

Brown and Levinson (1987) remark that if an expression makes the addressee feel unappreciated and unapproved of, the addressee’s positive face might be threatened. In this context, ‘sort of’ can be used to lessen the potential threat. In the following excerpt, the host is interviewing two young boys who have made an award-winning short film. It can be deduced from the interview that one of the boys is more knowledgeable about the art of movie making and has made a larger contribution to the success of the project. However, throughout the interview, it is the less knowledgeable person who generally answers the questions being raised. In the following excerpt, the host stops this less knowledgeable, talkative interviewee, addresses the other interviewee, paying him a compliment and at the same time asking him a technical question.

[15] [Mah-e Asal]

1. Interviewee: dærâmædi ke æz foruše tâblohâ be dæst ?umæd (.) aqâye bâqerzâde xærje rustâ kærdæn.

[Mr Baqerzade spent the money earned from the sales of the pictures (.) for the village.]

2. Host: =ye čizi begæm. čon dâštim bâ æli hærf mizædim (.) **sort of** (.) æli dæst be âčârtære tu filmsâzi!

[=Let me say something. Since Ali and I were speaking (.) **sort of** (.) Ali is more skilful in filmmaking!]

As excerpt [15] reveals, the host intends to compliment only one of the interviewees. However, he assumes that since this has been a collaboration, paying the compliment to only one of them may well indicate that the other person does not deserve to be complimented, something which might threaten his positive face. In order to avoid this, the host prefaces the compliment with ‘sort of’, most probably in an attempt to lessen the threat it would cause to the other person’s positive face. In this context, instead of saying, ‘Ali is more skilful in filmmaking’, the host opts for ‘sort of Ali is more skilful in filmmaking’ instead. This is an example of vague language use as it would be impossible for the audience to determine how skilful the host believes Ali is and/or how committed the interviewer is towards the proposition being made.

Example [16] below, provides another occurrence of ‘sort of’ used in this manner, where the host is interviewing a professional athlete who is suggesting ways in which the difficulties that professional Iranian sportsmen encounter can be overcome.

[16] [Mardom Geram]

1. Interviewee: be næzære mæn in væz? be râ:hæti mitune dorost beše æge inâ ((râhehælhâ)) piyâde beše!

[In my opinion, this situation can easily be changed if these ((solutions)) are applied!]

2. Host: hærfe šomâ **sort of** doroste. væli: hæmčin râhætæm nist! xeili kârâye dige bâyæd ænjâm beše!

[You are **sort of** right. But it is not that easy! Lots of other things should be done!]

In [16] above, the host had intended to disagree with the solutions that the interviewee is proposing because he believes they will not work. Knowing that such a bald on-record disagreement might come across as a direct threat to the interviewee’s positive face, the host then uses the vague expression ‘sort of’ which attenuates the threat to the addressee’s positive face. In this context, instead of saying, ‘You are wrong’ or ‘Your solutions won’t work’, the host resorts to ‘You are *sort of* right’ which is an example of vague language use because it would be impossible for the hearer to determine how wrong/right the host believes the interviewee’s solutions are.

9) Protecting the speaker’s negative face:

The expression ‘sort of’ can also be used to attenuate the force of a face threatening utterance (Holmes, 1988). Negative face has been defined as an individual’s expectation that “their actions should be unimpeded by others” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 62). To clarify this, consider the following excerpt which has been taken from an interview in which the host is interviewing a famous singer. The interviewee talks about how badly behaved he used to be as a young boy and how he used to trouble his parents. In [17] below, the singer in question is telling the audience the story of how, as a naughty boy, he intentionally broke the window of a neighbour’s house:

[17] [Mardom Geram]

1. Host: kotæket zædæn pedæret ((bexâtere šekæstæne pænjere))?!

[Did your father beat you ((for breaking their window))?]

2. Interviewee: næ. mæn tâ hâlâ æz pedær væ mâdæræm (.) **sort of** (.) kotæk næxordæm! šâyæd gushmâli. tæbi?iye inæm (.) æslæn bâyæd bâshe.

[No. I have never been (.) **sort of** (.) beaten by my parents! Maybe a simple punishment. This is quite usual (.) it should be like that.]

As the exchange in [17] reveals, the act of telling the audience that he was beaten/punished might threaten his own negative face. Hence, the interviewee tries to attenuate the force of the threat by using the vague expression ‘sort of’ which, while softening the imposition on his own negative face, does not give the reader any clue as to whether he was eventually punished and/or how severe the punishment he received from his parents was.

# 5. Conclusion

As discussed in the previous section, ‘sort of’ appears to fulfil a wide range of interactional functions. These functions can be categorised into two distinct categories, according to Holmes (1988). On the one hand, the vague item ‘sort of’ functions as an imprecision signal highlighting an ‘epistemic modal meaning’. With this group of functions, the speaker signals the imprecision of the following/preceding expressions or utterances. This epistemic modal meaning of ‘sort of’ can signal the fact that the speaker fails to describe the intended concept (semantic imprecision signal) or deliberately uses a lexicon which does not exactly convey the intended meaning (lexical impression signal). Moreover, ‘sort of’ is used to indicate that the following expression is not part of the speaker’s ordinary vocabulary (special-style marker). In addition, when attempts to find the appropriate word or phrase might fail, the speaker uses ‘sort of’ to indicate that he/she intends to leave the utterance incomplete and to start a new utterance (self-repair signal). Furthermore, as two novel functions of the vague expression ‘sort of’, it would appear that in Persian the expression in question can serve to signal ‘a moment of awkwardness’ and an ‘inferable’ (i.e. inferred information). With the former function, ‘sort of’ signals that the speaker is experiencing a feeling of inconvenience and embarrassment. When used as a resultant or an inferable information signal, ‘sort of’ indicates that the utterance has been inferred from the previous or current exchange.

On the other hand, as the study illustrated, ‘sort of’ can also serve functions which are not necessarily imprecision signals, but rather serve to protect the speaker or addressee’s ‘face’. In this respect, it would be wise to consider them as being associated with ‘affective meanings’. In this respect, as the study revealed, ‘sort of’ can be used to value the speaker’s wants and expectations (i.e. protecting the speaker’s positive face) or that of the addressee (protecting the addressee’s positive face). Moreover, speakers may use ‘sort of’ to show that they their wants are not to be impeded (protecting the speaker’s negative face).

On the whole, the current study is the first step towards analysing the pragmatic functions fulfilled by the expression ‘sort of’ in Persian conversations. However, further research is needed to shed more light on the pragmatic and discursive functions of this expression, not only in Persian but in other languages too. One potential avenue for research would be to investigate this vague expression in larger corpora and data-sets, particularly in more informal conversations. The corpus under investigation in this study constituted a more formal mode of communication and it is therefore important that future researchers attempt to investigate this vague expression in less formal contexts. Future researchers may also be interested in conducting a diachronic study of ‘sort of’ in different languages and contexts; studies in which attention can also be paid to the grammaticalisation of this versatile vague item.

**Transcription Conventions**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| , | continuing intonation |
| ! | an animated tone |
| : | a lengthened segment |
| (.) | a half-a-second pause |
| (( )) | a description by the transcriptionist |
| = | no interval between adjacent utterances |

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1. The transcript has been adapted from the following webpage: <https://www.cnsnews.com/blog/michael-w-chapman/englands-farage-eus-failing-eus-dying-i-hope-weve-knocked-first-brick-out> (last accessed 01/04/2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://corpus.byu.edu/coca> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Time magazine, 25 September 2017 Issue, p. 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In transcriptions, ? represents the glottal stop represented via the Persian letter ع. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The current authors believe, in line with others (e.g. Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2014, p. 570), that this use of ‘sort of’ is not an example of vague language use in that it is not the result of the discursive context it has occurred in, but rather the result of “factors such as temporary memory failure.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)