

VAGUENESS AND THE REFERENCE TO PEOPLE AND PLACES IN ROMANIAN CONVERSATIONAL DISCOURSE

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Abstract: *Vagueness in language generally takes on negative connotations. Vagueness in reference is often stigmatized because it is seen as a deviation from precision and clarity and is associated with vagueness in thinking. Traditional approaches to reference assignment generally assume that the communication is successful if the addressee can uniquely identify each entity that the speaker refers to. Although this may be the case in some speech events and for some discourse entities, there are nevertheless cases when a vague characterization may not only be sufficient, but also preferable. Applying a theoretical framework that blends elements of conversation analysis, the theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) and the theory of relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), this paper demonstrates that, in some contexts, vague referring expressions can be more effective than the explicit ones in conveying the intended meaning. The paper shows that vague referring expressions are frequently used in everyday naturally occurring conversation and they rarely give rise to detectable misunderstanding, their success depending on the exploitation of common ground in managing conversational implicature. The analysis is based on a corpus of naturally occurring conversations recorded and transcribed within the framework of conversation analysis.*

Key words: *relevance; vagueness; implicature; positive politeness; common ground*