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On the fringes of metaphor: Using ambiguously figurative vague language to pragmatically negotiate sensitive topics in the English as a Medium of Instruction classroom

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ABSTRACT

When negotiating sensitive and taboo topics language needs to be used carefully so as not to cause offence or disrupt the interlocutors' relationship. One way to do this is through the use of vague language. In this study, we provide an in-depth, qualitative analysis of vague, euphemistic language, which may be perceived as marginally 'figurative', that is used to negotiate taboo and sensitive topics concerning culture, immigration, race and class. We use the term figurative to include metaphor and metonymy. The paper's focus is on linguistic strategies that employ content words which are in turn, ambiguously figurative, vague and de-emphasising, as well as emphatic qualifiers, and hedging signals, that distance the speaker from their words or prepare the listener for figurative language to come, as tuning devices. The data used in the study are from the METCLIL (Alejo-Gonzalez et al., 2021) corpus and comprise two classes of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) students in Sweden studying international marketing in a post-graduate program. After a detailed discourse analysis, we show how L2 users exploit the vagueness inherent in ambiguously figurative language (i.e. language that we perceive to be "on the fringes of metaphor") to discuss complex topics in a pragmatically sensitive manner in ways that expand previously established categories for VL and collapse others.
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1. Introduction

Mastery of a second language entails the development of pragmatic skills (Yang and Ren, 2020; Taguchi and Ishihara, 2018; Alcón and Martínez, 2008). These include the ability to discuss sensitive and taboo topics in appropriate ways or in intercultural settings where social identity may be at stake (Zhang and Shi, 2017). Sensitive topics include those that have the potential to be emotionally charged or to provoke fear (Condomines and Hennequin, 2015), such as ethnicity, conflict, deviance, cultural difference, or gender. Because of their potentially controversial nature, and the difficulties inherent in discussing them, sensitive topics tend to be "gradually approached, partially penetrated and quickly retreated from" (Linell & Bredmar, 1996, p. 372).

When negotiating sensitive and taboo topics language needs to be used carefully so as not to cause offence or disrupt the interlocutors' relationship. This involves an ability to avoid face threatening acts or to employ repair language when these acts

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cannot be avoided. Vague language (henceforth VL), i.e. language that can be perceived in some way as being imprecise or inexact, is a useful tool for avoiding such offences. Channell published seminal work on the topic in 1994, which listed nine functions of vague language, among which included both giving the right amount of information and withholding information. The use of vague language can therefore be understood as being ultimately strategic.

Vague language has much in common with figurative language (in particular metaphor and metonymy), as both involve relatively 'loose' notions of meaning which allow for a degree of flexibility of expression. Both speakers and listeners can exploit this flexibility, especially where respective speaker positions need to be negotiated and common ground needs to be sought. It is perhaps for this reason that both VL and figurative language have been found to be prevalent in discourses that require this kind of communication, such as reconciliation (Cameron, 2012), political (Mio, 2018; Deignan et al., 2013) and therapy discourse (Tay, 2013). Moreover, many of the expressions that are used to signal the use of VL (such as 'kind of' and 'sort of') are also used to flag the use of figurative language (Cameron and Deignan, 2003; Steen, 2007; Skorczynska and Ahrens, 2015), which suggests there may be some overlap between the two types.

There has been a substantial amount of research into the ways in which both VL and figurative language are used to perform these delicate negotiating functions. However, very little research to date has brought the two fields of study together and looked at how VL and figurative language overlap and interact on the "fringes" of metaphor, in particular in foreign language users' discourse. We use the term "fringe" here to mean a non-prototypical use, a use that is not quite entirely metaphorical or metonymic, in that, in particular when combined with VL, it invites both qualities of comparison and categorization in its possible interpretation. Given that categorization implies a prior comparison and then a setting up of negation of that category to establish another, these descriptions also seem to some degree interdependent, where an overlapping interpretation of their meaning is natural. This multi-faceted possibility of interpretation reveals the pragmatically strategic use of such combinations of language to successfully maneuver sensitive subjects like race, immigration, class and culture. Such a use may be particularly helpful in a multiracial, multicultural group of students like the one studied here, where offense is possible given the myriad social and cultural identities at stake. We will argue that leaving this interpretation up for grabs is advantageous in such discourse, which constitutes the novelty of the data presented here.

In this paper, we focus on English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) students' linguistic strategies, examining the interaction of these three key elements: figurative language (specifically metaphor and metonymy), vague language (Zhang, 2013, 2015; Channell, 1994) and sensitive topics (Zhang and Shi, 2017).

2. Theoretical background to the study

2.1. Vague language

Zhang (2011) defines vague language as "a linguistic unit (word, phrase or utterance) that has an unspecified meaning boundary, so that its interpretation is elastic in the sense that it can be stretched or shrunk according to the strategic needs of communication (p. 573)". Zhang establishes six categories of VL which will be referenced in this study. We will look at each of these six categories, exploring how they employ and interact with metaphorically related words in our seminars.

1. Approximators (*about, a few)*
2. Possibility and plausibility indicators (*possible, maybe, seem)*
3. Vague category identifiers (*stuff, that sort of thing, etc)*
4. Intensifiers (*very, so, extremely, etc)*
5. De-intensifiers, also termed hedges or compromisers, (*sort of, somewhat, fairly, etc)*
6. Subjectivizer (*I think, I feel, I guess, I consider, I reckon)*

Vague language plays an important mitigating role when discussing sensitive topics because it includes the option to protect the speaker, since VL can act as a "softener" (Terraschke and Holmes, 2007) or a distancing device (Ruzaité, 2007). Studies on VL use in native speakers has found that more sensitive or taboo topics tend to generate more VL use, as Zhang (2013) discovered in a study on native Australian speakers when comparing 'touchy topics' (asylum seekers) and non-sensitive topics: sensitive topics generated more VL statistically, with differences both in frequency and in form.

2.2. The relationship between figurative language and vague language

As noted, figurative language and VL both involve a looseness, or "elasticity" of meaning (Zhang, 2013), which constitute a key aspect of communicative competence in native speakers (Channell, 1994). Two mechanisms that also allow for looseness of meaning are metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor (where one entity is described in terms of another, unrelated entity) is an inherently ambiguous trope, as it allows spaces for multiple meanings to exist: the most literal meaning in a physical sense, and the conveyed or comparative meaning. For example, in anti-immigrant discourse, a sensitive topic which is pertinent to this study since immigrants and culture are a subject of the seminar discourse examined here, immigrants are sometimes metaphorically framed as 'invaders' who are 'taking over' the country, linked to such conceptual metaphors as IMMIGRATION IS A NATURAL FORCE (FLOOD), IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS, INFECTIOUS ORGANISMS, INVADERS (Laso et al., 2017). They are

not literally invading or infecting the country but the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric that leans on such metaphors has the ability to evoke these literal senses in the minds of the reader or listener.

Metaphor has been studied in interaction with classic categories of VL, such as the use of vague category identifiers or de-intensifiers (sort of, kind of, etc) which operate as "tuning devices" for metaphor (Cameron and Deigan, 2003) that prepare the hearer for the metaphor to come. The tuning devices 'sort of', 'kind of' and 'like' also chime with different types of metaphor processing that are based on comparison ('like') or categorization ('sort of' 'kind of'). According to Bowdle and Gentner (2005) these different processes are triggered by metaphors at different stages of their careers, with relatively 'new' metaphors being processed as comparisons when they first enter the language, and relatively old (or conventional) metaphors being processed more as categories. This suggests that there may be different processes at work in the strategy of shifting alignments. There do appear to be certain correspondences between the tuning device 'like' and metaphors that involve comparison, and between tuning devices 'kind of' and 'sort of' and metaphors that involve categorisation. Although there have been no studies investigating whether these different kinds of metaphors are 'tuned' in different ways, these parallels suggest a degree of metaphoricity within the tuning devices themselves, operating 'on the fringes of metaphor'.

Another linguistic phenomenon which could be described as being on the 'fringes' of metaphor is metonymy. Metonymy involves the use of a word or phrase to talk about a related entity (e.g. the term '9/11.' is often used to refer to the events that took place on that date). Unlike metaphor, which evokes a relationship involving comparison between the word that is used and its referent, in metonymy, the relationship between a word and its referent is based on contiguity. However, the nature of the contribution played by comparison and contiguity in the meaning-making process is far from clear: the two often shade into one another and their respective roles vary according to context (see Barnden, 2010 and Littlemore, 2015 for a discussion of the similarities and differences between metaphor and metonymy and the overlaps and relationships between them). In practice it can, at times, be very difficult to tell the difference between metaphor and metonymy. Metonymy is particularly well-suited to express vague meanings, where it can be read on different levels in different ways. As Littlemore (2015)points out, the referent(s) in metonymy can often be vague and unclear, and psycholinguistic studies have shown that the meaning often remains unspecified until the very last minute.

This vagueness, or lack of specificity, can be manipulated for communicative purposes. Both Channell (1994) and Cutting (2006) have shown that people use vague language in order to avoid sounding too pedantic and knowledgeable, or to open up space for one's interlocutor to contribute to the conversation. Littlemore (2015, 97) cites an extract from a conversation on the BBC's 'Listening Project' website where a mother and her son are discussing the son's childhood and the fact that he had known about some awkward events that took place in the family home, which his mother had thought he was unaware of. At one point in the conversation, the son says: "… some of it stems back to Longfield Terrace actually … cos I also was aware of all of that even though you didn't ever tell me about it". In this extract, the son uses the metonymic expression 'Longfield Terrace' to refer indirectly to the awkward domestic situation that occurred while he and his family were living in a house in Longfield Terrace. He presumably uses a metonym here because the events that he wants to talk about are extremely sensitive. By using this metonym, he does not need to talk about the events themselves or about the people involved and he can keep things vague until he is sure that he can go ahead and say exactly what he wants to say. This level of indeterminacy is thus convenient for both interlocutors. Metonymy is therefore useful for nuancing discussion of sensitive topics and, as we will see in the following section, this sort of pragmatic strategy is employed by foreign language speakers as well.

2.3. Pragmatic competence in the L2: vague language for successful communication

Successfully managing both figurative language and VL is a key part of pragmatic competence, for both native and non-native speakers, though the nature of the difference in communicative competence between these two groups, native and non-native, can be debated. Cook notes that speakers of an L2 may be considered to have their L1 linguistic competence plus their L2 interlanguage, where multi-competence means the knowledge of two or more languages that co-exist in one mind in dynamic, but as yet unseen ways (Cook, 2016). English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) students, the subjects of this study, are a perhaps unique group in this sense and one that might embody the more encompassing term *L2 user*, rather than L2 *learner*. EMI programs are those where academic content is offered in English, but no language learning is purported to take place explicitly. In this case all the EMI students indicated they held native languages that were not English, and listed their levels of English as between B1 (n = 1), B2 (n = 5), C1 (n = 7) to C2 (n = 4), though their individual paths to achieving that level was not discussed.

For L2 users in general, pragmatic competence has been called a "regulator" of language proficiency (Morady Moghaddam et al., 2020), because studies have shown that a lack of pragmatic skills can lead to communication breakdowns (Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Kasper, 1997), while an increase in pragmatic awareness can improve speakers' perceived linguistic performance (Morady Moghaddam et al., 2020).

Research suggests that L2 users tend to employ less VL than L1 users. For example, in her study of VL use by native (British) speakers of English (n = 35) and low-intermediate level Taiwanese teenage learners of English (n = 35), Lin (2013) found that the native speakers used an average of 4 times more VL than the EFL learners. This finding was echoed in a study in Hong Kong (Drave, 2001) with English native speakers and Cantonese EFL speakers. Frequency of VL use can also vary depending on task-type in an EFL classroom, as Parvaresh and Ahmadian (2016) found when analysing structured versus unstructured tasks with Persian EFL learners (n = 61). They found that EFL learners used significantly more VL when doing an unstructured task,

which they conclude may have had to do with the fact that the unstructured task focused on a more complex process of meaning negotiation.

In contrast to students, teachers have been found to employ VL more often as a communication strategy (Xi, 2013) with concrete pragmatic functions such as creating a mild tone to sound less aggressive or authoritarian in class, filling lexical gaps where students need them, giving the right amount of information or, on the other hand, withholding information in given moments for didactic purposes. From these findings, we can see that the use of vague language in L2 contexts offers both challenges and opportunities. Investigating VL in L2 users is difficult, in particular because of the impossibility of knowing precisely what meanings are actually encoded in any use of VL (McGee, 2018) as well as what might be due to L1 transfer or be a part of the users' interlanguage (Cook, 2016), or what might be simply a lack of language experience, i.e. being vague because the L2 user does not yet have the language she or he needs to communicate something.

2.4. Metaphor and metonymy use by L2 users

In comparison to vague language, there has been a substantial amount of research into the use of metaphor by second language speakers. The ability to use metaphor in strategic ways has been shown to be a key component of communicative competence (Littlemore and Low, 2006; Sabet and Tavakoli, 2016). Research has shown that even highly proficient L2 speakers struggle to learn and fully master conventional figurative expressions (Ciéslicka, 2006; Littlemore et al., 2011), which are also typically acquired late in first language development (Libben and Titone, 2009; Tabossi et al., 2010). The ability to use metaphor to perform evaluative functions has been shown to develop around B2 level where it presents a considerable challenge to some learners (Littlemore et al., 2014). While on the one hand language mastery is an important prerequisite to be able to use appropriate metaphors (Littlemore and Low, 2006), on the other hand, L2 speakers may create unusual forms of metaphor, partly because they may transfer metaphorical expressions from their first language, and partly because they may come up with creative combinations that are influenced by the different languages they speak and cultures they have access to. Moreover, questions have been raised over the nature of metaphors that are produced by second language speakers, with some researchers questioning whether many of these metaphors are used intentionally if they do arise from unconscious language transfer and may therefore have been produced inadvertently (Nacey, 2013). However, in an investigation that employed a think-aloud procedure to explore the cognitive processes by Chinese students of English when writing essays in the L2, Lu (2021) found that these L2 speakers made strategic use of metaphors, some of which involved intentional transfer from their L1.

Less research has investigated the ways in which second language speakers make use of metonymy. Most of the work to date has focused on metonymy comprehension by second language speakers, where it has been shown to present something of a challenge (Littlemore et al., 2016; Slabakova et al., 2016). It has been suggested that the ability to infer the pragmatic content of metonymy is an important skill in second language learning (Barcelona, 2010), but no studies have investigated this issue to date, in particular with EMI students.

The findings discussed in this section provide some insight into the extent to which L2 users are able to employ vague and/or figurative language and the challenges that these types of language present. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have brought these two fields together and investigated the ways in which they combine these two skills in an L2 classroom, in particular an EMI setting, where language study is not explicitly present. The findings from such a study are likely to be of benefit to language educators as they would shed light onto the kinds of linguistic skills that feed into L2 pragmatic competence when a non-native use of an L2 is present. This might constitute a more realistic, hands-on use of the L2, with a focus on content and the message rather than forms (a focus on correct form would theoretically be part of a language learning classroom). Findings may also be of interest to researchers in the fields of VL and figurative language as they would show how these two mechanisms interact and work together to perform an important pragmatic function for managing sensitive topics.

2.5. Sensitive or taboo topics and their implications for figurative and vague language

In the seminars discussed in this paper, the sensitive subjects that arise in the classes involve culture, class, immigration, and race, which are often described metaphorically. Sensitive topics are those in which one's social identity may be at stake in some way: exposed as different, exposing as they mark someone else's difference, etc. For example, race is largely recognized as a cultural construct (Gannon, 2016) which acts as a social marker that historically has carried a degree of social stigma, a result of Western-centric racism. Race is commonly described through colour, since perceiving colour is one experience of the physical, embodied world, a use that is mediated by differentiated cultural experience. Chou (2017) notes in an opinion piece that "the various skin 'colours'—white, yellow, red, olive, and black—are only exaggerations of the actual shades, hues, and tones of human skin. This exaggeration functions in the current vernacular as a metaphor" (2017).

Race and class in turn are intimately intertwined and inseparable in terms of their effect on individual experience, where class can be considered to be an abstract social concept built through mutually constructed cognitive schemas (Gobo, 1995). One facet of class, for example, involves education and literacy and their place with the socio-cultural framework of class hierarchy, in which some conceptual metaphors are: LITERACY IS MORALITY and LITERACY IS ECONOMIC WELL-BEING (Bialostok, 2002), which are clearly tied to the rise of the middle-class and universal education. These topics are of particular importance in the context where the discourse takes place, an EMI Master's degree program bringing together students

from 15 different countries in the subject of international business, a field with a reputation for inequality (Dar et al., 2020; Contu, 2018) that tends to favour the individual over the collective when compared to other academic fields such as, for example, the social sciences (Wee et al., 2021) and one whose research tends to emphasize negative, adverse outcomes of cultural differences over positive ones (Stahl and Tung, 2015). The class discussion around the topic for these seminars, internationalisation in business, organically leads to conversations on culture, immigration, race and class, which we already discussed as sensitive and ones which native speakers tend to navigate with vague language to avoid offense or seeming insensitive to their interlocuters (Zhang, 2013). They may be considered to be even more sensitive in this particular context, when taking into account the multiple social, cultural, ethnic and racial identities of the participants and how they could feasibly affect their participation in the discourse.

In the current study, we aim to identify ways in which participants in two EMI classrooms employ VL involving metaphor and metonymy to discuss these sensitive topics. Our ultimate aim is to explore the ways in which VL and figurative language interact, and if necessary, to revise the VL framework proposed by Zhang, to take account of the 'vagueness' work that is done by figurative language. One might expect a good deal of VL and figurative language to be employed in these two settings, as they cover sensitive subject matter that may need to be mitigated through VL and metonymy, and some of the topics themselves (immigration, etc) are likely to be conceptualised through metaphor. In our study, we explore the ways in which the students employed metaphor, metonymy, and other types of VL that, as we show below, could be described as operating 'on the fringes' of metaphor. Our research questions are as follows.

1. How do participants employ ambiguously figurative vague language to discuss sensitive topics in two EMI classrooms?
2. Do the findings from the study suggest any modifications to existing taxonomies of vague language?

3. The study

3.1. Participants in the corpus

The corpus under study here is the METCLIL (Alejo-González et al., 2021) project, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (project no. FFI2017-86320-R), which comprises recorded spoken discourse from 9 EMI seminars in 7 countries, for a total of 110,496 tokens of transcribed oral production. In this paper two 1-h seminars are under study from the "International Business and Marketing" course of a one-year Master's program at a public university in Sweden, an area accounting for 22,843 tokens of the METCLIL corpus. The two seminars focused on the topics of internationalisation in business. The classes had a total of 17 students, 9 female and 12 male, where 15 were international students coming from: Germany, Kenya, Russia, Latvia, Turkey, France, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ghana, Syria, Italy, Sri Lanka, Greece, Croatia, Bangladesh. The professor was female and originally from China, making for a very culturally diverse group. Participants were previously informed of the purpose of this research and all signed a consent form to be recorded and for their linguistic data to be used. Additionally, each institution in question granted ethical approval for the research to take place before the data collection process initiated.

3.2. Methodology

These two seminars were chosen because their conversations in particular veered into sensitive topics such as race in ways that got our attention, where direct and indirect figurative language was being used and we noticed a pattern of interesting vague language present, such as the use of "like". To examine these in more detail, we first manually identified all instances within the two sessions where VL involved metaphor or metonymy. In our identification process we use as a guide the categories established by Zhang (2011) for different types of VL. We also included cases where the meaning of a word or phrase could be perceived as metaphorical or metonymic but where the context would also permit a non-figurative interpretation. These were the "fringe uses' of figurative language that were mentioned previously. In addition to this, we also used Antconc software to identify all instances of specific and repeated strings such as: 'like', 'kind of' and 'sort of', as these are attested uses of VL that involve metaphor, as discussed above. We then conducted a manual analysis of the concordance lines for each of these terms to identify whether they were used to make direct comparisons, to signal the use of metaphor, or as fillers. This analysis was then used to identify cases where they were used in a more ambiguous way that appeared to serve more than one of these functions at once. Finally, we note that this is largely a qualitative study, and while we make references to the frequency of some utterances (see *like* for example), there are other infrequent instances, such as the use of the approximator *-ish,* that occur within conversational strings which are quite illustrative of our combined purpose of examining VL, sensitive topics and figurative language use and which we feel are therefore worthy of inclusion here.

4. Findings

In terms of research question 1. *How do participants employ ambiguously figurative vague language to discuss sensitive topics in two EMI classrooms?* and in order to identify the ways in which marginally figurative language interacted with VL in

discussions of sensitive topics, we employed Zhang's taxonomy as a starting point in order to draw out instances and types of VL. Once located, we then analysed these instances in order to identify cases where metaphor or metonymy was being used. This process led us to make a small adaptation to the VL categorisation taxonomy, as we found that two of the categories ('vague category identifiers' and 'de-intensifiers') were blurred in our data, which addresses research question 2. *Do the findings from the study suggest any modifications to existing taxonomies of vague language?* We discuss our findings therefore under four headings: 'approximators', 'possibility and plausibility', 'vague category identifiers and de-intensifiers', and 'intensifiers'. Subjectivizers were rare in our data, and when they did occur, it was in response to other features in the taxonomy ('approximators' and 'possibility and probability') so they are discussed under these headings. In this section, we discuss our findings regarding the ways in which the students and lecturer made use of marginally figurative VL to talk about controversial topics relating to race, culture, class and immigration in a pragmatically sensitive way. Although different instances of vague language discussed here co-occur in the same conversational threads, only the relevant vague language under question in each section is marked in **gray highlighted bold.** Relevant figurative language is underlined. Speakers are labelled by anonymised initials, and the lecturer is marked as such to identify her in the discourse. Pauses are indicated by parenthesis (.), and where appropriate, by length in seconds indicated. Overlapping speech is indicated as <Speaker>, and @ indicates laughter.

4.1. Approximators

Approximators are words that express an inexact amount, and can include adverbs and suffixes like -ish (*He is fifty-ish*). Approximators may be used when uncertainty exists about the exact amount, or no need is present to indicate a precise amount (Zhang, 1998). Indicating uncertainty in an amount may be particularly useful for sensitive topics where more or less of something can be considered difficult to assess or there is a desire to avoid assessment in some way, such as about skin colour, and the underlying sensitive topic of race. It also has a metonymic quality, where the approximator stands in for an unnamed quantity. Colour, and colour terms, are closely linked to people's experiences and perceptions, which make them ripe for metaphorical use. The perception of colour in terms of race has long held a variety of metaphorical references, such as being related to health/growth (Yan, 2020), and to class and status. We found one interesting instance of approximator use that was relevant to figurative language and sensitive topics. In the class discussion on culture and business, where the subject has turned to beauty norms in different cultures, the class talks about beauty trends that bely a social preference for some skin tones over others.

(1). SPF Lecturer: Or maybe because of the the the the color (.) you know the Chinese are (.) yellow (.) so even if yellow i- i- (.) maybe (.) people feel you're sick or something er (.) but (.) e (.) well (.) whiter (.) so maybe more healthy (.)

SCB: I don't consider Chinese is yellow.
SQD: It's more yellow**ish** (.)
SCB: It's it's **in comparison**
SPF Lecturer: yeah yeah (.) yeah (.) **in comparison**

The student SQD's use of the suffix *-ish* at the end of the adjective *yellow* is an approximator that creates ambiguity about just how yellow a skin tone is, where it is at once a metaphorical comparison (skin that is yellow-like) and a qualifier (skin with some degree of yellow). This approximator involves metonymy. Firstly, an EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymic relationship is evoked, relating yellow skin with sickness, but this then shades into metaphor as the sickness is imagined and the concept of health is conjured ("maybe more healthy"): having yellow skin as if one were sick, i.e., the association of health with a determined colour. Finally, the description of the skin colour itself as 'yellow' is also metonymic, as Chinese people's skin is not actually yellow. The use of the term yellow in this context therefore appears to involve a further metonymic relationship whereby a prototypical member of a category ('yellow') is used to refer to a shade that lies towards the periphery of that category (Radden and Kövecses, 1999; Taylor, 2003) and which does not have a prototypical label in English. This is picked up on by the two students who cushion the statement by further qualifying this as being 'in comparison' which might also be considered a sort of approximation by virtue of comparison (a colour being close to 'yellow' in comparison, i.e. more 'yellow' than the skin of a typical Westerner).

This section of the class discussion is particularly interesting, since it involves a figure of authority in the classroom, the teacher, who is Chinese. In this conversation one perceives a sort of dance of political correctness: the lecturer seems to affirm a negative racial stereotype (Asians having 'yellow' skin and looking 'sick') which could be understood to be about herself, the students react to this possible affront with VL to distance themselves from it so as not to offend her as the classroom authority, using in fact a subjectivizer, the 6th category of Zhang's typology, *I don't consider* to try to retract that stereotype, and another approximator *in comparison*, which both concedes to the lecturer's opinion, and thus authority, while still offering distance from the term itself in case agreeing with it is offensive.

4.2. Possibility and plausibility

Possibility and plausibility are used to transmit epistemic uncertainty about a proposition (Degen et al., 2019). When these are used as VL this uncertainty provides a way to distance oneself by couching statements in degrees of possibility that

indicate they may not be very true. In the previous example on skin colour, we also see some interesting instances of VL use by the Lecturer indicating possibility and plausibility with a repeated use of *maybe* that operates as a hedge for this sensitive talk on race which is threaded with metaphoric language around colour and race.

(2). SPF Lecturer: Yeah (.) so that's- we'll come back to these norms (.) who set this norms? (3) where did thes- th- these norms start?

SCB: Historically established <SPFLecturer> mhm < SPFLecturer > <SQD> yeah </SQD> (.) definitely < SPF Lecturer > mhm </SPFTeacher> because (.) like (.) e (1) for example (.) **maybe** you can correct me but (.) er (.) I think Chinese (1) er (.) w- women (.) they (.) they prefer to be more white < SPF Lecturer > yeah (.) mhm < SPFLecturer > (1) than brown because it shows that (.) they haven't been outside but the- they have been inside and they're not like this (.) lower level

It is one turn later when the lecturer continues this discussion on race, with an echoed use of *maybe* to soften her discussion on yellow-toned skin perhaps appearing less healthy.

(3). SPFLecturer: Or **maybe** because of the the the the color (.) you know the Chinese are (.) yellow (.) so even if yellow i- i- (.) **maybe** (.) people feel you're sick or something (1) er (.) but (.) e (.) well (.) whiter (.) so **maybe** more healthy (.)

In terms of figurative language here with race, we might be seeing an interaction of metaphor and metonymy called *metaphtonymy* by Goossens (2003, in Littlemore, 2015), where skin colour and health can be considered contingent when we look to embodied experiences such as some skin tones changing when jaundice is present due to poor liver functioning, where the PHYSICAL PART FOR WHOLE relationship is salient and skin colour is indicative of a whole state of general health. However, such an embodied representation is pertinent only when lighter skin tones are used as standard (a racist starting point) so that the stereotypical use of "whiter" skin as healthy for all skin tones becomes metaphorical. This comparison also lacks an 'embodied' basis, as 'white' skin is, in practice, more likely to be an indicator of poor health (pallidness, etc). Given the sensitive nature of race being discussed in the first example here, bookending an indirect metaphor *people feel you're sick* with VL indicating possibility, *maybe*, points to the controversial nature of the statement. A bit later in this thread, *maybe* is again used to hedge the idea of skin tone preferences being a "tradition" which another student indicates could be determined by a nation's "dominance".

(4). SPF Lecturer: Yeah (.) erm (.) yeah but (.) e (.) this white is beautiful so (.) where has this norm comes from? (.) I I pf {SPF shakes her head} (2) really
SQD: Traditions <SCB> yes </SCB> <SPF> yeah </SPF> in this case I think yeah (.) it has some (1) it's it's tradition <SCB> yeah </SCB> and people follow that <SPF> mhm (.) mhm </SPF>
SQB: Because of dominance of the (.) um (.) the nation **maybe** <SPF> yeah </SPF>

Something similar occurs here with the idea of beauty norms being *traditions*, where we see race, a fixed trait, being described as a *tradition*, a more variable characteristic (culturally determined, etc.). This idea might be considered contentious, and we note another two uses of VL to soften this. One is the subjectivizer *I think* by student SQD, and the second is how student SQB, cushions their statement that the cause of such traditions might be the *dominance* of one nation, presumably over another, by using VL for plausibility and possibility (*maybe)*. Moreover, the language of possibility occurs in response to a direct question from the lecturer: "where has this norm come from?", where the answer from the students offers an indirect point of blame that cannot be pinned to individual people: a nation. This thread in the conversation seems to reference themes of slavery and conquest, without saying these words directly, or pointing to the humans behind them, perhaps to maintain conversational ease between interlocuters, who are coincidentally from some of the very nations that conquered, and those that were enslaved. In fact, the only direct reference to racism occurs in this thread less than a minute and four turns later, which we turn to now.

In this part of the discussion, a student describes a practice she has observed in her native country in Africa where banks hire light-skinned girls to front the business as a marketing technique to draw in clients. Here again culpability is attached to an abstract actor, the banks, which is a light personification or metonymy. Here we note multiple uses of VL that we have already seen, such as the use of subjectivizers (*I don't know)*, but also vague language indicating plausibility in the use of the modal *should* as a sort of subjunctive meaning *if he were to do* X.

(5). SGK: People are like (.) **I don't know** but it's adapted (.) to it because there's a bank in (.) Nigeria (.) they don't employ (.) dark brown skin girls basically (.) yes yeah yeah yes <SAB> yes </SAB> (.) they employ like light skin girls because (.) they feel that's their marketing strategy (.) if a man **should** walk <SCB> in Africa </SCB> <SQD> in Africa? </SQD> yes yes yes (.) they do that (.) they don't employ brown skin girls like (.) if I was working <SQD> but then it's official </SQD> yeah (.) like that's what's a ba- bank is known for (.) if I was working that bank I was asked going bleached and looking as white as so for me to get a job 'cause if you if (.) a man **should** walk (.) walk up into that bank like (.) definitely be seen the receptionist like is attractive like (.) they feel (.)he can open an account (.) he can (.) take a loan or like so that's what's the bank is looking for.

SQD: What? They're going racist about it?

In the classmate's reply here "What? They're going *racist* about it?" we find one of the only direct references to racism, and its placement as an action (*to go racist*) seems to further offer distance here. It seems clear that the conversation mostly skirts directly addressing the concept of racism and the detrimental effects it has and the participants' use of VL allows the speakers to essentially ignore human responsibilities. We also note here the multiple instances of *like* as VL, which is discussed in the following section.

4.3. Vague category identifiers and de-intensifiers

Vague category identifiers, which include expressions such as *''something like that', 'and stuff', 'and all that'*, '*that sort of thing',*' signal the idea that the text that follows is likely to involve a degree of generalisation and approximation as they operate as hedging devices that "loosen" the concept indicated by the following word by dropping some of the defining properties of that word (Itani, 1995). This renders them suitable for use in discussions of sensitive subject matter.

Although 'vague category identifiers' and 'de-intensifiers' (*some, sort of, kind of, somewhat, fairly, etc)*, are two separate categories in Zhang's scheme, they have much in common. De-intensifiers have the function of vaguely expressing a degree of intensity, and as such decrease the tone of speech. Sometimes the decreased tone is achieved through reference to a vague category. For example, Itani (ibid.) suggests that vague categories can also be flagged through the use of expressions such as 'sort of' and 'kind of', although Zhang lists this as a de-intensifier. This provides further support for the idea that expressions such as 'sort of', 'kind of' and 'like' serve a function that crosses these two types of VL and that the distinction between them is fuzzy. Indeed, in our data it was almost impossible to distinguish between these two categories and many of the words that were used to signal them served both functions at the same time. Therefore we treat them together here under a single heading.

It has been observed that 'sort of', 'kind of' and 'like' are also used to flag the use of metaphor. Cameron and Deignan (2003) show that in spoken discourse, they can be used to flag both conventional and novel metaphor. They note that these devices are used not only to prepare the hearer for an impending use of metaphor, but that they also serve a series of pragmatic micro-functions, such as alerting the hearer to an unexpected or pragmatically difficult stretch of metaphorical text, signaling an unexpected change of register, adjusting the strength of the metaphor, and suggesting what kind of interpretation is intended. They therefore label these devices 'tuning' devices, as this term captures the broader role that they play. As well as signaling metaphor and related phenomena, devices such as these can also serve as discourse markers. In addition, the use of VL constructions such as *sort of/kind of* has been associated with the discussion of sensitive topics, such that as the level of sensitivity of a topic increases, so the level of vagueness in talk-in-interactions also increases (Zhang, 2013).

4.3.1. Sort of

There were only two instances of 'sort of' in the dataset and both involved references to potentially sensitive subject matter. Of the two instances, the most interesting one occurred in the second seminar, where the Chinese lecturer uses the string 'sort of' when talking about the difficulties inherent in setting up business in China.

(6). SPF Lecturer: Mhm yeah (.) but actually i- i- i- it plays quite a big role (.) so whe- whe- when you (.) trying to think of (.) marketing strategies you have to (.) have that in your mind (.) so the the the policies and laws regulations are not the same country (.) to country (2) e (.) but of course today it (.) e **(.) sort of** opened (1) e (.) I mean (.) the wholly owned subsidiaries was was allowed to start at (.) nineteen (.) nineteen ninety-five or something like that in China (2) yeah (.) [ ]

SDE: I think that's a- also because of the culture (.) because they're they're used to it to have control <SPF Lecturer> yeah that's true <SPF Lecturer> in (.) er (.) business (.) they don't have to.

Here, the lecturer uses the string 'sort of' to introduce the idea that China 'opened'. This is a quasi-metaphorical term used to refer to China's relaxing of its policies towards international business. The use of 'sort of' here is in line with Cameron and Deignan's (2006) findings in that it signals an ambiguously worded idea whose meaning may be slightly hazy; it also appears to express a lack of confidence in the term. Alternatively it could be that China has not really 'opened up' very much, so 'sort of' here is also potentially working as a de-intensifier. One reason for the lecturer's use of 'sort of' at this point could be the somewhat sensitive nature of the subject matter. Saying that China 'opened up' implies that it was formerly 'closed', and that this was possibly a bad thing, which is referenced in the student SDE's reply about the state needing to have "control" with which the lecturer indicates agreement. This is a somewhat politically contentious opinion, made about a country that has been historically authoritarian in controlling its narrative. It also reflects a largely Western view of Chinese culture and politics, and may therefore not be a favoured term amongst Chinese speakers. She may therefore be exercising caution for her own benefit, but also for the benefit of the students, given the authority that she has as a teacher. The 'sort of' allows room for dissent and debate and as such is being used in the context of this double layer of sensitivity.

4.3.2. Kind of

The term 'kind of' also served this dual function, and was frequently used to refer to sensitive subject matter. There were 58 instances of 'kind of' across both texts. Of these, 23 were used to flag some sort of looseness of meaning (e.g. 'this is a kind of a side effect') and 35 were used to flag a category or type of entity (e.g. 'this kind of shape face is beautiful'). Some of the loose meanings involved metaphor or items that were marginally metaphorical, such as topics relating to culture (e.g. 'kind of

cultural things'; 'kind of tradition') and business (e.g. 'kind of service'; 'kind of clients'). Here the speakers appear to be using 'kind of' as a way of introducing subject matter that they feel may be controversial. The string 'kind of' was often used to make sensitive references to cultural or racial differences, for example on discussing skin colour, which we saw in the previous section: "if you're more brown then you're **kind-of** you can be outside you can sunbathe and you're like living good life but in China it's opposite way." Here the student is referring to the positive connotations of light skin in Chinese society and attempting to explain why this is the case. However, she is clearly aware of the multicultural nature of the group and the fact that some of her classmates have darker skin, and therefore needs to tread carefully around her references to evaluations of skin colour.

The conversation around the perceived qualities that are associated with 'white' skin continues across a few turns and it is suggested that it is a 'tradition'. In order to counter this idea, a student from Mozambique replies: "**like** in Africa it's not a **kind of** tradition".

(7). SQD: Traditions <SCB> yes <SCB> <SPF> yeah <SPF> in this case I think yeah (.) it has some (1) it's it's tradition <SCB> yeah <SCB> and people follow that < SPF Lecturer > mhm (.) mhm < SPFLecturer >

SQB: Because of dominance of the (.) um (.) the nation maybe < SPF Lecturer > yeah < SPF Lecturer >

SQD: Yeah but (.) like in the Asian in in China yes (1) but like in Africa it's not a **kind of** tradition (.) we don't have any tradition of (1) it's just a new concept (.) for woman (1) that maybe started (.) ten fifteen twenty years ago (.) not twenty (.) LESS than that (1) fifteen maximum (.) < SPF Lecturer > mhm < SPF Lecturer > of white (.) skin whitening (.) all you heard about this kind of product recently

Here, she could have simply stated baldly that 'in Africa it's not a tradition'. However, because she's contradicting views that have just been expressed by her classmates, she may have felt the need to hedge her interjection by setting up a comparison of degrees, which includes the cushioning effect of the use of *like*, discussed in the following section. We also note here the use of *maybe* here, where this vague language to express plausibility or possibility further offers distance from the idea of lighter skin being more of a tradition.

4.3.3. Like

'Like' was used 347 times across the two seminars, and it appeared to serve a range of functions. In 202 cases, it operated as a filler, usually as a way of introducing ideas in a tentative manner (e.g. 'probably after like the second or third time'). In 26 cases it was used as a vague category marker involving quantity (e.g. '1995 or something like that'). In 31 cases, it was used as a way of introducing illustrative examples, where it conveyed a 'such as' relationship (e.g. 'car producers like Toyota'). In 50 cases, it was used to introduce a comparison (e.g. 'like we do if you're doing mathematics'). Six cases involved metaphor (e.g. 'you sit like a King and Queen').

Many of these uses of 'like' appeared to be hedging references to cultural practices, such as when one of the speakers refers to powders to whiten skin, they say "it's just **like** a **make-up** that you put on".

(8). SAC: How much white you can make your skin with this whitening product <SGK> yeah (.) that's true </SGK> <SAB> yeah </SAB> it's really white? <SGK> it's REALLY white </SGK>
SAB: There're so many products but (.) most of them backfire obviously but (.) they go for the cheaper ones (.) which (.) is bad (1) and then they look (.) awkward (.) like

SCB: But it's just **like** a make up which you put (.) on <SAB> it's (.) no it's </SAB> <SGK> cream cream (.) a cream (.) so you start peeling </SGK>

This use of the term 'make-up' is partly metaphorical and partly metonymic. It does not refer to 'make-up' in its most prototypical sense, which would include lipstick, eye shadow, and mascara etc. The speaker appears to be saying that the whitening powder is part of this broader category of make-up, but his use of the term 'like' also acknowledges that it is somehow different. One would not, for example, say that a lipstick was 'like' makeup. They are therefore drawing their interlocutor's attention to a relationship between skin whitening powder that involves both contiguity (metonymy) and comparison (metaphor). The use of 'like' here could also be seen simply as a filler so in principle three different interpretations are possible and it is impossible to tell from the context which is the 'intended' one or indeed if there ever was an 'intended' one. This loose form of expression allows for a range of interpretations that is sufficiently wide so as to prevent potential cases of disagreement or offence.

'Like' was also used in this ambiguously figurative way when referring to sensitive issues relating to cultural differences, intercultural communication and multicultural societies. Sometimes these involved conventional metaphors: "also such major cities which are **like** melting pot," "there are (.) **like** really big cultural differences," "Chinese culture and (.) Europeans (.) still there will be **like** really big fundamental differences (.)," "but we also have to consider **like** cultural differences at the same time (.) **like** you have to accept yourself and each culture have to accept yourself I think (.) but (.) at the same time we have to share this (.) **like** (.) this cultural knowledge (.) among (.) each other." At other times, they involved metonymy, where for example, the name of a country was used to refer to behaviour that is typically associated with residents of that country: "with high level of in-group (.) e (.) perception **like** (.) **China**?" In these examples, the word 'like' is used to soften references to potentially face-threatening subject matter, or generalisations relating to cultural differences. We can also see from these examples that the participants produced a large number of pauses (.) before introducing these topics.

4.3.4. It's a XXX thing

Another expression, which is not in Zhang's original list, but which was used by students in the classes we investigated to signal the use of vague approximators is the construction: '[det.] [adj.] thing'. In our data, we found that this construction was particularly prominent when metaphorical language (or even loosely metaphorical language) was used to discuss sensitive topics involving culture, religion, or class (about the service industry, tips etc.). For example, in the following extract, a student uses the expression 'some blue blood thing' to emphasise the distance between his own views and a set of racist and discriminatory views that he ascribes to 'the British royalty'.

(9). SAC: Also it's not about (.) trend to be white it's also like (.) it was like trendy to be (.) black because like for example those Kardashians (.) all their guy- their guys they're black (.) so (.) I also maybe want to have a black guy (.) what's the problem? (.) and (.) e <SGK> @@@@@@@@@@ </SGK> um (.) and I mean (.) for example me I don't want to be like this white (.) because I also want to have good s- s- (.) like (.) color of skin (.) I want to be more like (.) erm (.) <SQB> yeah </SQB>

SQD: So that's a new thing

SQB: Well I think it's came from the British royalty or something like that (1) because (.) they believe **some** blue blood (.) **thing** (.) <SAC> mhm </SAC> and (.) and everyone should be (.) e (.) white <SPF> okay </SPF> (1) so (.) I don't know (.) maybe it's came from this because royalty (1) define the standards <SPF> yeah that's true that's true </SPF> <SQD> mhm </SQD>

Here the idea of 'blue blood' is a metaphorical expression (which also contains an element of metonymy whereby the blood stands for the person as a whole) which is sometimes used as a shorthand reference for a set of beliefs according to which members of the British royal family are qualitatively different from, and superior to, the rest of society. Placing this expression within a construction that is associated with vague approximation allows the student to express their contempt for this set of beliefs.

In the following extract, student SDA, an immigrant in Sweden, has just been discussing his experience of racism in Swedish shops. Student SDB asks if it's 'a culture **thing'**.

(10). SDB: But do you like it as a permanent Swedish here? (.) do you like the service?
SDH: He got used to it (.)
All: @@@@@@
SDA: Yeah I mean I've grown up with it (.) I mean some shops are worse than others and
SDB: So **it's a culture thing**?

Here he is using the term 'culture' metonymically to refer to a set of negative behaviours that are associated with Swedish society, implying that it's a wider phenomenon, extending beyond the behaviour of the shopkeepers that SDA happens to have encountered. However the vagueness of the expression allows him to avoid placing the blame on a specific group of people. In both of these cases the "thing" is a loosened category of object, partially defined by the adjective preceding it, but left open enough to allow for interpretation. These 'things' are never fully specified, which allows the students to mitigate the tension that may be felt around cultural differences.

4.3.5. Let's say

Another way in which the speakers flagged vague category use in the seminars, with a possible aim of de-intensifying the subject matter of a potentially controversial discussion, was through the use of the construction: 'let's say + NOUN': (e.g. "**let's say** the taxi drivers …"). In a thread of the conversation related to tipping and customer service, which often tiptoes around class, the taxi drivers are presented as a class of workers who do not necessarily know how to interact with customers in an appropriate manner.

(11). SPF Lecturer: Mhm mhm (.) mhm mhm (.) yeah (.) yeah (.) yeah (.) yeah (.) bu- bu- but (.) e (.) anyway as a company you have to train your employees some- sometimes (.) **let's say** the the taxi (.) drivers (1) e (.) if the (.) the customer's you then you would like they (.) talk with you and tell you everything (.) and if (.) <@> @@ <7@> <@> SAC </@> she just wants to sit there <@> @@@@ </@> <SAC> @@@@@@ </SAC> <@> so ho- how could this (.) taxi driver react? </@> @@@@@@ <SAC> @@@@@@ </SAC> <SCB> he's confused (.) so (.) <@> can I talk with you? Or should I </@> </SCB>

In another example, the lecturer discusses cultural differences between subsidiary and local companies in the context of joint ventures.

(12). SPF Lecturer: Yeah (.) but localization is tough (.) the- the- there is a challenge (1) you know (.) em (1) **let's say** (.) one company started subsidiary in China (.) and they start to use local the (.) the local (.) employees (1) and even the management 'cause they know the culture quite well (.) um (.) but then (.) y- y- y- you know these local employees they know their own culture very well (.) but they do not know the culture <SDH> of the buying company </SDH> <SDB> of the buying company </SDB> yeah that's true (.) that's true (.) so how do (.) do they (.) integrate the subsidiary into (.) th- the company? (.)

Thus, a single instantiation of an entity (i.e. a group of people) metonymically represents a whole class of similar entities, allowing for a generalisation relating to the whole class of entities. The relative flexibility of this kind of metonymy means that the exact members of the class do not need to be specified, leading to a looseness of meaning that the speaker is able to exploit if at any time, he or she needs to hedge a controversial viewpoint. The use of 'let's say' here allows the speaker to pull back if she is challenged about her views of taxi drivers or companies and their management of local culture, more specifically.

These examples expand the idea of what a 'vague category identifier' might be when talking about normalisation and generalisation. The meanings of words and strings such as 'sort of' and 'like' hovers between discourse marker, filler, literal and VL/metaphor flag. These different aspects of meaning come to the fore in different contexts of use and when used by different people. They are vague in and of themselves and this vagueness can be used strategically. The VL signals seen in this section serve a cushioning function; they set up 'comparisons' which may or may not actually be comparisons, they introduce categories whose boundaries are fuzzy and which can be changed at any moment, and they establish 'examples of categories' so that they do not have to name specific places or events that might cause offence.

4.4. Intensifiers

Intensifiers (*very, so, extremely, too, etc)* are similar to de-intensifiers, in that they have the function of vaguely expressing a degree of intensity, but here they increase the tone of speech. *Too* as an intensifier is most often found preceding adjectives, often for markedness in order to focus listeners' attention (Prihantoro, 2015). The use of *too* as an intensifier was used 20 times across both seminars. In one interesting case, *too* was used when discussing culture and cultural adaptation in a particularly sensitive thread, with other intensifiers (*really, totally)*.

(13). SDE: Yeah (1) in Sweden <SDA> I think </SDA> in Sweden (1) em (.) my landlords they're **really** (.) mad (.) I think I think I don't know there is (.) e (.) it is prohibited now to say like Christmas tree (1) it's WINTER tree (.) because of many cultures here <SDA> yeah </SDA> <SDB> uhu </SDB> (.) so Sweden is also usin- (.) e (.) losing its (.) em (.) I don't know chara- characteristics you know like a country (.)

SDA: Cultural <SDE> yeah </SDE> identity (.) yeah <SDE> because one </SDE> I think we are (.) like (.) some things we are adapting to **too much** (1) <SDE> yeah </SDE> instead of trying to (.) get people to adapt to our (.) culture <SPF> mhm </SPF> <SDE> yeah </SDE>

SDE: And many Swedish are (1) they are (.) I don't know (.) mad @@

SDA: I I think a lot of social media is (1) like troll accounts {SDA makes air quotes} like (.) a lot of loud voices from (.) minorities (.) so (3) <SDE> hm </SDE> <SPF> hm (.) hm </SPF> and you shouldn't listen **too much** to @@ <SDB> yeah </SDB> <@> to some people yes </@> <SDB> **totally** right </SDB> @@

The topics here are clearly sensitive in how they look to cultural identity, a principal theme in both seminars, in this case, cultural trends that are felt to be prohibitive to others (resulting in the inability to feel comfortable using certain words, like Christmas) or which are perceived as causing other cultures to "lose" national features, which propel the students into discussing how much adaption should be done from one culture to accommodate another ('adapting too much'), and even, whether or not some minority 'voices' should receive attention. The student here associates these minorities with 'troll accounts', another figurative expression which calls into question their validity, further emphasized with the use of air quotes, which previous research has shown to be a paralinguistic device with pragmatic functions. These pragmatic functions include similarities to vague language, as air quotes can be used to distance oneself from a given word or phrase as speakers use them to manage mismatched attributions revealing the speakers' attitude or alignment with the referent (Cirillo, 2019), such as casting doubt on it or even negating its validity. The use of air quotes here shows a mismatched alignment: they serve to reveal the speaker's doubt concerning the supposed anonymity of these troll accounts, underlining his belief that these accounts are actually immigrants protesting, rather than anonymous persons on the Internet.

Other cases of the intensifier *too* were seen in the first seminar, where in 8 out of 9 cases *too* occurred in a conversation about the service industry, and, indirectly, class relationships, where an overly servile attitude on the part of hospitality industry employees was being described as exaggerated and undesirable, as seen in the following two examples across several continued turns from students from Turkey, Nigeria and Kenya, which precede two direct metaphors about service and class. In the first part, the lecturer has launched a question about customer service, and the students are discussing how some attempts at service are exaggerated and thus unwanted, even 'annoying'.

(14). SPF Lecturer: True (.) yeah (.) find it (.) yeah but but if (.) yeah let's see the situation's like that (.) if you if you go to a restaurant to eat and then maybe every five minutes or ten minutes (.) erm (.) the the the waiter or waitress would come to you and ask you do do do you need any help? (.) do (.) erm (.) yeah what do you think about food or (.) th- this kind of (.) th- they are very kind (.) <SQB> yes </SQB> so what do you think this kind of (.) erm (.) service (.) do you like it or?

SQB: Actually I used to do it (.) but sometimes in Turkey for example (.) they (.) erm (.) emphasize this kindness **too much** and (.) erm (.) there's some (.) **like** servant (.) and staff relationship between customer and (.) employee and I don't like it (.) so much for example in France (.) the waiters are not so (.) kind to you because they do their job <all> @@@@@@ </all> but it's (.) <SCB> get your food </SCB> (.) yeah (.) they do their job (.) <@> and there's no need extra kindness </@> <all> @@@@@@ </all> <SPF> <@>

Seven turns later, less than a minute later in the conversation, another student uses this intensifier again to continue the description of customer service as exaggerated.

(15). SGK: Ehm (.) for me I don't like it (.) <SPF Lecturer> no < SPF Lecturer > because in Africa they do that a lot (.) like it's **too much** (.) they are talking you and (.) like (.) I noticed that in Europe (.) like if you go to a restaurant (.) like you have to order your food (1) but in Africa you sit like a King and Queen (.) they come to meet you and ask you where you want to eat (.) and when I am in restaurants (.) <clears throat> you will see the (.) I won't call it personnel the gates man (.) the (.) I won't call it personnel watchman the person who opens the door for you (.) he starts saluting you (.) being as in (.) <un> xxx </un> would you like me to carry your bag (.) like it's **too much** and you (.) as the customer you are tempted to leave money like they got extra amounts of their attention and it's not right cause (.) things like that get irritating to customers (.) you will see (.) erm (.) people starting to get familiar with you (.) some even go to the extra like (.) do you mind a picture or something (.) it's just nuts (2) <SQD> it's **too much** <SQD> it's **too much** (.) yeah that's right (.)

It is interesting to note that both examples take place in countries with significant gaps between upper and lower economic classes: Turkey, Nigeria and Kenya, and each student makes this reference as one of personal experience where they indicate that they feel uncomfortable being fawned over, so that it may be considered a statement about themselves as much as the nature of service in that country. Making such personal statements to other classmates about experiences in high-end establishments might be considered snobby, and the use of intensifiers in combination with the metaphor flag 'like' acts as a class leveller for the sensitive topic of class, and also serves to tune the listener for the direct metaphors to come, in the case of "*you sit like a King and Queen*".

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented an in-depth, qualitative analysis of the ways in which students and their lecturer, in two EMI classes at the post-graduate level, made strategic use of ambiguously figurative VL in order to negotiate sensitive topics involving race, culture and class. We have seen that VL and figurative language have much in common and that they interact in a variety of ways. At times VL is used to introduce metaphor or metonymy and at other times metaphor or metonymy are used to introduce VL (i.e. to 'tune for flexibility'). In other cases, the metaphor or metonym constitutes the VL use as it is (perhaps intentionally) unclear whether a metaphoric reading was intended, or a metonymic one, or neither. Looking at how metaphor, metonymy and VL interact in these ways has allowed us to provide a more nuanced picture of how L2 participants negotiate these sensitive topics in an EMI learning environment.

Our findings suggest that the students in these classes are able to skillfully combine VL, metaphor and metonymy and to use them as cushioning devices, exploiting the elasticity functions that these types of language provide in order to give themselves and their fellow students space to find their own meaning, and to prevent them from being boxed into a corner or pinned down to a specific idea. Our findings have revealed a level of pragmatic sophistication that may have been missed if we had considered only metaphor, metonymy or VL in isolation.

In performing our analysis, we have noted a degree of fuzziness around some of the categories that have been proposed in the literature on both VL and figurative language. We had to make a small adjustment to Zhang's (2011) taxonomy of VL functions, by merging 'vague category identifiers' with 'de-intensifiers', as the distinction between the two could not be ascertained in practice. Similarly, the distinction between metaphor and metonymy in our data was by no means clear cut, and even within metaphor the idea of 'class inclusion' versus 'comparison' was strategically manipulated through the use of 'like', 'kind of' and 'sort of'. Here the participants were able to hover between the idea that X was 'an example of' Y, and simply say that it was 'like' Y′, leaving the interpretation open to the interlocutor. These tuning devices appeared to cut across several categories, partly because the categories themselves overlap.

We also found in our analysis that there were shades of sensitivity in these discussions, which affected the use of ambiguously figurative VL. Discussions of race are understandably very sensitive but other topics are more 'marginally' sensitive (e.g. 'China opening up'). The degree of sensitivity that is attached to culture varies according to context and in these two classrooms, as some of the examples show, the strategic use of ambiguously figurative VL in discussions of culture appeared to be affected by the fact that the lecturer was Chinese and the students were culturally and racially diverse.

The high levels of pragmatic competence displayed by these EMI students in their L2 may be a reflection of the fact that they have experience discussing complex, nuanced and controversial topics in multicultural settings where differing opinions are likely to be held by their classmates. It may also be the case that they transferred many of these pragmatics skills from their L1, and that the ways in which nuance is expressed through the use of ambiguously figurative VL in English resemble to some extent the ways in which it is expressed in their L1s. In order to disambiguate these two possible explanations, and to identify the reasons why students find appropriate ways of expressing nuance in the L2, it would be interesting to compare the discussions explored in this paper with discussions of similar topics by students in monolingual and monocultural settings that correspond to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students in this study. Such a comparison could potentially provide valuable insights into the opportunities that are provided by student exchanges and study abroad programmes for the development of L2 pragmatic competence.

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Declaration of competing interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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