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A CONTRASTIVE APPROACH TO VAGUE NOUNS

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ABSTRACT

A very general way of denoting vagueness in language is by means of nouns with a maximally unspecific meaning, such as thing. In modern Norwegian, there is a range of nouns that can fill this function, notably ting, sak and greie, all of which may to some degree correspond to English thing. This chapter investigates recent trends in the use of such unspecific nouns, showing how they contribute to overall vagueness and non-commitment in language. Five different corpora of spoken Norwegian form the empirical basis of the investigation. In addition to their general use as placeholders, these nouns serve a range of different functions, as part of the set-marking tags, in presentative constructions and in what appears to be more specialised formulaic uses. The pattern of a possessive determiner followed by the singular form of a vague noun forms a common use in which the noun may take on more specific meanings, often with habitual connotations, in the direction of ‘interest’, or ‘speciality’.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vagueness is an essential property of much, if not all, human communication. Vague features of language are used by speakers for a variety of purposes. Choosing a vague expression instead of a more precise one may have several motivations and does not necessarily entail any uncertainty on the part of the speaker. A speaker may, for example, opt for a vague description as part of a cooperative strategy to avoid providing more information than is required in a communicative situation. This can be seen as a way of reducing the processing costs of the
utterance and as an economical strategy beneficial to both the speaker and the hearer. Vague items may also be used as part of a politeness strategy in which the speaker avoids sounding superior or pedantic. Therefore, use of vague expressions, in whatever form, is to be expected in naturally occurring conversation.

One way of being vague is by means of nouns whose meaning is maximally unspecific, that is to say, they are essentially void of lexical features but can be used to refer to any object or phenomenon, examples being thing in English or ting in Norwegian.¹ The aim of this chapter is to present the use and function of a set of such vague nouns in Norwegian, with reference to their English counterparts. The background for the interest in this topic is the observation that many languages have several nouns that denote vagueness in similar ways, an observation which begs the question – to what extent are vague nouns comparable across languages, and to what extent are vague nouns interchangeable within one language? Are their meanings and functions stable or subject to diachronic change? These are issues that I want to address in this chapter.

Vague nouns can be illustrated by the following examples.

(1) det er en av de tingene jeg husker (NoTa:004)
   ‘that is one of the things I remember’
(2) baksnakking er jo mest typisk jenteting (UNO)
   ‘slander is most typically a girl’s thing’
(3) tingen er at vi må snakke mer (UNO)
   ‘the thing is that we must talk more’
(4) skikkelig sånn tett med bilder og ting (UNO)
   ‘really packed with pictures and things’

The examples show that a Norwegian vague noun like thing can be used for a variety of purposes, to be described in more detail in the following section. But Norwegian users also have other vague nouns at their disposal.

(5) for vi skal flytte og da har vi fått masse sårne greier fra internett (UNO)
   ‘cos we’re moving and we have got lots of stuff from the internet’
(6) ‘ja det betyr at du får ikke lenger disse herre sakene i posthyllene dine (NoTa:123)
   yes that means that you no longer get these kind of things in your pigeonhole’
(7) men jeg hadde tingene mine og sånt her i juni liksom (NoTa:026)
   ‘but I had my things and stuff here in June’

¹ These are sometimes also referred to as ‘placeholder words’ (Channell, 1994) or ‘general nouns’ (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Johansson, 2007). Strictly speaking, a noun like thing is not in itself vague, but semantically generic. I use the term ‘vague noun’ as shorthand for maximally generic nouns that contribute to the vagueness of utterances.