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

Diana Hornoiu
Ovidius University of Constanța

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 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 of conversations recorded and transcribed within the framework of conversation analysis.*

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

1. Introduction

It is generally assumed that vague expressions take on negative connotations. Such forms are stigmatized because they are "assumed to reflect vague and inexplicit speech" (Dines 1980: 19). The negative value attached to the use of vague language seems to come from a feeling that vagueness in reference stems from vagueness in thinking, and hence stupidity. Those who stigmatize the use of vague expressions embrace the view that language is ideally precise. However, this is a rather plain view of what is maximally efficient in communication. Stubbs (1986) argues that, in itself, precise language is not necessarily more efficient than vague language. As Williamson (1994: 4869) argues, in certain contexts "vagueness is a desirable feature of natural languages.

Channell (1994: 3) argues a more general point, that "vagueness in language is neither all 'bad' nor all 'good'. What matters is that vague language is used appropriately". Vague words often suffice for the purpose in hand, and too much precision can lead to time wasting and inflexibility". The ability to vary the precision of utterances and to use them in appropriate contexts is thus part of the speaker's communicative competence. An understanding of the nature and the role of vagueness in language use is critical to an understanding of language itself.

This paper proposes an interactional approach to the concept of vagueness. Vagueness is not only an inherent feature of natural language but also an interactional strategy. Speakers are faced with a number of communicative tasks, and they are vague for strategic reasons. Varying the level of vagueness may help guide the addressee to make the intended interpretation of entities and events and draw the intended meaning from them.

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

In my analysis, I will focus on one communicative task of naturally occurring conversations: evoking appropriate mental representations of people and places. The aim of the paper is two-fold. Firstly, it determines ways in which these vague referring expressions are not just poor or good-enough substitutes for precise expressions, but are preferable in some contexts due to their greater efficiency (in terms of Sperber and Wilson 1995: 46-48). Secondly, it determines ways in which vague expressions might actually carry meanings different from, and more relevant than, precise expressions, i.e. functions served by vagueness, other than simple efficiency.

2. Vagueness and the relevance theory

In their relevance theory, Sperber and Wilson (1991: 540) treat vagueness, or looseness, in their terminology, as a natural language of language use. They argue that "loose uses are non-literal uses" of language "based on resemblance relations among representations" (Sperber and Wilson 1991: 546). In general, an utterance is said to express a proposition. As such it conveys some state of affairs which constitute the truth conditions of this proposition. However, utterances are not limited to the representation of state of affairs. Sperber and Wilson argue that their meaning relies on resemblance relations. Thus, an utterance can also be used to represent any other phenomenon which it resembles in some respects. In order to distinguish between these two aspects of representation, namely representation in virtue of truth-conditions and representation in virtue of resemblance relations, Sperber and Wilson call the former 'description' and the latter 'interpretation'. Descriptively, an utterance represents the truth-conditions of the proposition. Interpretively, an utterance represents its resemblance in content. Vague uses or loose uses are said to involve interpretive rather than descriptive dimensions of language use (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 546).

Resemblance is defined as the similarity of representations concerning their content. The relationship between the two similar representations is called 'interpretive resemblance'. 'Interpretive resemblance' is a comparative notion. On the other hand, the degree of resemblance can be very high, e.g. in the case of a direct quotation of another utterance, or it may be very low, e.g. in the case of a summary of some else's utterance or utterances. In each case, the addressee is expected to "identify the respects in which the resemblance holds" (Blakemore, 1992: 104).

Sperber and Wilson take the notion of interpretive resemblance one step further and apply it to intrinsic properties of thoughts. They argue that "there is an even more essential interpretive use of utterances: on a more fundamental level, every utterance is used to represent a thought of the speaker's" (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 230). From this point of view, an utterance always relies on resemblance relations. This includes the underlying assumption that an utterance can never have the same contextual and analytical implication as the thought entertained by the speaker. Thus, every utterance is only an approximation to the very thought the speaker has in mind.

The addressee cannot expect that the meaning the speaker wants to convey is always a literal one. A literal interpretation is neither always necessary nor always appropriate for successful communication. Regarding vague uses of language, the speaker entertains only some of the analytical and conceptual implications of the proposition. The addressee is expected to construct a subset of analytical and contextual implications as intended by the speaker in order to achieve shared discourse goals. A vague utterance is not regarded as 'approximately true'. A vague proposition generally bears a literal truth-conditional meaning. According to Sperber and Wilson, "the truth-conditional relation between propositions and the state of affairs they

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

represent remains unaltered: what varies is how closely the proposition expressed is taken to represent the speaker's thought" (Sperber and Wilson, 1991: 564). Vague expressions may guide listeners to find the best match for the communicated and the intended meaning.

3. Database and methodology

The excerpts analysed in this paper are taken from a ten-hour corpus of face-to-face naturally occurring conversation that I recorded as part of a research project comprising both mixed and same-sex interactions with a view to exploring the speaking practices of Romanian women and men in both formal and informal settings (Hornoiu 2007). The participants include twenty-four individuals (twenty females and four males), whose ages ranged from thirteen to sixty-four (including ten adolescents, eight in their twenties, two in their thirties, three in their forties, and one in her sixties. The primary database was collected with one Panasonic MiniCassette Recorder (RQ-L30).

My primary concern in gathering the data on informal conversation has been to avoid the constraints inherent in a one-to-one interview where the interviewer is present. Therefore I have chosen not to be present while the informants were engaged in conversation hoping that the constraints stemming from the informants' knowledge that they are being observed can be alleviated.

I asked some of the participants to pair up with their same-sex best friend and talk about 'stuff' in a familiar setting; the topic for discussion, however, was up to the informants. The choice to group them in dyads rather than in triads or in even larger groups was made with the view to avoiding the technical problem of recording each speaker on a different track. On the other hand, I have chosen to interview best friends because I hold the view that the closest we can come to getting natural speech in an interview situation is by interviewing *groups of peer*. This type of interview is the context most conducive to obtaining casual speech since the normal patterns of group interaction can direct attention away from the tape recorder.

All those involved in this project provided information on their social background and granted permission for the data to be used for linguistic analysis. Throughout the process, participants were free to edit and delete material as they wished. By handing over control of the recording process in this way, I managed to develop a relationship with my informants based on mutual trust which, over a period of time, made it easy for the participants to ignore the recording equipment. As a result, in return for guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, the informants trusted me with a wide range of fascinating material. All names are fictionalised to protect participants' identity.

4. The analysis of the data

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. However, speakers only aim to individuate discourse entities to a degree that is sufficient for the current purposes of the talk exchange. How much individuation is needed depends on the situation and the discourse entities involved. In some speech events and for some discourse entities it is essential that the addressee can uniquely identify the intended referent. In other cases, however, a vague characterization may not only be sufficient, but also preferable. We take the view that the most relevant referring expression is the one that will help the addressee both identify the referent to the right level of individuation and give it the appropriate level of focus or foregrounding.

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

Generally it is difficult for the analyst to determine how precise the mental images are that speaker and addressee entertain of a certain discourse entity. We may assume that, as long as the conversation proceeds smoothly, the addressee has managed successfully to access appropriate mental images, but there is no way of establishing how close they are to the respective mental images intended by the speaker. On some occasions, the mental images, even though entirely wrong, will not disrupt the conversation.

4.1. Reference to animate in inanimate entities

The analysis of the data has shown that speakers varied the vagueness of referring expressions according to their current purposes. In **excerpt 1**, Iulia uses the demonstrative pronoun *asta/astea* ("this/these") to refer in less specific way to various entities. In lines 1 to 3 Iulia starts telling her friend Maria a story about an acquaintance of her sister-in-law's who one night called them at a very late hour. In her story, the first occurrence of *asta* ("this") refers to an acquaintance of her sister-in-law's. Rather than using a proper name accompanied by some more specific way of establishing the identity of the referent, she is referring to the respective lady in a vague manner by using the noun phrase *tipa asta* ("this lady") in line 1. This is an instance of reminder deixis (Mey 1993) in which the discourse entity is referred to in a vague way. *Tipa asta* ("this lady") is used to refer to 'a certain lady' whose identity needs no further introduction because either her identity is of no interest to the story, or her identity is established in some other way. In line 2 she supplies just one piece of information regarding the profession of the respective lady (*e tot medic* "she's a physician as well"). The other two occurrences of the demonstrative pronoun refer to some nose drops (in line 15) and the label on the bottle containing the respective nose drops (in line 19). Although the addressee can easily and correctly establish the identity of two distinct referents, the way the reference is made is less than specific in the first place. The speaker's first choice is a rather vague way of referring to entities, both in terms of syntactic and semantic cues, which is then later made explicit by means of a cataphoric noun phrase in line 21 (*pe etichetă*, "at the label"). The specific reference is the second choice, after the use of a vague referring expression. Presumably, this strategy is used in order to increase the dramatic effect of the story.

Excerpt 1

1 Iulia: să vezi o sună **tipa asta**
wait and see what she did then. well, this lady calls her
2 <e tot medic
she's a physician as well
3 şi o sună pe alina
and she calls alina
4 cât era? unşpe noaptea cît era?
what time was it? eleven at night what was it?
5 Alina: °unşpe jumate doişpe (nici nu ştiu)°
half past eleven twelve (I don't know)
6 Iulia: da (.)
yes
7 Iulia: **[**înnebunită ia**]** povesteşte-i tu=
mad, come on, you tell her,

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

8 Alina: **[**speria:tă că-**]**
scared that
9 Alina: = în loc să-i pună picături de nas cu Olinth
instead of giving him Olinth nose drops
10 Alina: pentru băiţelu' ei i-a pus ALte tipuri de picături tot pentru nas
for her little boy, she gave him ANOTHER kind of nose drops
11 da' hhh cu hhh un hhh antihistaminic care era pentru adulţi
but hhh with hhh another hhh type of antihistamine which was for adults
12 Maria: **[**AOleu
AY
13 Alina: **[**VA:i dispera:tă săra:ca dispera:tă
AY, poor thing, she was desperate
14 °la unşpe jumate° 'ce se poate întâmpla?
at eleven thirty 'what could happen?
15 ↑Ali:na de trei zile îi pun din **astea' [**((laughs))
Alina: I've been giving him these for three days'
16 Maria: **[**((laughs))
17 Maria: a::: şi nu şi-a dat seama?
a::, and she didn't realize?
18 Alina: nu şi-a ↓dat seama
she didn't realize
19 şi-n seara a:ia ce-o::: fi făcut-o să se uite **[pe asta]**
and that night what made her look at this
20 Maria: **[**>da' bine că-<**]**
well it's good that
21 Alina: pe etichetă pentru că ea până atunci îi punea şi ştia că avea flaconu' la fel
da' eticheta– pe etichetă scria ↓altceva=
at the label. because she had been giving him before and she knew that the bottle was the same but the label - the label read something else

In **excerpt 2** Iulia introduces the topic for discussion, in line 1, by making use of a couple of phatic questions that elicit details about a concert Maria's husband was organizing at the time of recording. In supplying the elicited information, Maria chooses to refer to the bands that are going to perform in the concert in vague terms by using an informal form of the demonstrative pronoun ("these (people), i.e. they") in lines 4, 5 and 6: *aleargă ca nebunu' pînă vin **ăia*** ("he's running around like crazy until they come"), *ia-**i** p-**ăia** du-**i** la hotel pune-**i** la mîncare* ("pick them up, take them to the hotel, to eat"), *du-**i** să facă probe du-**i** să facă aia* ("take them to rehearsal, take them to do that and that"). It is safe to argue that Maria uses a less precise way of referring to people in order focus on the activities that Bogdan is supposed to do in organizing the concert and to make her argument more convincing by providing evidence as to how busy Bogdan is. A vague reference to persons allows her to foreground the activities her husband is being engaged in and to address, in a more relevant way, Iulia's first question (*bogdan ce face?* "bogdan? what is he doing?").

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

Excerpt 2

1 Iulia: bogdan? = ce face? a terminat cu concertu'?=
bogdan? what is he doing? has he finished with the concert?
2 Maria: =eh bogdan = nu sîmbătă
eh, bogdan no, on Saturday
3 Iulia: =aha
aha
4 Maria: tre' să îţi dai seama că aleargă ca nebunu' pînă vin **ăia**
you've got to know he's running around like crazy until they come
5 ia-**i** p-**ăia** du-**i** la hotel pune-**i** la mîncare pînă nu ştiu ce
pick them up, take them to the hotel, to eat 'til I don't know what
6 du-**i** să **[**facă probe du-**i** să facă aia
take them to rehearsal, take them to do that and that
7 Iulia: **[**pe cine pe cine la hotel?
whom whom is he taking to the hotel?
8 Maria: păi p-**ăia care cîntă**
well, the singers
9 Iulia: da' ce vin din ţară? **trupe**?
why, are they coming from other parts of the country? bands?
10 Maria: păi vin din ţară
well, they're coming from other parts of the country
11 **unii vin din timişoara**
some are coming from Timişoara
12 **unii vin din bucureşti**
some are coming from Bucharest
13 **unii vin din** (**craiova**)
some are coming from (Craiova)

After a couple of more questions whose main function is to keep the flow of conversation going rather than to ask for information or clarification, proving thus Iulia's interest in the topic, Iulia enquires in line 9 about the whereabouts of the bands performing in the concert (*vin din ţară*? trupe? 'are they coming from other parts of the country? bands?'). Maria ratifies Iulia's contribution in line 9 by repeating it in line 10 (*vin din ţară* 'there are coming from other parts of the country') and incorporating it into her narrative and then she refers in a more precise way to the singers performing in the concert by mentioning the cities they come from, in lines 11-13: *unii vin din timişoara* ("some are coming from Timişoara"), *unii vin din bucureşti* ("some are coming from Bucharest"), *unii vin din craiova* ("some are coming from Craiova").

Excerpt 3 is a continuation of excerpt 2. In lines 11-13 of excerpt 2 and 8-10 of excerpt 3, (separated by a page and a half of transcript) Maria repeats the clauses with slight variation. This time she shifts from vague pronominal expressions such ăia ("they/those"), *unii* ("some") or *ăştia* ("these") to more a precise noun phrase: *o trupă vine din bucureşti* ("a band comes from Bucharest"), *o trupă vine din timişoara* ("a band comes from Timişoara"). By restating her contribution, she does two things. Firstly, she foregrounds the singers performing in the concert, thus addressing in a relevant way the second question Iulia asked at the beginning of the

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

conversation, in line 1 of excerpt 2 (*a terminat cu concertu'*? – "has he finished with the concert?"). In so doing, she abides by the Gricean maxims of Relation (Be relevant) and Manner (Be orderly). Secondly, she continues to take part in conversation even though she has nothing new to add. Thus, both the shifts in foregrounding to match the relevance of the answers to the questions and the repetitions meant to keep the flow of conversation flowing are used for strategic purposes to signal Maris's willingness to interact, where talk itself is a sign of involvement, and her interest in the topic raised by her Iulia.

Excerpt 3

1 Maria: şi le dau **ăstora** le dau drumu' şi cazare ştii
and they're paying for their travel and accommodation, you know
2 **[**drumu' cazare şi masă
travel, accommodation and meals
3 Iulia: **[**drumu' le plătesc le plătesc drumu' **la ăştia**
travel expenses they cover travel expenses for them
4 Maria: mhm
mhm
5 Iulia: da
yes
6 Maria: sînt vreo trei care vin
about three are coming
7 unu vine din bucuresti
one comes from Bucharest
8 deci **o trupă vine din bucureşti**
so a band comes from Bucharest
9 **o trupă vine din timişoara**
a band comes from Timişoara
10 **şi o trupă (nu-ş' de unde vine)**
and a band (don't know where from)

4.2. Reference to places

Conversationalists also refer to place names. At first sight, proper nouns referring to places seem to be linguistic expressions that allow the identification of the referent with maximum precision. One might think that there is one obvious way to name a place. However, the speaker has at his disposal a variety of expressions with a wide range of precision. In response to the question "Where do you live?" it may be much too specific, just right or not nearly specific enough to say the name of the city "Constanța", or "in a city in Southeast Romania" or "on the Romanian Black Sea coast", or a combination of such choices such as "Constanța, a city on the Romanian Black Sea coast". Such choices depend on whether the question is asked by a chance acquaintance on a travel through Europe or Romania, by someone familiar with locations in Southeast Romania, or with the Romanian Black Sea coast or by a police officer in Constanța itself.

The protagonists in **excerpt 4** belong in different age groups and have different educational background. A is a teacher in her sixties while B is a nurse in her forties and she regularly helps A with the housework. Despite this asymmetry in social status, their conversational exchange resembles a conversation between close friends displaying most of the

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

positive politeness strategies that are commonly analyzed as social accelerators in friendly talk. In **excerpt 4**, B recounts a journey in the countryside. The story is elicited by A in line 1 where she uses a **news-up-date** (*şi CUM a fost la brăila la: VIe?* 'and how was it at brăila, at the vineyard?')**,** a speech act characteristic of small talk and particularly frequent in all-female conversational discourse. B's answer in line 2 (*no:::că dacă vă povestesc faceţi un roman*, "well if I tell you you can write a novel") prefaces the story and shows her as being oriented towards a narrative rich in details.

The story elicited would seem an obvious opportunity for participants to simply give conventional names to places. In fact, A does use the proper name Brăila, allowing thus any recipient familiar with the city to uniquely establish the identity of the referent. However, there is some degree of ambiguity even in the use this proper name since it may refer to the city or the county of Brăila. The storyteller, on the other hand, makes use of the proper name Cireșu in addition to referring to her destination in such vague terms as *la țară* ("to the countryside" – line 4), *la soacră-mea* ("to my mother-in-law's" – line 16). Obviously, B knows the name, but she may suspect that the addressee would not recognize it, or would recognize it with some difficulty.

It is safe to assume that one reason for which she chooses to use vague expressions to the detriment of the more precise ones would be that she spares her conversationalist partner the processing effort required for the identification of the referent with a view to foregrounding the evocative details of the story. Placing the focus on such personal details not only makes the story more vivid, but also increases the participants' interest in the story and in their relationship that is constructed through talk. The vague expressions used have more relevant implications than would a precise place name. *La țară la soacră-mea* ("to the countryside, to my mother-in-law's") conveys something of the purpose of the trip that, whereas a place name would probably not. Additionally, speaker B uses four other place descriptions *nu e sat* ("there's no village"), *cîmp cîmp cîmp* ("just fields and fields all around"), *cîteva stîne* ("a few sheep folds"), *vreo patru stîne* ("about four sheep folds") that, although vague in terms of reference, convey a better sense of the trip than the proper names Brăila and Cireșu.

The relevance these vague expressions have for the current purpose of the talk exchange is acknowledged by speaker A who is equally involved in the construction of a scene that evokes familiar experiences by supplying her own comments, in lines 1 and 12 (*la vie*, *o șosea în cîmp* "at the vineyard", "a road in the field"), that either provide or elicits further details. Thus, both the speaker and addressee are involved in the construction of shared meaning through the use of the details provided by vague, less conventional place names that conjure up images of familiar experiences. This type of co-constructed meaning is a positive politeness strategy that reinforces the group cohesion, on the one hand, and the protagonists' involvement in the conversation and the relationship, on the other.

Excerpt 4

1 A: şi CUM a fost **la brăila la: VIe**?
and how was it at braila at the vineyard ?
2 B: no::::că dacă vă povestesc faceţi un roman
well if I tell you you can write a novel
3 A: ha ha ha poate că mă pregătesc să scriu romanu
ha ha ha maybe I am going to write that novel

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

4 B: am plecat joi deci joi a fost o săptămînă de cînd am plecat **la ţară**
we left on Thursday, so on Thursday it was one week since we'd gone to the countryside
(…)
5 B: şi-am ajuns la nouă şi jumate în **cireşu'**
and we got to ciresu' at nine fifty
6 A: seara
in the evening
7 B: şi de la nouă şi jumate ia-o pă JOS
and from nine thirty we started walking
8 A: şi::: e drum aşa: sau mergeţi peste cîmp aşa ?
and is there a road, or you go across the field?
9 B: e: asfalt
it's paved
10 A: e asfalt
it's paved
11 B: da dar întuNEric. Nu e: deci **nu e SAT cîmp cîmp cîmp**
yes, but it was dark there's no village, just fields and fields all around
12 A: **o şosea: în [cîmp**
a road in the field
13 B: **[**sînt **cîteva stîne** de oi. **vreo patru stîne**
there are a few sheep folds about four sheep folds
14 se-auzeau cîinii [lătrînd
you could hear the dogs barking
15 A: **[**cîinii altă belea
the dogs, another trouble
16 B: aşa şi-am ajuns **la soacră-mea** la doisprezece şi un sfert
and so we got to my mother-in-law's at a quarter past twelve
17 A: DOAmne
god
18 B: băşici pă TĂLpi aveam
my feet were in blisters

(Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu 2002)

The excerpt in (4) shows both participants to be oriented towards "concreteness and imageability" (Chafe 1984: 1099) which lends them a sense of particularity. The event described is represented as a scene. The numerous details supplied by the speaker realised as vague referring expressions inspire the addressee to create sounds and scenes in their minds, scenes in which the described characters, objects and actions figure. Thus, it is in the individual imagination that meaning is constructed. At an interactional level these vague referring expressions are more efficient and evocative of familiar experiences and shared meaning than precise proper nouns would be. It is the creation of such *shared meaning* that turns a collection of individuals into a *community* and unites individuals in relationships giving thus cohesion to the group.

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

5. Conclusions

Vague expressions are pervasive in naturally occurring conversational discourse where they serve a variety of functions. According to the analysis of examples of our corpus, they are not just a poor substitute of a precise term. Rather they convey meaning that is different from, and more relevant than a precise expression would.

Vague expressions play an important role in managing conversational implicature, especially relevance-related implicature. They may function as focusing devices, directing the addressee's attention to the most relevant information. They may guide the addressee in interpreting appropriateness of fit of an entity to a conceptual category. Additionally, they may place descriptions on a scale and thus provide a reference point that is instrumental in drawing inferences.

Finally, vague expressions may serve various social functions. They may serve as positive politeness strategies softening implicit complaints or expressions that may trigger disagreement. They also provide a way of establishing social bond by invoking shared knowledge and experiences.

Transcription symbols

The transcription conventions used for transcribing the conversations analyzed in this paper are adopted with some changes from Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson (1996: 461-65). One important difference between these conventions and the ones cited in our book is that capital letters are neither used in the beginning of turns nor for new turn constructional units. Nor are they used at the beginning of proper nouns. Capital letters are used to indicate some form of emphasis.

The conversations have been transcribed phonetically. Thus I depart from some of the current spelling rules that apply to the letters **î/â** in medial position. I use the letter â only in such words as *român/românesc/românește/România*. Similarly, I use two variants for the verbal forms of *a fi* (to be) in first person singular and plural and in second and third persons plural (sînt/sunt; sîntem/suntem; sînteți/sunteți; sînt/sunt) depending on how our informants pronounce these forms.

[Separate left brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances
[by different speakers, indicate the point of overlap onset.

] Separate right square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with
] utterances by different speakers, indicates a point at which two overlapping utterances both end.

= Equal signs come in pairs: one at the end of a line and another at the start of the next line or one line shortly thereafter. They are used to indicate the following:

1. If the two lines connected by equal signs are by the same speaker, then there was a single continuous utterance, with no break or pause, which was broken up in order to accommodate the placement of overlapping talk.
2. If the lines connected by two equal signs are by different speakers, then the second followed the first with no discernable silence between them or was lathed to it.

(0.5) Numbers in parentheses indicate silence, approximately represented in tenths of a second. Silences may be marked within an utterance or between utterances.

(.) A dot in parentheses indicates a "micropause", hearable but not readily measurable, usually less than 2 tenths a second.

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

The punctuation marks are not used grammatically, but to indicate intonation.

. The period indicates a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.

? Similarly, a question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily an interrogative sentence.

, A comma indicates continuing intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.

:: Colons are used to indicate the prolongation or stretching of the sound just preceding them. The more colons, the longer the stretching. On the other hand, graphically stretching a word on the page by inserting blank spaces between the letters does not indicate how it was pronounced; it is used to allow alignment with overlapping talk.

becau- A hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption, often done with a glottal or dental stop.

word Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis either by increase loudness or higher pitch. The more underlining, the greater the emphasis.

WOrd Upper case indicates especially loud talk; the louder, the more letters in upper case.

WOrd In extreme cases, upper case may be underlined.

° The degree sign indicates that the talk following is marked as being quiet or soft.

°**word**° When there are two degree signs, the talk between them is marked as being softer than the talk around it.

w**o:**rd If the letter(s) preceding a colon is/are underlined, then there is an inflected *falling* intonation contour on the vowel (you can hear the pitch turn downward).

wo**:**rd If a colon is itself underlined, the there is an inflected *rising* intonation contour on the vowel (i.e., you can hear the pitch turn upward).

↑↓ The up and down arrows mark sharper rises or falls in pitch than would be indicated by combinations of colons and underlining, or they may mark a whole shift or resetting of pitch register at which the talk is being produced.

> < The combinations "more than" and "less than" symbols indicates that the talk between
< > them is compressed or rushed. Used in the reverse order, they can indicate that a stretch of talk is markedly slowed or drawn out.

< The "less than" symbol by itself indicates that the immediately following talk is "jump-started" i.e. sounds like it starts with a rush.

(cough)) Double are used to mark the transcriber's description of events, rather than representations of them.

(word) When all or part of an utterance is in parentheses, or the speaker identification is, this indicates uncertainty on the part of the transcriber, but represents a likely possibility.

( ) Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but no hearing, or in some cases speaker identification, can be achieved.

(bu::t)/ Two parentheses separated by a slash represent alternative hearings of the same spate of talk

(goo:d)

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)

References

Blakemore, Diane. *Understanding Utterances*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

Brown, Penelope and Levinson, Stephen. *Politeness: some universals in language usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Chafe, Wallace. "Integration and involvement in spoken and written language". Borbe, Tasso (ed.) *Semiotics unfolding*, Berlin: Mouton, 1095-1102, 1984.

Channell, Joanna. *Vague Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Dines, Elizabeth."Variation in Discourse – and stuff like that". *Language in Society* **1**, pp. 13-31, 1980.

Hornoiu, Diana. "Language and Gender An Analysis of Conversational Discourse in English and Romanian", University of Bucharest, PhD dissertation, Ms, 2007.

Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, Liliana. (ed.), *Interactiunea verbală în limba română actuală. Corpus selectiv: Schiță de tipologie*, Bucuresti: Editura Universității București, 2002.

Mey, Jacob. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*, Blackwell, 1993.

Ochs, Elinor, Schegloff, Emanuel and Thompson, Sandra. (eds.) *Interaction and Grammar*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Sperber, Dan and Wilson, Deirdre. "Loose talk". Davis, S (Ed.) *Pragmatics. A Reader*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 540-549, 1991.

Sperber, Dan and Wilson, Deirdre. *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, second ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

Stubbs, Michael. "A matter of prolonged fieldwork: notes towards a modal grammar of English". *Applied Linguistics*, 7 (1), 1-25, 1986.

Williamson, Timothy. "Vagueness". Asher, R., Simpson, J. (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp. 4869-4871, 1994.

BDD-A22754 © 2014 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 21:11:48 UTC)