

On keeping one's hedges in order

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WE ARE so used to reading about the same old topics, in manuals of English usage – split infinitives, *will* and *shall*, *between you and me*, and the like – that it's easy to forget there are hundreds of usage issues which receive next to no attention at all. An article by Betty Lou Dubois in a recent issue of *Language in Society* has focused on one of them. It's an analysis of the way scientists use numerical expressions in an imprecise way, as they talk about their subject, and it reminds me that linguistic imprecision is a topic about which we could usefully be more precise.

Imprecision, like ambiguity and repetitiveness (see *ET14*), is one of those notions which tends to be immediately and unthinkingly condemned. If someone is being imprecise, that must be bad. But it turns out, when we look carefully at the way people talk and write, that there are numerous contexts where a modicum of imprecision is desirable or even essential. Moreover, most of it is rarely noticed. This is a point I have always suspected for everyday informal conversation. What I found particularly interesting about Dubois' article was to see how frequent and important the phenomenon is in scientific expression.

What Dubois has done is classify all the imprecise expressions (or 'hedges', as these are often called, in the linguistics literature) found in a series of slide talks given at a professional biomedical meeting. There were a large number of them, and they displayed a considerable range. *About* was by far the commonest (as in *about 10 per cent of the animals developed the virus*), but there were many others.

Most of the hedges preceded the figure: almost 10%, approximately 10%, around 10%, close to 10%, nearly 10%, of the order of 10%, some 10%, somewhere around 10%, something like 10%.

Some followed it: 10% or more, 10% or so, 10% plus or minus, 10% nearly.

And there were several cases where more than one hedge was used in the same phrase: something of the order of 10%, about a little over 10%, about 10% or so, around 10% or more.

I suspect there are limits to this process, though I don't know what they are. More than two hedges are unlikely, to my mind, though I don't suppose we can completely rule out the possibility of such phrases as 'something of the order of about 10% or so, more or less'!

The hedges in Dubois' article are only a fraction of what is available in the language. A few moments' reflection brings to mind the following, in addition to the above: roughly, practically, all but, in the region of, thereabouts, hard on, well nigh, as good as, within an ace of, verging on, virtually, perhaps, usually, invariably, sort of, kind of . . .

There must be hundreds more. They range from the highly formal (such as *circa*) to the highly informal (such as *say – we'll need something for the hotel, £10, say . . .*).

Why do we use hedges? It isn't just a matter of carelessness, laziness, lack of memory, lack of knowledge, or some other deficit in our performance. If you ask me how many people were at the meeting, and I say *about 50*, this level of precision suffices for the casual purpose of the exchange. Indeed, if I were to say *53*, it would suggest that I was making a particular point. (This is a real example, in fact: the other evening, we had put out 50 chairs for a meeting, having previously wondered whether that would be enough; afterwards, I asked how many people had been present, and one of the organisers said *53*, in disgust – he was the one who had had to get three extra chairs from another room!)

People don't want to be precise all the time. It would be intolerable if every time we spoke we had to recall our behaviour with mathematical precision. A 'What did you buy?' B 'Oh, apples, bananas, cabbages, and so on'. This is enough for A to be informed of

the kind of shopping B did. B would not expect A to follow this up by asking 'What do you mean, *and so on?*'.

There are other reasons for introducing imprecision. In the scientists' case, hedges turn up often in contexts of popularization, where the author knows that the audience only needs the 'half-truth'. More surprisingly, they are common also in specialised contexts, where the casually introduced hedge acts as a safeguard against later questions (*there are perhaps 1500 such cases a year . . .*). Said quickly, these hedges are hardly noticed; but they are there, waiting to provide a line of defence against a critic. Also to be noted are the insidious, ambiguous hedges, of which *invariably* is the most notorious, being sometimes used in an absolute sense (= 'always') and sometimes not (= 'usually', or 'nearly always').

In scientific reports, the amount of imprecision being introduced, and the reasons for introducing it, are important elements in our evaluation of what is being said or written. There could be all the difference in the world between '500' and 'about 500'; and it's important to know the margins of tolerance a speaker or writer is using, in interpreting what is expressed. The same point applies to other contexts, too, including everyday speech. When someone says, 'Smith has written over 30 novels', in principle the actual number of novels ranges from 31 to infinity. In practice, we interpret this figure to be from 31 to about 35 (or so). Anything higher would be 'nearly 40'. Our numerical system makes us 'round' figures up or down in fives and tens, in preference to anything else. We don't normally say 'Smith has written over 34 novels' or 'nearly 38 novels'. And when we read 'He's written about 30 novels', we interpret this to mean that the real figure is somewhere between 28 (or so) and 32 (or so). We don't usually enquire too closely into what the limits on 'and so' are. Would you accept 'about 30' to mean 27? 26? 25?

There are doubtless all kinds of personal and cultural factors which affect our usage in this domain. Dubois noted that 10 out of her 52 speakers didn't use any hedges at all in their presentations. I wondered, as a consequence, whether a similar variation would be found in everyday conversation, so I looked

at the corpus of informal speech Derek Davy and I collected for *Advanced Conversational English* in 1975. In fact *everyone* uses them there, and with great frequency. To illustrate, here is the very first piece of speech in that book, with the imprecision italicized. (I have omitted repetitions and other non-fluencies, and added some conventional punctuation.) Someone has just asked why football isn't so popular nowadays.

I think it *probably* is the money, for what you get, you know. I was reading in the paper this morning, a chap, he's a director of a big company in Birmingham, who was the world's number one football fan, he used to spend *about a thousand* a year watching football, you know. He's watched football in every league ground in England, all 92, and he's been to America, to watch West Bromwich playing in America, he's been to the last *two or three* world cup tournaments, and he goes to all the matches away, you know, European cup matches *and everything* that English teams are playing in, he's *all over the world* watching it, you see. This year, he's watched 22 games, which is *about fifty per cent* of his normal, and even he's getting browned off, and he was saying that you can go to a nightclub in Birmingham, and watch Tony Bennet, for *about thirty bob*, *something like this*, a night with Tony Bennet, have a nice meal in very plushy surroundings, very warm, nice, pleasant, says it costs him *about* the same amount of money to go and sit in a breezy windy stand to watch a *rather* boring game of football, with no personality, and all defensive, and *everything . . .*

The conversation bowls along very happily, and I suspect that one of the reasons for this is the balance of precision and imprecision that this speaker is able to put into his utterance. indeed, it's perhaps only because of the norm of imprecision which is present in everyday conversation that really precise notions have the effect they have – as in the dramatic use of 92 and 22 in this extract.

Nor is it only spoken language which is affected. I see I have just written *perhaps*, and reading over this article my very first sentence contains three more (*and the like, hundreds and next to no*). Maybe I should do some hedge trimming.

Reference

B.L. Dubois, 'Something on the order of around forty to forty-four': imprecise numerical expressions in biomedical slide talks. *Language in Society* 16(4), 1987, pp. 527–41.