Abstract

Mastering the pragmatic norms of another language is a great challenge to non-native speakers. One aspect of the pragmatic norms of a language is the appropriate use of general extenders. These are items such as and stuff and or something like that, which have been ascribed a number of important textual and interactive functions in discourse. This paper explores the uses of the English extender or so by native speakers of New Zealand English and by German non-native speakers of English (GNNSE) plus the use of its German word-for-word equivalent oder so in German in a corpus of 18.5 hours of dyadic conversations between non-familars. The quantitative and qualitative investigations reveal non-standard uses by the non-native speakers with regard to frequency and functions of use. The analysis shows that GNNSE use or so for functions other than numerical approximation, and suggests that its high frequency use is related to a preference for German oder so, which has a wider semantic scope in German.

1. Introduction

One of the most prevalent features of informal communication is a lack of linguistic precision (Crystal and Davy 1975: 111). Research has suggested that vagueness not only serves to express the speaker’s degree of uncertainty but also serves important interpersonal functions. This makes the culturally appropriate use of vague and imprecise language an important skill to have for non-native speakers. In many languages such as English and German, which are the focus of this paper, one of the ways to achieve this sense of elusiveness lies in the use of pragmatic devices. Pragmatic devices (PDs) are items such as I think, you know, or and stuff, which play an important role in discourse as they can be used to maintain discourse coherence, help in managing turn-taking, convey epistemic modality and create interpersonal rapport (Dines
1980; Holmes 1982, 1985; Schiffrin 1987; Lenk 1996). PDs are multifunctional
devices that can serve a variety of different purposes, some of them at the same
time, and even express contrasting functions, all depending on their context of
occurrence (Erman 1987; Holmes 1995; Brinton 1996). The PD you know, for
example, can express both certainty and uncertainty (Holmes 1988), depend-
ing on how it is used in context. In this sense, PDs can be regarded as rather
complex communication tools and even native speakers are often not actively
aware of their functions, which makes their use by non-native speakers an in-
teresting field of inquiry. This paper builds on an earlier comparative study on
the use of general extenders by native and non-native speakers of English by
focusing on the form or so. The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative
methods in order to provide a thorough description of the use of this device.

2. Literature review

Among the class of PDs is the group of general extenders (Overstreet 1999),
which consists of items such as and stuff, or something or other and similar
forms in other languages, such as German und so was, oder so was in der Art.
Items falling into this group follow the basic structural pattern of conjunction
+ noun phrase as in or something like that, or something or the German general
extender (henceforth GE) und so, and can be grouped into adjunctive (and)
and disjunctive (or) extenders, based on the initial conjunction (Overstreet
1999). Like other pragmatic devices, GEs are also associated with a range of
textual and interpersonal functions. On a textual level, GEs have been found to
work as category indicators where the GE marks the preceding item (for ex-
ample carrots in he bought carrots and stuff) as representative of a more gen-
eral category (“vegetables”) and suggests that the item is only one of many
(potatoes, broccoli etc.) that could be named in this context (Dines 1980; Jef-
ferson 1990; Channell 1994). Overstreet (1999; 2005) maintains that GEs
function predominantly as interpersonal politeness devices with regard to
Grice’s Maxims of Quantity (adjunctive extenders) and Quality (disjunctive
extenders). Thus, the use of adjunctive extenders suggests that more could be
said but that the speaker chooses not to, while disjunctive extenders indicate
that the preceding item does not exactly represent what was meant. Overstreet
argues that by being vague in this way, the speaker marks what has been left
out or barely implied as shared knowledge. The speaker seems to assume that
the hearer understands, evoking the sense of a shared common ground between
the interactants. These subtle interpersonal implications allow GEs to be used
as both positive politeness devices by creating and inviting interpersonal rap-
port and as negative politeness devices by hedging the illocutionary force of a
GEs are not idiosyncratic to English but can be found in a large number of languages, among them German. Overstreet (2005) conducted a cross-cultural examination of the uses of GEs in American English and German using a corpus of about 24 hours of spoken interactions. Both Overstreet’s study and Terraschke and Holmes’ (2007) investigation of GEs in English and German showed that these items function in very similar ways in both languages. In Overstreet’s (1999) data the two groups used disjunctive extenders more than adjunctive ones and overall, American speakers used GEs more frequently than German speakers. Overstreet also identified language specific GE forms and uses, such as the use of or what as an intensifier, which were not found in the other language. A similar comparison of German and New Zealand English (NZE) in a corpus of about 9.5 hours of dyadic interactions between near strangers produced slightly different results (Terraschke 2007). In this study, native speakers of German (NSG) used GEs at a higher frequency than native speakers of New Zealand English (NSNZE) and NSNZE used adjunctive extenders slightly more often. The data was further supplemented with 9 hours of dyadic interactions between German non-native speakers of English (GNNSE) and NSNZE. An analysis of this dataset showed that GNNSE used GEs at a slightly higher frequency than their NSNZE interlocutors. Another interesting result of this investigation was that, unlike their native speaker interlocutors, GNNSE used the form or so more often than any other disjunctive extender. It was suggested that this high-frequency use of or so, as well as the occurrence of the non-English form and tralala, might have been influenced by the speakers’ first language as the German word-for-word equivalent GE oder so was the most commonly used disjunctive extender in the NSG data. It is this striking difference between GNNSE and NSNZE uses of or so that is the focus of this paper.

Previous research has suggested that PDs are usually not taught in schools (Sankoff et al. 1997; Müller 2005). This would make their adoption by non-native speakers mostly a process of unguided learning and as such could be influenced by a number of factors including the learners’ L1, their access to native speaker interactions (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei 1998), their knowledge of L2 pragmatic conventions and general linguistic proficiency (Kasper 1998), their ability to notice certain language features (Schmidt 1990) or their language learning background. This last point would include the issue of ‘pragmatic fossilization’ (Romero Trillo 2002), i.e. the use of pragmatically inappropriate forms by non-native speakers, which can be caused for example by de-contextualized classroom based learning or by learning a language later in life.

The issue is that of most commonly discussed in relation to non-native uses of PDs L1 influence. A relatively clear case of functional L1 transfer was found in an investigation of the language of Anglophone speakers of Montreal French (AMF) (Sankoff et al. 1997). The researchers noticed that the use of the French
device *comme* ‘like’ by AMF seems to be influenced by English *like*. The most prominent evidence for this suggestion is AMF use of *comme* as a quotative marker. This quotative function is a typical feature of English *like*, but it is not part of the functional repertoire of French *comme*. Cheng and Warren (2001) noted that non-native speakers from a Cantonese background were more likely to use tag questions as invariant tags, rather than adjust them to the proposition they mark. Non-native speakers were also found to use PDs more for expressing propositional uncertainty than for politeness functions compared to native speakers. Cheng and Warren propose that these characteristics can be linked to the form and function of Cantonese tags. Aijmer (2004) suggests that non-natives generally use PDs more as referential or hesitation markers or as fillers to gain more time to plan their turn rather than as politeness devices. In her interview data, language learners used PDs in clusters together with other PDs or at the end of false starts or abandoned propositions, leaving the intended meaning open for interpretation. The notion that native and non-native speakers might use PDs for different functions seems to be an important point to bear in mind for data analysis and it seems possible that language learners would use PDs more often to hold the floor or mark hesitation or uncertainty. At the same time, it seems rather drastic to assume learners never use PDs for interpersonal politeness purposes. In the following investigation, the use of GEs by native and non-native speakers is considered with regard to their organizational, referential and interpersonal discourse functions.

This paper builds on the results of an initial quantitative analysis of the entire corpus (see below) (Terraschke 2007) by selecting the most commonly used disjunctive extender by GNNSE as the focus point of this investigation. Initially, this paper provides an overview of the GEs used by NSG, NSNZE and GNNSE and discusses the various functions of the GEs in the data. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the uses of *or so* in New Zealand English represented by the NSNZE data and the larger Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WCS) and in the GNNSE corpus are described next. By also considering the German data, in particular the use of the word-for-word equivalent *oder so*, the paper explores how the use of *or so* by GNNSE could be influenced by L1 norms of GE uses.

3. **The corpus**

The data for this study was taken from a corpus of about 18.5 hours of dyadic interactions between near-strangers, which translates into approximately 224,000 transcribed words. The corpus consists of 60 conversations which can be divided into three sets: 15 NSNZE, 15 NSG and 30 GNNSE-NSNZE conversations. The interactions were conducted between 60 speakers overall, 30
NSNZE and 30 NSG. Each participant took part in two conversations, one with a fellow native speaker and one in a cross-cultural dyad.

All participants were between 20 and 30 years old and all but two were studying at a university in Wellington, New Zealand at the time of the recordings. Most New Zealand participants were studying toward an undergraduate qualification, and the majority of the NSG group were in New Zealand on a study exchange program as part of their German undergraduate studies. The sample also featured a number of postgraduate students from both groups, including two NSGs who were enrolled in PhD programs. At the time of recording, German participants had been in New Zealand between 3 months and 8 years. Since it would have been difficult otherwise to recruit 30 German university students in New Zealand it was decided not to control for the length of stay in New Zealand but to make a note of this variable and take it into consideration for the data analysis when relevant. The NSG’s level of English was not tested or in any other way evaluated, but the varying amounts of time the participants had spent learning English or living in English speaking countries made it likely that they had different levels of linguistic and pragmatic competence. Considering that they were all studying or working at an English medium university, however, it can be assumed that they were advanced learners of English and at least fulfilled the minimum language requirements for university entry. This methodological design means that the data cannot be used to draw conclusions about the correlations between language proficiency and the use of PDs or pragmatic development in general. Nevertheless, the corpus offers the opportunity to provide a thorough description of GNNSE language use in all its variability and to contrast the results with native-like uses.

The interactions were recorded on mini-disc and video in a room at the university. In most cases, the participants did not know each other before the recording; however, as there is only a small pool of German speakers enrolled at university each year, it was unavoidable that some NSG had met before. To sit down in an impersonal university room to record a conversation with a stranger is likely to be perceived as stressful by all participants, which might have increased the amount of phatic communication and face work used, including PDs. Participants were not informed of the focus of the study and were merely asked to engage in two dyadic conversations. Once the recording equipment was started, the participants were left alone to talk for about 20–30 minutes about anything they liked.

4. General extenders in use

As noted above, Overstreet (1999) defined GEs as multifunctional devices that can express a wide variety of meanings, ranging from predominantly referential
functions, for instance as indicators of imprecision or vagueness, to affective and interpersonal functions like establishing rapport and reducing social distance. The following analysis adopts Overstreet’s (1999) approach and applies it to the NSG, NSNZE and GNNSE data. Uses of GEs as fillers or hesitation markers are also considered when relevant. The multifunctionality of PDs makes a quantitative analysis of the various functions impracticable. Thus, the quantitative analyses conducted in this study are restricted to establishing the variety of GE forms in the data as well as the number of occurrences of or so in and across the corpora. Because GEs work on so many different levels simultaneously, it is often impossible to specify the entire range of functions they may serve since these will vary slightly and often subtly from point to point in a conversation. For this study, knowledge of the wider discourse situation, together with an analysis of the use of discourse strategies, phonological cues, position within the clause and the presence of other pragmatic devices, was used to help in identifying some of the potential meanings of an extender in a specific context. Despite this insider knowledge, it is often still impossible to clearly categorize a token as having only one specific function. Even referential and affective functions are often closely related, as shown in Example (1) below. The interactants in this example, both NSNZE, are talking about Nathan’s upcoming graduation and Greg asks if his family is going to attend the ceremony. In this case, the GE immediately follows the noun *family*.

(1) NZE-NZE/M-M/55/16:00
Greg: got a lot of family and stuff coming? sorry you go
Nathan: urm + yeah mum and dad are coming down both my brothers are overseas

Referentially, the GE *and stuff* suggests that it is not only family that might want to attend such a big event but maybe also friends or partners. At the same time, on an affective and interpersonal politeness level, the GE also seems to serve to mitigate the rather personal nature of the question, making it sound less intrusive.

GEs can also be preceded by verbs in both the NSNZE and, as Example (2) shows, the NSG data. German examples are annotated with literal English translations that aim to reflect both the wording and the illocutionary effect as accurately as possible. German pragmatic devices are kept in their original form because the differences between German and English forms make direct translations rather difficult.

(2) NSG-NSG/F-M/7/5:00
Sandra: ja ist dann halt auch die Frage wo also man sollte ja eigentlich schon die Uni wechseln dann für einen PhD und dann ist es auch halt die Frage wohin man dann zieht und so also. das in Neuseeland irgendwo machen wollte dann wüsste ich auch nicht so genau wo
Sandra: Yeah it is also the question where I mean you should change the university for a PhD and then there is the question where to move und so I mean. to want to do one in New Zealand then I wouldn’t know where

In this example, Sandra says that her problem with doing a PhD is the question of where to do it. On one level, the adjunctive extender *und so* seems to suggest that there are other questions than just where to move to that one has to consider when thinking of doing a PhD. At the same time, the GE also seems to function on an interpersonal level, appealing to the interlocutor’s understanding of the complexities involved in moving, such as leaving friends or partners or the prospect of moving to an unfamiliar city or country.

In the data GEs were also found to follow adjectives, as shown in Example (3). Here, Bobby is expressing his annoyance with people who are obsessed with health and not smoking. The use of the GE *and stuff* in this context appears to convey his acknowledgment that there are many more arguments in favor of healthy living and thereby draws on the assumed knowledge shared with the interlocutor about modern public discourse on these issues.

(3) NSNZE-NSNZE/F-M/23/8:00

Bobby: you know you can have a completely boring life and do absolutely nothing but hey you know my lungs are still clean it’s like. I don’t know I guess you know it could be it can be important and stuff but [sighs]

The GE also seems to emphasize Bobby’s general exasperation with this public focus on health; together with his very grudging admittance that good health might be important (*I guess you know it could be*), it indicates that delving further into the positive aspects is not relevant. In this sense it seems to have a slightly dismissive quality.

Example (4) illustrates the use of GEs immediately following numbers, where the GE mostly serves to express epistemic modality. In the excerpt, Nadine is talking about her living situation, saying that she and her partner are planning to move closer to the university soon.

(4) NSG-NSG/F-F/[45]

Nadine: aber wir ziehen jetzt auch hier hoch wohl + in ’nem Monat oder zwei oder so

Nadine: but we will probably move up here + in one month or two oder so

Here, the GE *oder so* appears to indicate that no definite plans have been made yet and that it might be longer than two months before they will be able to move.
In the corpus, English and German GEs were also found to go after adverbs, as in *I don’t smoke habitually or anything*; prepositions, as in *sechs Wochen oder sieben Wochen sind wir schon hier oder so* ‘we’ve already been here [oder so] for six or seven weeks’; and other pragmatic devices as in *apparently he crafted his poems out for a long time you know and stuff so yeah*. Finally, in some circumstances GEs occur at the beginning of a turn, as illustrated in Example (5). This is an excerpt from Paul and Kim’s conversation about what they consider shortcomings in New Zealand’s provisions for creating a truly bicultural society.

(5) NSNZE-NSNZE/F-M/5/10:00  
Paul: yeah you can be frustrated from Wellington  
Kim: Yeah  
Both: [giggle]  
Paul: or something like that yeah . sweet . erm what sort of geology and geography are you doing?  

The use of the GE in this context seems to serve as a delayed attempt to deflect from and attenuate the force of the criticism that one can get frustrated by the decisions and guidelines made by the government in New Zealand’s capital Wellington. This impression is further supported by Paul immediately changing the subject.

As can be seen from this brief discussion, German and English GEs do not only occur in very similar environments, they also fulfill a range of similar referential and interpersonal functions. This does not necessarily mean all GEs can be used in all contexts for all possible purposes—some GEs are clearly functionally restricted, for example *and something* and *or so*, which are restricted to numerical approximation. Others can only be used in certain contexts. Thus, the GE *or anything* usually occurs in negative, non-assertive utterances while *and everything* is used in positive, assertive utterances (Channell 1994: 132; Overstreet 1999: 80; Aijmer 2002: 220). A more detailed description of a larger corpus is needed to more clearly delineate the scope of functions and restrictions of GEs in both languages.

5. Forms and number of occurrences

The GE forms and their number of occurrences in the three sub-corpora have been summarized in Table 1. The table only contains those forms that occurred 5 or more times. The total number and overall frequency of use per 100 words of all GEs identified in the corpus is included.

Several observations can be made about the numbers summarized in the table. First and foremost, it can be noted that GNNSE have adopted the most
Table 1. Number of occurrences of GEs in the 3 corpora

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NSNZE (5hrs)</th>
<th>NSG (4.5hrs)</th>
<th>GNNSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And stuff</td>
<td>Und so</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And things</td>
<td>Und so weiter</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And everything</td>
<td>Und alles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And stuff like that</td>
<td>Und so was</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And all that</td>
<td>Und so was</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or something</td>
<td>Oder so</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or something like that</td>
<td>Oder so was</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or whatever</td>
<td>Oder was</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or anything</td>
<td>Oder was</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total overall</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of use</td>
<td>0.374</td>
<td>0.692</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

frequently used GEs by NSNZE. The table also highlights some parallels between the NSG and the GNNSE data. For example, the GE *und so weiter* is used relatively often by NSG. The form-functional equivalent *and so on* is also among the more frequently used GEs in the GNNSE set, even though it hardly occurs in the NSNZE data. A similar link can be seen between German *oder so* and English *or so*, which is a direct word-for-word translational equivalent of the most commonly used disjunctive German GE. Indeed, the quantitative analysis of the data shows that GNNSE used *or so* more often than any other disjunctive GE. NSNZE, however, used this form only three times in their native-native and native-non-native interactions put together. Numerically, this preference for *or so* is the most notable difference between GNNSE and native speakers, and it is a preference that can be found among a good portion of the GNNSE population. This transparent formal resemblance between *or so* and *oder so* suggests that the frequent use of *or so* by GNNSE could be influenced by the speakers’ L1. This warrants a closer examination of the use of the GE by native and non-native speakers. The following discussion focuses on the use of *oder so* in German and *or so* in NZE and compares the results with the data collected from GNNSE.

6. **Oder so in the German data**

The direct translation of *or so* is German *oder so*. The form *oder so* has been identified as the most frequently used German GE by Terraschke (2007) and Overstreet (2005). As mentioned above, German GEs on the whole have not been described in great detail. The same applies to *oder so*, which has not been
analyzed beyond being classified as belonging to the group of *Etceteraformeln* ‘etcetera formulas’ in Schwitalla’s (1997) discussion of spoken German. Probably the best discussion of the use of *oder so* has been given by Overstreet (2005). In her comparative study of German and American English GEs Overstreet (2005) uses *oder so* along with other disjunctive extenders to exemplify common functions of English and German GEs. Overstreet’s investigation did not identify any functional restrictions for *oder so* and suggested that, a few exceptions notwithstanding, English and German GEs serve similar referential and affective functions.

In the NSG data, *oder so* can be found in the same environments and seems to be used for a similar range of functions as described above. In other words, it can follow nouns (Example 6), verbs (Example 7), adjectives (Example 8) and numbers (see Example 4). In Example (6), Boris and Veit, two law students, talk about the possibility of working for a lobby organization after they finish their degree. In the excerpt, Boris points out that you just have to be able to find a lobby group that you can morally agree with since his family and friends would not like it if he started working for a weapons export group.

(6) **NSG-NSG/M-M/54/11:30**

Boris: irgendwo anfangen und äh . du mußt dass noch halbwegs vertreten können also selbst also kannst jetzt nicht äh ++ nich nicht für . für waffenexport lobby *oder so* das wär ein bißchen blöd irgendwie weil

Veit: Ja okay

Boris: Da [chuckles] zu hause dann nicht mehr reingelassen glaube ich

*Boris: Start somewhere and äh . you have to be able to somehow justify it like yourself like you can’t äh ++ not not for . for the weapons export lobby *oder so* that would be a bit stupid somehow because*

Veit: Yeah okay

*Boris: Then [chuckles] wouldn’t be let in anymore at home I think*

Here, *oder so* seems to be used as a lexical hedge, signaling that the focus lexical item is just one example of a number of possible ones. It indicates that in addition to the weapons export lobby there are other lobby groups that could be considered morally objectionable. Incidentally, this example also nicely illustrates the underlying interpersonal or affective function of GEs: by merely indicating that the given example represents a wider category the speaker indicates that he believes the addressee to be aware of other lobby groups that could or could not be mentioned in this context. Thus, while lobbies groups supporting nuclear power or whaling lobbies could be feasibly added to the list of morally problematic organizations, maybe groups such as wind farming or fair trade lobbies could not be mentioned. In other words, the use of a vague referent implies the speaker’s assumption that the two interlocutors share the same or similar cultural background knowledge and moral values. This pro-
cess, where two individual speakers who supposedly do not see or understand the world in exactly the same way manage to come to similar conclusions and draw similar inferences is called intersubjectivity (Overstreet 1999: 66). By invoking intersubjectivity the speaker invites the interlocutor to accept this assumption and makes an appeal to the listener to cooperate by drawing conclusions that are relevant to the given context. Conveying the speaker’s assumption of shared background knowledge as well as the implicit request for communicative collaboration are part of the GEs, underlying affective functions.

Another use of oder so in German is illustrated in Example (7). Here, Lotta explains that she likes the way the assessment is laid out for her law degree. University courses in New Zealand usually base the final grade on relatively small pieces of assessment which are expected to be handed in on a regular basis; whereas in Germany the course grade is often based on a final exam. Lotta states that without the constant pressure she would not do the work and might fail the exam because she started studying too late.

(7) NSG-NSG/F-F/43/15:30
Lotta: und für mich ist es ganz gut das ich . regelmässig was tun muss weil ich sonst genau weiß ich würd's einfach nich machen ich würd dann halt irgendwie zwei Wochen vorm Examen oder so anfangen zu lernen und würd's nich schaffen oder so

The first oder so in this example immediately follows a noun and appears to work as a numerical hedge on the proposed time of two weeks, suggesting that she might start studying for her exam a bit earlier or even later than two weeks before. At the same time, the use of this GE emphasizes the hypothetical nature of the proposition, highlighting that the proposed two weeks are a relatively randomly selected timeframe that was chosen to illustrate that she would start studying only a short time before an exam were she studying in a different university system. Moreover, this use also demonstrates that GEs can not only modify those elements immediately preceding them but that their scope can reach back quite far.

The second oder so, however, immediately follows the verb schaffen ‘to accomplish’, used here with the negative marker nicht ‘not’, and one possible interpretation of its use is to suggest that failing is not the only possible outcome. Alternative results could be getting a bad mark or panicking so much that she would not even sit the exam. Again, similar to the first oder so, the GE also serves as a hedge on the entire proposition, indicating that the described situation is merely hypothetical. In both instances, in addition to their referential
functions, the GEs in this example also work on an affective level as they appeal to the interlocutor’s knowledge of the German university system and to her understanding of the stress involved in studying for an exam.

Finally, in Example (8), the first oder so follows the noun Schadstoffuntersuchungen ‘contaminant analyses’ the second oder so follows the adjective ohnmächtig ‘unconscious’.

(8) NSG-NSG/F-M/7/1:00
Mario: die haben doch auch früher schon nee oder benutzten die nicht sogar immer noch für irgendwelche Schadstoffuntersuchungen oder so wenn irgendwie die die Luft vergiftet ist die sterben direkt weg oder werden ohnmächtig oder so
Mario: they did before no or do they still do use them for some kind of pollution analyses oder so somehow when the air is polluted they die or become unconscious oder so

Mario and Silke are talking about geckos and Mario thinks that they are used to test the level of air pollution. In this case, the use of the GE seems to predominantly indicate epistemic modality, emphasizing that Mario is not entirely sure that what he says is correct. Silke is the expert on geckos and Mario is possibly not too sure if his information is correct and may not want to challenge her authority in this area.

In this section, it has been shown that German oder so is a versatile GE that occurs in a variety of environments and is used for a large number of functions on both a referential and an affective level in a wide range of contexts. In other words, oder so does not seem to be formally or functionally restricted, which could explain its frequent occurrence in the German data.

7. English or so

The discussion of the uses of GEs in German and New Zealand English has shown that GEs can occur after most grammatical categories within a clause, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions. However, some GEs are more specialized and can only occur in certain contexts. In English, for example, and something and or so are functionally restricted in their use to numerical approximation (Channell 1994: 59; Aijmer 2002: 223). In this regard, the use of English or so differs markedly from German oder so, which was found to not be subjected to such functional restrictions.

The English form or so is not included in most studies on GEs, possibly due to its restricted use. Overstreet (1999), for example, did not include this extender in her study. She does not discuss this decision explicitly, but it may have been based on the fact that or so is a numerical approximator and there-
fore does not fulfill the condition of GEs having mostly interpersonal functions. Another possibility is that the form did not occur often enough in her corpus. *Or so* was also not listed in Dines’ (1980) study, possibly because the form does not imply a set or category, and Channell (1994) discusses *or so* separately from other GEs in British English. However, Aijmer (2002: 213) does include *or so* in her count of GE forms in the London Lund Corpus (LLC), as she believes GEs to have “functions such as uncertainty, approximation and intensity”, and as a numerical approximation device *or so* serves at least one of these uses. This paper adopts Aijmer’s (2002) approach and counts *or so* among GEs.

Channell’s (1994) analysis of the use of vague language in British English provides probably the most detailed discussion on the use of *or so*. With reference to Quirk et al.’s (1985: 13.102) brief description of its uses Channell (1994: 59) reiterates that, in addition to its restriction to numerical approximation, there is also a rule saying that head nouns preceding *or so* must be “units of measurement (*year, pound*) or items contextually rendered units of measurement (another N)”, for example *a glass of beer* (Quirk et al. 1985: 13.102). Judging from Channell’s (1994: 59) list of acceptable and unacceptable forms, which has been reproduced below, in cases where there is no suitable unit of measurement the GE occurs immediately after the number:

a. six or so books
b. *six books or so*
c. ten pounds or so [weight]
d. *? ten or so pounds*

According to this list, the phrases in a) and c) are generally considered unproblematic by some speakers (who they are and how many speakers she refers to is never clearly stated). However, the b) construction *six books or so* is deemed unacceptable by some native speakers because *books* is not a noun denoting a unit of measurement. Even though construction d) *ten or so pounds* follows the pattern in a) and therefore should be acceptable, Channell found that some native speakers consider it ungrammatical. Channell (1994: 59) suggests that those speakers have added another rule guiding the use of *or so* according to which it is not only optional but compulsory for nouns of measurement to precede the extender.

Channell (1994) tested the validity of this list of acceptability by analyzing the uses of *or so* in the Cobuild corpora of spoken and written English. In the spoken English corpus, which contains about 1.32 million words, Channell found 53 tokens of *or so*. While all the constructions listed above, even the supposedly unacceptable ones, were found in the corpus, the majority of the tokens followed the construction in c). In the following section, the use of *or so* in NZE is discussed with reference to Channell’s list of acceptable *or so* constructions.
7.1. *Or so* in NZE

This study analyzes the use of *or so* in New Zealand English based on the corpus of NSNZE speech containing approximately 111,000 words. It includes the native-native interactions as well as the contributions of NSNZE in the cross-cultural conversations. A search of this section of the corpus shows that it only contains 3 tokens of *or so*, 1 in the native-native and 2 in the cross-cultural data sets. In all three instances, the NSNZE use the form for numerical approximation. One of the tokens is used as a hedge on a guess on how long ago it was that a specific event took place (*it was about a year and a half or so*), one to indicate that a given ranking might not be entirely accurate (*we just usually make like top ten or so*) and one serves to express imprecision of a year date (*till about nineteen seventy or so*).

Since 3 examples are not enough to make any informed observations with regard to the rules of use of *or so* in spoken New Zealand English, the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WSC) was also consulted. The WSC contains 1 million words that were collected 1988–1994 and consists of a combination of formal monologues (e.g., broadcast news, lectures, parliamentary debates, etc.), semi-formal monologues and dialogues (e.g., oral history interview) and informal speech (e.g., private face-to-face conversations). The semi-formal and informal speech categories make up nearly 90 per cent of the corpus. Even though some of the data included in the WSC is rather different from the data collected for the NSNZE corpus used in this study they still represent the variety of speech GNNSE would be exposed to while living in New Zealand. Moreover, consulting a larger corpus of NZE in order to establish the norms of use of the device in this particular variety of English seems important for a discussion of the GNNSE data. A comparison of the occurrence of *or so* in the WSC and NSNZE corpora can be found in Table 2.

As the table illustrates, the WSC contains proportionally twice as many tokens of *or so* as the NSNZE corpus. A brief analysis of the corpus shows that, just like speakers of British English, NSNZE predominantly use the c) construction *ten pounds or so* as shown in Example (9). In this example, *or so* follows the established unit of measurement *meter* but precedes the qualifier *of snow*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wellington Corpus</th>
<th>NSNZE corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spoken</td>
<td>1 million words</td>
<td>111,000 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56 tokens</td>
<td>3 tokens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.6 tokens per 100,000 words</td>
<td>2.7 tokens per 100,000 words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data also contains some cases of what could be considered contextually rendered units of measurement as in Example (10). Here, the idea of a car length is treated as a unit of measurement by the speaker.

Like the Cobuild corpus, the NSNZE data includes a few examples that do not conform to the main c) construction format. Example (11), for instance, is a good illustration of the b) construction six books or so, which was deemed unacceptable by Channell (1994). Even though it is not exactly clear what contextually rendered units of measurement are, it is safe to say that if books is not a unit of measurement in b) then people is not a unit of measurement in Example (11).

Finally, Example (12) shows how in NZE or so sometimes follows construction d) where the GE occurs before an established units of measurement such as years.

Overall, it can be noted that the numerical approximant or so occurs much less in NZE than in British English. Nevertheless the NZE data seems to comply with Channell’s (1994) observations for British English in that or so most commonly occurs in the c) structure. Only few exceptions to this use could be found, including some that were labeled unacceptable in Channell’s list above. However, the sample of or so in the WSC is too small to tell whether these few aberrant cases are indicative of language change or whether or so was moved to an atypical position for stylistic purposes, allowing the speaker to draw attention to one element over another.

8. GNNSE Data

The GE or so was the most frequently occurring disjunctive extender used by GNNSE in cross-cultural interactions. As Example (13) shows, GNNSE employ or so as a numerical hedge just like their native speaker counterparts. In Example (13), Nina is adding up how many minutes of interaction were collected for the corpus. This is an example of the c) construction where or so follows the unit of measurement minutes. Here, or so appears to be used predominantly as a numerical hedge on time, indicating that the proposed period of twenty minutes is not necessarily accurate.
(13) NSNZE-GNNSE/F-M/22/17:00
Nina: When people when we sit here twenty minutes or so it’s like sixty
times twenty minutes↑

When looking at the use of *or so* by GNNSE for numerical approximation it
seems that they adhere to the rules governing sentence constructions involving
*or so*, as all but one case follows pattern c). However, out of all 42 instances of
*or so* in the data, only 17 are used for numerical hedging. In the majority of
cases *or so* follows elements other than numbers, such as verbs, (Example 14),
nouns (Example 15) and adjectives (Example 16).

(14) NSNZE-GNNSE/F-M/29/8:30
Frederike: But well I’m . yeah . I believe that there’s more to do or so↑ more
offers↑ or well↑ if it’s the biggest city but I wonder because I’m
quite busy here and + I couldn’t even do all those things

In Example (14), Frederike and her interlocutor are talking about the differ-
ences between Auckland and Wellington, the two largest cities in the north is-
land of New Zealand. In the excerpt, *or so* immediately follows a verb. Such a
construction did not occur in the NZE corpora analyzed in this study and, con-
sidering that *or so* is a numerical hedge, does not seem like a permissible con-
struction in English. From an interactive point of view, the GE appears to be
used for multiple purposes. On one level it seems to serve to soften the force of
the proposition that maybe Auckland is more exciting than Wellington. Here,
the use emphasizes that the notion is entirely based on Frederike’s assumptions
rather than actual fact. Additionally, it could also be used to signal her ac-
nowledgment that the expression *there’s more to do* is not particularly precise,
appealing to the listener’s willingness to infer the intended meaning. This use
of *or so* is a rather interesting example since, when trying to find an alternative
GE to express Frederike’s proposition in a way that is more acceptable in Eng-
ilish, it seems that no English disjunctive GE could capture the same functions.
A close English alternative might be the adverb ‘maybe’ as it is also able to
soften the potentially offensive force of the statement and at the same time in-
dicate uncertainty with regard to the content and word choices of the proposi-
tion. The fact that no English GE seems to be able to substitute *or so* in Ex-
ample (14) could indicate that at least some German extenders serve a wider
range of functions than English ones. More detailed research into the functions
and scopes of GEs in German and English is needed to establish the extent of
formal and functional equivalence of GEs in the two languages, which in turn
could shed further light into non-native like uses of GEs.

Another example of GNNSE using *or so* for purposes other than numerical
approximation can be found in Example (15). Katrin from Germany studies
environmental management and in this excerpt she is discussing the advan-
tages and disadvantages of wind energy with Guy. The intonation on the GE goes down and there is a small pause, separating or so from the false start you.

(15) NSNZE-GNNSE/F-M/20/1:30
Guy: it also got sound pollution as well so i imagine people wouldn’t want to live near there either
Katrin (G): Yeah . because of the em like it’s called disco effect↑ the the shadow thing↑ . like if the shadow is being thrown in your em like living room or so you you’re getting crazy by those + 1// movement↑
Guy: 1/that would drive\1 people like who are living outside a neon light↑

In this example, the main function of the GE seems to be to modify the noun phrase living room, indicating that this is just a randomly selected room and that the same problem would apply to a kitchen, bedroom or lounge. However, it does not seem to indicate propositional uncertainty as Katrin has studied the issues surrounding wind energy. In this case, or so could be conceivably replaced by or whatever. Overstreet (1999: 123) points out that the GE or whatever has “a dismissive quality”, signaling that the further details are not important. This seems to fit the context in the example above as Katrin’s main point regarding the impact of flickering lights on your emotional and mental well-being is not affected either way by into which room exactly the wind turbines cast shadows. The absence of long pauses or clarification demands by Guy suggests that this non-native use of or so by the GNNSE does not obstruct communication and understanding between the interactants.

The GE in Example (16) is an illustration of how lexical and propositional approximations are closely interrelated, making it sometimes difficult to tell them apart. After all, when speakers are unsure of the full denotative and connotative meaning of a keyword, they cannot be entirely certain whether the proposition being made is correct. In Example (16), Greg, the New Zealander, states that he likes the ceremonial aspect of fencing and Veit (GNNSE) puts forward the notion that the sport is rather formal. The question intonation on Veit’s statement together with the pragmatic devices it’s like and or so and the adjective quite seem to work together to attenuate Veit’s proposition on a number of different levels.

(16) NSNZE-GNNSE/M-M/13:00
Greg: Yeah you wear the masks and . everything it is it is very sort of cool it’s got a lot of ceremony to it which I like and . you know saluting to people before //you fence and\
Veit (G): /ah okay\ okay okay it’s like quite formal or so?
Greg: Yeah it can be quite formal
One possible interpretation of this example is that the marker *or so* is used as a lexical hedge, indicating that the adjective *formal* might not be the most appropriate word in this context and thus asks the interlocutor to adopt a more liberal interpretation of the term. At the same time, *or so* also appears to modify the entire proposition, indicating that Veit is not sure if his evaluation of fencing being formal is a valid one. By mitigating a proposed judgment on an issue Veit is not familiar with and by inviting Greg to confirm or dismiss Veit’s assessment, the GE also functions as a politeness device. In this context it seems that *or so* could be substituted by *or something (like that)* to achieve a similar effect as *or something* is also commonly used to indicate lexical or content-related imprecision and, as shown in Example (5), to mitigate the illocutionary force of a statement.

Based on the data presented here, GNNSE seem to use *or so* for a range of referential and affective functions that are similar to the uses of other disjunctive GEs (e.g., *or something*, *or whatever*), even though those alternative extenders can be found in their repertoire as well. There were not many instances in the GNNSE data where *or so* co-occurs with pauses or other pragmatic devices and only a few where *or so* was followed by stammering. This would suggest that *or so* is not predominantly used as a hesitation marker or filler, although the notion that these functions play a role in some contexts cannot be completely discarded. GEs might not often serve as fillers or hesitation markers as they usually occur in clause final position and might serve better as floor yielding rather than floor saving devices. It can also be noted that the non-native-like use of *or so* does not seem to lead to a communication breakdown or instances of miscommunication between the interactants. It is possible that the GE-like form of *or so*, its position within the clause and its context of occurrence provide the native speaker interlocutor with enough clues to recognize the form as an intended GE and analyze it accordingly. Another potential explanation is that the native speaker interlocutor simply ignored the non-standard use of *or so*. As pragmatic devices, GEs do not “directly partake in the propositional content of an utterance” (Östman 1982: 153) and therefore their inaccurate use does not necessarily have a great impact on the intelligibility of the utterance. If a GNNSE’s contribution is generally understood, their native speaker interlocutor might not pay any attention to non-standard uses such as *or so* in non-numerical contexts, either because they simply do not notice them, or because they want to maintain the communicative flow.

Overall, *or so* was used by 13 out of the 30 GNNSE included in this study, 9 of those in a non-numerical context. Among these 9 participants are mostly speakers who were either in the middle or at the end of their one year study program in New Zealand. The group of 9 participants also includes GNNSE who had already lived in New Zealand for up to 4 years and 2 participants who had lived or extensively travelled in English speaking countries before coming
to New Zealand. At the same time, the group of participants who did not use *or so* also includes those who had been living in New Zealand for a short time only as well as those who had lived there or other English speaking countries for a substantial amount of time prior to the recordings. This suggests that variables other than the length of stay in an English speaking country have a greater influence on GNNSE’s use of *or so*.

9. Conclusion

A quantitative comparison of the use of *or so* in the NSNZE and WSC corpora and in the language of GNNSE demonstrates that the form is used comparatively little by native speakers. However, as the data presented above has shown, those GNNSE who use the device do not necessarily use the English device *or so* according to native speaker norms. GNNSE use *or so* for purposes other than numerical approximation and in contexts where its use would not be deemed appropriate by native speaker norms. The data used in this study indicates that some GNNSE use *or so* in a wide range of contexts following nouns, verbs, adjectives and others. The form is also used to express a great range of interpersonal, affective and referential functions that are similar to English GEs. However, the non-correspondence between the use of *or so* and English disjunctive extenders in Example (14) could suggest that German extenders have a wider functional scope than English ones.

While L1 influence is certainly not the only possible explanation for the use of *or so* by GNNSE, the similarity of forms and the differences in function between English *or so* and German *oder so* plus the frequent use of *or so* in appropriate and inappropriate contexts by GNNSE make it at least a plausible option. However, rather than it being a case of transferring pragmatic knowledge of *oder so* to *or so*, it could be that GNNSE have merely failed to acquire the pragmatic restrictions governing the use of this particular form, resulting in the non-standard application of the marker.

Even though the non-standard use of *or so* by GNNSE does not have a major impact on cross-cultural communication, the findings of this research have interesting implications for the study of second language and interlanguage pragmatics. On the one hand, in an unguided learning setting, GNNSE seem to be able to adopt GEs that do not have direct translational equivalents in German, for example *and stuff*, *or anything*, and use them in appropriate contexts. For the most part, they also seem to have a feel for which German GEs they cannot directly translate into English (a few occurrences of *and tralala* notwithstanding) or else there would have been a higher frequency of *and so* as an adjunctive extender, the direct translation of the most commonly used German adjunctive GE *und so*. On the other hand, they do not seem to be able to recognize
the specialized use of or so as opposed to other disjunctive GEs. It would be interesting to analyze data from non-native speakers of English with L1 backgrounds other than German to see if this particular use of or so is a common non-native feature, whether it is a characteristic of GNNSE speech or whether the GEs used by non-native speakers are generally directly related to the forms and functions of GEs in the speakers’ L1. Applying a translation approach (Aijmer and Simon Vanderbergen 2003) to the data could further help establish functional English equivalents of German oder so that might help to establish the full extent of the functional uses of the German extender and explain why GNNSE use or so so frequently rather than one of the other English disjunctive GEs that are in their repertoire. Further research is also needed in this area to identify other examples of L1 specific non-standard uses of English pragmatic devices as learners could benefit from this knowledge both as a means for them to increase their pragmatic awareness as well as merely being able to avoid non-native like constructions common for their specific language group.

Note

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Transcription Symbols

[laughs] Paralinguistic features in square brackets
. Pause of less than a second
+ Pause of up to one second
. . . . / . . . \ . . . Simultaneous speech
. . . . / . . . \ . . .
↑ High rising terminal on declarative
Publicat-underlined Incomplete or cut-off utterance
underlined General Extender

References


