

# VAGUENESS AND GENDER COMPREHENSIBILITY IN ONLINE NEWS REPORTAGE

By

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## Abstract

The study sets out to find out if women understand and interpret vague language better than their male counterparts. To achieve this, the paper focused on Nigerian L2 users of English with attention on their gender. Using corpus linguistics methodologies, the study preselected 20 hedging elements (10 approximators and 10 quantifiers). The preselected elements were identified and classified, while examples of their usage in real-life situations were searched in a purpose-built corpus of 200 online news reportage. Besides that, a 20-item questionnaire, using Likert Rating Scale of five points from the corpus, was administered on 350 purposively selected Nigerian L2 English user-respondents through the *Google Forms*. At the same time, one null hypothesis was formulated to test the comprehensibility of the respondents' responses. The test-item questionnaire was also used to determine the respondents' sociolinguistic competence of some instances of the vague expressions in the corpus. Respondents' responses were subjected to inferential statistics of chi-square at 0.05 significant level. The study discovered that there is a difference on comprehensibility, and sociolinguistic competence of vague language on the basis of the gender of the respondents.

**Keywords:** approximators, corpus linguistics, hedging, news reportage, Nigerian English L2 users, quantifiers, vagueness

## **Introduction**

### **Language and Gender**

Language is the sole property of humans, with slight differences in usage (Pickering & Garrod, 2004; Newman, Groom, Handelman & Pennebaker, 2008; Xia, 2013). Though, claims and counter claims of differences in usage abound, but they lack empirical evidence to support the differences in human language usage. Mulac, Studley, & Blau (1990) emphasize that communication is a means of identity, distinguishing group members from non-members. In the same vein, Golmakani, Amirinejad & Moghaddam, (2023) say it is also a means of cultural and societal identity. Especially in the hospital setting, gender differences and the portrayal in interaction enhances mutual understanding (communication) between medical professionals and patients who speak different languages, possibly leading to better patient outcomes (Banat & Adla, 2023). We need to understand that gender differences extend beyond language use, as men and women also differ physiologically and psychologically which supports gender differentiation in the society (Kianinezhad, 2023). Gender difference refers to the variances in roles and stereotypes between men and women, as they are genuinely distinct in certain capacities as well as social and biological grouping options (Mahmud & Idegbekwe, 2020; Wang, 2021; Worthy, L. D., Lavigne, T., & Romero, n.d.).

Men and women use language differently due to their unique ways of acting and communicating their lives (Crawford, 1995; Merchant, 2012). Extreme examples of gender difference in communication include the Ubang people in Cross River State, Nigeria (Adegoke, 2018); the Amazon Indians' language, the Yahi language of the Yanna group, and the Aboriginal Yanyuwa (Sapir, 1923 as cited in Bradley, 1988). Emphasis on gender differences in the use of language has made researchers question if life course factors contribute to these differences or just the way men and women are created (Yang & Wu, 2008). The extent to which gender impact comprehensibility of vague language, specifically hedging (approximators and quantifiers) in discourse is the focus of the study.

The work seeks to find answer to the question below:

1. Does gender affect the comprehensibility of the COVID-19 news reportage through the English vague expressions to users of English as a second language?

The research question is hypothesized as follows:

**H01:** There are no significant differences between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage.

### **Vague language**

Vagueness is a universal tendency in human language and culture, found in English, Chinese (Mandarin), German, Spanish, Persian, Arabic, etc. (Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2014; Alkhatnai, 2017; Cutting, 2015, 2019; Sabet & Zhang, 2015). Despite vagueness been an inherent and integral feature of human language and culture, its definition is slippery (Channell, 1994; Ismail, Bsharat, & Amirbayeva, 2022). Vagueness implies a tolerant meaning that is insensitive to small changes such as considering the difference between a hill and a mountain, a village and a hamlet, etc. The small changes are often worked out in interaction; as long as human communication deals with perception and categorisation, it cannot be completely free from being vague. Vagueness is useful in clarifying and performing interpersonal functions, such as in legal documents (Meyerhoff, 1992; Cotterill, 2007; Pishwa, 2014). Humans use words or expressions with elastic meanings strategically to augment their interactions in various aspects of human endeavours, such as news reportage, academic writing, politics, language teaching, literature, newspaper editorials, inaugural lectures, mathematics classrooms, courtrooms, and corporate responsibility reports (Cotterill, 2007; Ewata & Mahmud, 2014; Ewata, 2017; Jin, 2022; Poole, 2022; Sabet & Zhang, 2015; Ewata, Akeredolu-Ale, & Awe, 2023).

There are divided views on who communicates more vaguely of the two genders. Channell (1994) suggests no discernible distinction exists, in their communication. Holmes (1984) on the other hand, claims women use more vague language in certain situations, such as in informal interaction, employment interviews, and scholarly presentations. Coates (2015) tolling the path of Channell (1994), argues that the question of who uses vague language more between male and female cannot be specifically determined as the context, culture, and individual traits of the interlocutors' impact language usage choices. From another angle, Else (2019) stresses that men use more "broad" vocabulary than women for grants.

## Vague Language and Gender

Lakoff (1975) argues that women's language is seen as feeble due to their use of less assertive words, hedging devices, and the use of language indicators such as: “questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns, and adverbials begin sentence” (Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann & Gibson, 1998, p. 315). This makes some analysts say women communicate “relative uncertainty” (Mulac & Lundell, 1994). That even as children, boys exhibit confidence in opinion, while girls communicate “socio-intellectual status and aesthetic quality” (Mulac, Studley & Blau, 1990, p. 439). This feebleness led to the "assertiveness training movement" in the 1970s and 1980s aimed at correcting women’s poor communication skill or style (Crawford, 1995).

Psychologically, women have better memory, are competitive, and communicate less emphatically. They are more affectionate, submissive, sympathetic, and use more standard language than men (Mulac, et al., 1990; Eisenman, 1996; Gu, 2013). Men are assertive, which supports Tannen’s (1990) claim that life for men is a contest: e.g., (“Let’s go get some food”, Mulac, et al., 1988,). Women communicate concretely and specifically in business, while men abstractly talk about the "bigger picture" (Joshi, Wakslak, Appel & Huang, 2020)). This abstract and bigger picture stance makes some analysts view men as possessing greater power, leadership potentials, and expertise (Gysler, Kruse, & Schubert, 2002). Women use nonverbal variables, such as smiles and gaze, more than men who take more turns and interrupt their interlocutors more (Mulac, et al., 1990). Aries (1996) suggests that there is an absolute difference between men and women in communication, as women are involved, empathic, supportive, and bonding, while men are domineering and more conscious of their ego. According to Newman, et al. (2008), language to men is an instrument of transmission of message while women see language as a social thing.

Despite the differences between men and women communication, commentators argue that language and gender are interrelated, with some arguing that gender differences in communication are universal and affect age, status, language, and speech community (Joshi, et al., 2020; Nemati & Bayer, 2007). However, Joshi, et al. (2020) argue that gender is determined by social goals and audience, while others argue that gender is an ever-changing not lucid classification (Curtis & MacCorquodale, 1990).

Coates (2013) emphasizes that gender differences in language use are not due to the communicators’ gender but rather their communicative competence. However, we should be careful, as most assertions about gender differences are based on western

cultures and may not be uniform across different cultural and linguistic contexts (Valentine, 2019). In spite of this, the contentious issue of difference in women and men's communication patterns remains. This could be due to the limited sample size used in making these claims that may result in misleading generalisations. Socioeconomic factors, such as education, social class, income, and social exposure, may also impact on the outcome of the studies, as seen in the health sector (Darin-Mattsson, Fors, & Kåreholt, 2017; Fadipe, 2019; Rich-Edwards, Kaiser, Chen, Manson & Goldstein, 2018)

## **Hedging**

Hedging is a cultural norm in human discourse, used to tone down utterances and statements to reduce riskiness in every discourse type: formal or informal, written or spoken, spontaneous or planned (Markkanen & Schröder, 1997, p. 4), Gribanova & Gaidukova, 2019)) It expresses tentativeness and possibility, softening categorical statements, and promoting personal modesty and honesty (Hyland, 1995); Zuck & Zuck, (1987 as cited in Hyland, 1998) as well as project language users' "personal modesty and honesty" (Salager-Meyer, 1994). Hedging is a non-violent language conflict management strategy used by academics "to manage conflictual situations in their work." (Ewata, 2017).

Hedging is a crucial aspect of language and cultural users' pragmatic competence and metapragmatic awareness (Fraser, 2010; Wishnoff, 2000) It involves politeness phenomena, mitigation, vagueness, and modality, and is a linguistic device used to project honesty, modesty, and caution in self-reports (Schröder & Zimmer, 1997; Gribanova & Gaidukova, 2019). Hedging falls under the rhetorical devices used for: "projecting honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports and for diplomatically creating space in areas heavily populated by other researchers" (Swales, 1990, p. 175). It is classified within the vague language set as it helps make things fuzzy and bridge social gaps (Lakoff, 1973). We must stress that it is not a deficiency of language or communication system but an intentional human communicative device (Channell, 1994), indicating nebulosity, doubt, or tentativeness. Salager-Meyer (1994), echoing Rounds (1981) stresses that hedging elements are not mere linguistic devices to protect writers and speakers but are also a rhetorical device to express uncertainty, scepticism, and doubt (Skelton, 1988). For the purpose of this work, two subclasses of hedging: approximators and quantifiers are involved.

## Approximators

Quirk & Greenbaum (1987, p. 199) classify approximators as a subclass of "downtoners" in grammar, which lower the verb force. In the same vein, Salager-Meyer (1994) takes them as hedging subsets that showcase estimation in measurement, degree, quantity, frequency, and time. Other commentators say approximators convey imprecision, uncertainty, frequency, and probability in discourse (Moxey & Sanford, 2000); Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002)).

Channell (1994, p. 43) emphasizes that approximators are not precise numbers or quantities but intervals of numbers "whose extent is apparently not exactly specified". She cited the following examples to buttress her point: "I wonder what time I've got to go to the dentist. It's always around four o'clock" (p. 45). She stresses further that the approximators appear as the first of the two parts of approximation (e.g., approximately, around), while the second part is "one or two 'exemplar numbers'". They serve to express an approximation to the force of the verb and are used when exact measurements are not important or unobtainable, or when precision is not needed.

Let us consider the following made-up examples, for instance:

1. She is 4ft tall
2. She is 4ft, 6inches tall.

Example 1 suffices as there is really no need for 2.

The exact height is not necessary as we are not using it for any specific purpose in the discourse (Sigurd, 1988). It however serves various pragmatic functions (Crystal & Davy, 1975). It is in this light that earlier commentators see approximators as vague language elements that give a round number rather than an exact one. Wachtel (1980) argues that approximately approximation allows for latitude distribution proportionally around the exemplar number.

The 10 approximators for our study are: *almost, approximately, around, at least, nearly, over, between x and y, more than, about, and according to.*

## Quantifiers

A quantifier states the quantity of the noun there is (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002, p. 26). As a grammatical group, quantifiers are "two small groups of closed-system" used to express quantities: "(1) *many, {a} few, and several* co-occur only with plural count nouns... (2) *much and {a} little* co-occur only with non-count nouns..." (Quirk

& Greenbaum, 1987, p. 66). They indicate impreciseness in numbers and are depicted through non-numerical expressions in discourse.

Apart from some few persons, language users often struggle with counting due to their lack of number sense (Dantzig, 1930; Nelson Laird, Korkmaz & Chen, 2009). To alleviate stress, they use vague quantification. Re-emphasising Mosier (1941) earlier assertion, Bradburn & Miles (1979) argue that humans can be less emphatic about counting and its exactness by relying on the concept of two constituents: “one constant, anchoring meaning in the vicinity of a particular point on a continuum, and one variable, representing fluctuations in meaning that stemmed from the individual usage of the speaker and the context”.

The 10 quantifiers this study has chosen to work with are: *(a) few, a number of, all of, less, many, most, often, several and some.*

### **Some Previous Studies on Vague Language and Gender**

Interest in gender in feminism and the idea of taking gender as a universal aspect of language necessitated using language differences between men and women as a sign of psychological and social inequality among the sexes (Lakoff, 1973, 1975). Lakoff stresses that women use, at the syntactic level, more hedges than men. This, according to Weatherall (2002, p. 58) is “signalling uncertainty”. Since Lakoff studies, different scholars have studied the way men and women communicate. In these studies, some conclude that women speak differently from men while some do not see the difference.

Holmes (1988) argues that there is no difference in vague language usage between men and women in New Zealand while Mills (2003) disagrees with the notion that women are often more polite than men but argues that women may be stereotypical and impolite when needed.

Boakye (2007) finds gender differences in vague language usage in both formal and informal contexts, stressing that there is gender difference in use of language, with women using vague additives more than men. Yang & Wu (2008) also note gender differences in vague word usage among native and non-native English speakers. Newman et al. (2008) discover women’s use of words were different from men and that women used their words for psychological and social processes while the men used words for object properties and impersonal topics. Essa (2017) notices a gender difference in the use of general extenders in British English discourse.

Tannen (1991) argues that men and women communicate differently due to their communication goals. Women view the world from an interconnected perspective, while men view it as a competition. To Weatherall (2002) and other analysts, language of men and women is influenced by their gender which “contributes to the features of the interactional context” (p. 113). According to Tannen (1990), there are six core differences in how men and female use language. They are:

- i. status vs. support: that men view language-use in the society as a way of emphasising supremacy i.e. they use words or communication to establish status, while women view language-use in the society as a way of supporting ideas i.e. they use it to look for and proffer (pp. 24-25).
- ii. advice vs. understanding: that when men use language, it helps them solve their problems i.e. to search solution to their problems while to women, language is used to comfort them in whatever situation they find themselves i.e. they use language to seek for compassion and support to their problems (p. 22).
- iii. independence vs. intimacy: that when men use language, they use it independently, as they value their independence while women strive/clamour for intimacy.
- iv. advice vs. understanding: that when men use language, it helps them solve their problems while to women, language is used to seek empathy and compassion for their difficulties they are facing (pp. 149-151).
- v. information vs. feelings: that when men communicate, they want to pass information to the other party and get over with it, thus, their messages are “message/ task-oriented” but women would not only pass information but would consider the emotional factors of the information they want to pass on the other party i.e. they use language for establishing relationships and for building social ties. Men are "hierarchical" in their dealings including language use while women are "egalitarian" (p. 20).
- vi. orders vs. proposals: that men use straightforward command – “close the door” (p. 142), women use subtle or super polite forms of command in communication for "making suggestions, not demands" (p. 73). For instance, "Let's go out for lunch today"; "Let's clean up now, before we start lunch" (p. 73)

Conflict vs. compromise: women do not like being confrontational while men are confrontational both of these are portrayed in the way they use language (pp. 149-151).

### **Theoretical Model**

Scholars propose four models to explain language use between men and women: deficit, dominance, difference, and diversity. Deficit model suggests women's language usage reduces their power in the society; the dominance model asserts that men dominate women; the difference model indicates distinct language usage norms, and the diversity model suggests differences are due to socialization rather than biological characteristics.

This study leans towards the difference model which is also referred to as difference in cultural approach (Uchida, 1992). That is the manner it subscribes to the idea that women and men use language differently in the society due to their different subculture backgrounds. Tannen (1990), the proponent of difference model, borrows the concept from Gumperz (1982), argues that parents speak differently to boys and girls while growing up. That they speak to girls using emotive words and boys using activity verbs. This socialisation reinforces gender roles and shapes how individuals view the world, leading to a difference in language usage. She contends that when men use language in society, they do not do so to suppress or lord over women but rather to accomplish goals

Tannen postulates that the world of the woman and man are not the same and that both of them use different words to say the same thing. Though they see the world differently, it is not as a means of dominance. Women communicate through language so as to keep the social bonds.

### **Methods**

*Major World COVID-19 News Reportage* was set as the search parameter in *Google Alerts* between the months of June to August, 2020. The search results were pooled directly from the different media web sites to a dedicated mail assigned to receive the harvested results. Since the focus of the study was on COVID-19 news pandemic coverage, there was no restriction on the type of news reportage both print and electronics (TV) media were collected. As long as it focussed on the COVID-19 pandemic, the items arrived from all over the world as there was also no ceiling on the country from where the reportage came. 200 news stories/reports of 311488 words made up the corpus of the study. To a large extent, the corpus is representative as it is solely of the journalistic genre that centred on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also, since the texts of the corpus were online materials from the news organisations' sites in the HTML format, they were converted to the plaintext format for ease of processing by the *AntConc* (4.2.4). However, the names of the news organisations, the titles of the news items, date of production and the site address of each item were left as metadata. Each of the 20 preselected vague quantifying elements (10 approximators – *almost, approximately, around, at least, nearly, over, between x and y, more than, about, and according to* as well as 10 quantifiers – (*a few, a number of, all of, less, many, most, often, several and some*) under focus was searched in the corpus using *AntConc*'s Key Words in Context (KWIC) tool.

Furthermore, a research instrument of 20 test-item questionnaire was administered on 350 (225 males and 125 females) Nigerian L2 users of English respondents through *Google Forms*. The questionnaire was structured into three sections. **Section 1** formed the introductory part which elicited respondents' information on gender and education levels. **Section 2** elicited information on the respondents' understanding of the vague language elements in the human communication. It had 10 questions of 5-point Likert scale of: Strongly Agreed (**SA**), Agreed (**A**), Undecided (**U**), Strongly Disagreed (**SD**), and Disagreed (**D**). **Section 3** contained 10 polar (**Yes/No**) questions; which required information on the respondents' understanding of the meaning in the context of the use of the vague quantifying language elements. The questionnaire was administered through *WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter*. The respondents were requested to determine if they understood the examples of the vague quantifying language elements taken from the corpus.

In addition, the study was interested in eliciting information on the respondents' levels of understanding of the vague language elements on the basis of their gender, on the one hand, and their levels of education, on the other hand. Using two hypotheses, the responses from these 20 test-item questionnaires administered on the 350 Nigerian L2 users of English respondents were subjected to inferential statistics (chi-square and Kruskal Wallis Test) at 0.05 significant level.

## Data Presentation

Here are examples of the vague quantifying language elements in the corpus:

1... Nordre Aker, Bjerke, Grorud, Stovner and Alna before arriving back in Østensjø **around** 9:30 at night (COVID-19 Recovery Chellange: Soda Ash Market Overview to 2020 – 2025 July 31, 2020 <https://researchnewspaper.com/COVID-19-recovery-chellange-soda-ash-market-overview-to-2020-2025/>).

2. Tribune Publishing is in talks with Prudential Plaza owner Sterling Bay for a buyout of its **approximately** 137,000-square-foot lease in the office complex overlooking Millennium Park, according to real estate sources (August 06, 2020, Coronavirus in Illinois updates: State reports the highest number of daily COVID-19 cases since the end of May as lakefront restaurants are set to reopen this week: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-covid-19-pandemic-chicago-illinois-news-20200806-b2zp42cdm5f2lgnh4xq62oujai>).

3. The world's biggest COVID-19 vaccine study got under way on Monday with the first of 30,000 planned volunteers helping to test shots created by the US government along with Moderna Inc - one of **several** candidates in the final stretch of the global vaccine race (July 27, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/morocco-returns-partial-coronavirus-lockdown-live-updates-200726222443290.html>).

4. U.S. airlines this week unveiled stricter rules for face coverings, with **at least** two, American and Southwest, saying they will no longer carry passengers who refuse to wear masks (July 24, 2020, U.S. coronavirus cases double in just six weeks, to 4 million: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/07/23/covid-live-updates-us/>).

5. F1 said it still hoped to hold **between 15 and 18 races** "and end in the Gulf in mid-December." (The World Health Organization has recorded the highest rise in global cases in a single day: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-latest-record-daily-rise-in-new-covid-19-cases/a-54301885>).

6. **Nearly** a dozen Indian states have imposed a partial lockdown in high risk areas after spikes in coronavirus cases ... (Bolsonaro tests positive for coronavirus again: Live; 15 Jul 2020 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/coronavirus-vaccine-poised-final-testing-liveupdates-200714232458235.html>)

7. **A number of** people who had been in contact with the man were also displaying symptoms, said Nguyen Tien Hong, deputy director of Da Nang's Center for Disease Control and Prevention (The World Health Organization has recorded the highest rise in global cases in a single day: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-latest-record-daily-rise-in-new-covid-19-cases/a-54301885>).

8. The UK has recorded over 298,000 cases and **more than** 45,500 deaths (July 24, 2020, Local news outlets are crucial to stopping COVID-19 spread: <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/guest-commentary/os-op-coronavirus-local-news-public-health-20200724-hqevjvc6jsndvben64kxhkcut5u-story.html>).

9. **Over** a half-million people have died in the rest of the world (Misinformation on coronavirus is proving highly contagious; July 30, 2020; <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2020/jul/30/misinformationon-coronavirus-is-proving-highlyco/>).

10. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was questioned about Immanuel's video during an **often**-contentious congressional hearing Wednesday (July 30, 2020, Misinformation on coronavirus is proving highly contagious: <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2020/jul/30/misinformation-on-coronavirus-is-proving-highly-co/>).

**Analysis on the research question and hypothesis:**

**Research Question:** Is there difference between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage?

**Table 1:** Difference between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Agreed (Number of Female)</b>	<b>Disagreed (Number of Male)</b>
1	If we didn't act quickly and smartly, we would have had, in my opinion and in the opinion of others, anywhere from 10 to 20 and maybe even 25 times the number of deaths, Trump said two months later.	335 (96%)	15 (4%)
2	Approximately 400,000 of the Combat COVID masks purchased by the county have been mailed out to area residents.	292 (83%)	58 (17%)
3	“Corona has set off a bit of a digital revolution in the way we work,” wrote researcher Anne Skevik Grødem in the newspaper Dagsavisen	310 (89%)	40 (11%)
4	Tim Walters: “I was diagnosed yesterday at the ER with COVID-19 and here I am months after not wearing a mask at rallies, churches and so on and so it’s funny how capricious this thing is.”	297 (85%)	53 (15%)
5	Communicate and adopt context-specific measures to limit the contagion: frequent hand washing, case isolation, bans on public gatherings, lockdowns, etc.	231 (66%)	119 (34%)
6	As of July 8, Africa had just surpassed barely 500,000 cases.	302 (86%)	48 (14%)
7	We need to kind of flood the system, not only with testing, but we need to flood it with workers who understand the community, people that are trusted in the community, to be able to figure out what's going on here, Fauci said.	325 (93%)	25 (7%)
8	And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?	244 (70%)	106 (30%)
9	It makes me wonder, perhaps, 100 years from now, that a great-grandchild of one of the students who presented	317	33

	today will look back on the project of her or his great-grandmother or great-grandfather to make sense of a pandemic they will be facing.	(91%)	(9%)
10	"I guess the question becomes whether the mayor would continue these," Daugherty said.	292 (83%)	58 (17%)

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of the participants that agreed, or disagreed that the items possess English vague expression. The data in table 1 reveals that the percentage of the female participants who agreed that the various expressions are vague are higher than their male counterparts. The results show that there are difference between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage. One aspect of this difference could be attributed to communication styles. Males and females often have different communication styles, with females tending to use more indirect and nuanced language, and males being more direct and literal in their speech. This can lead to variations in interpreting vague language. Moreover, in terms of socialization, from a young age, males and females are socialized differently regarding language use. Females may be taught to be more attuned to nuances and indirect communication, leading to a more developed understanding of vague language. Furthermore, cultural expectations and gender roles can influence how individuals interpret language. In many cultures, females are expected to be more empathetic and attuned to others' feelings, which can contribute to their heightened sensitivity to vague language. Also, research has shown that there are differences in the ways males and females use language (linguistic differences). This can impact how they understand and interpret vague language, as well as their proficiency in navigating its subtleties. Finally, cognitive differences could be a factor. Some studies (such as Crawford & Harche, 1986; Maltz & Borke, 1982) suggest that male and female brains may process language differently, leading to variations in understanding vague language.

**Ho 1:** There is no significant differences between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage.

**Table 2:** Chi-square Analysis of the male and female Participants' Perception on the vague language in the COVID-19 news reportage

S/N	Items	Gender	Number of participants	Chi-square	p-value
1	If we didn't act quickly and smartly, we would have had, in my opinion and in the opinion of others, anywhere from 10 to 20 and maybe even 25 times the number of deaths, Trump said two months later.	Female	335	292.6	0.000
		Male	15		
2	Approximately 400,000 of the Combat COVID masks purchased by the county have been mailed out to area residents.	Female	292	156.5	0.000
		Male	58		
3	“Corona has set off a bit of a digital revolution in the way we work,” wrote researcher Anne Skevik Grødem in the newspaper Dagsavisen	Female	310	208.3	0.000
		Male	40		
4	Tim Walters: “I was diagnosed yesterday at the ER with COVID-19 and here I am months after not wearing a mask at rallies, churches and so on and so it’s funny how capricious this thing is.”	Female	297	170.1	0.000
		Male	53		
5	Communicate and adopt context-specific measures to limit the contagion: frequent hand washing, case isolation, bans on public gatherings, lockdowns, etc.	Female	231	35.8	0.000
		Male	119		
6	As of July 8, Africa had just surpassed barely 500,000 cases.	Female	302	184.3	0.000
		Male	48		

7	We need to kind of flood the system, not only with testing, but we need to flood it with workers who understand the community, people that are trusted in the community, to be able to figure out what's going on here, Fauci said.	Female	325	257.1	0.000
		Male	25		
8	And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?	Female	244	54.4	0.000
		Male	106		
9	It makes me wonder, perhaps, 100 years from now, that a great-grandchild of one of the students who presented today will look back on the project of her or his great-grandmother or great-grandfather to make sense of a pandemic they will be facing.	Female	317	230.5	0.000
		Male	33		
10	"I guess the question becomes whether the mayor would continue these," Daugherty said.	Female	292	156.5	0.000
		Male	58		

Table 2 shows the chi-square analysis of the male and female participants' perception on the vague language in the COVID-19 news reportage. The data in table 2 shows that in all the items (items 1 to 10), the number of females that agreed on the item as vague is more than the males, and the p-values (0.000) for all the items are greater than the alpha value of 0.05. This shows that there is a difference. Consequently, there is a significant difference between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage. The communication style could lead to the significant differences in the interpretation of vague language, as individuals may be more accustomed to processing and understanding communication styles that align with their own. Moreover, research has also explored differences in the brain's processing of language between males and females, Maltz & Borker (1982) suggest that there may be differences in the neural mechanisms involved in language comprehension,

which could contribute to the significant variations in understanding vague language.

## **6.0 Discussion**

The study's aim was to ascertain that women interpret and understand vague language better than their male counterparts. This was done through raising of a research question and one null hypothesis. The hypothesis was tested through a 20-item questionnaire administered to 350 Nigerian English as a 2<sup>nd</sup> language user for their comprehensibility of the elements. The questionnaire included real life examples of 20 preselected hedging elements (10 approximators and 10 quantifiers) from a purpose-built corpus of 200 online news reportage on.

The 200-news reportage corpus contains 3,792 instances of the 20 vague quantifying items, with approximators used in 2,007 and quantifiers 1,785 instances, respectively. This trend follows previous studies that suggest that quantifiers are language devices for saving faces and mitigating face threats, while approximators protect speakers from criticism (Salager-Meyer (1994; Ruzaité, 2007; Ewata, 2017). This study also supports Channell (1994) and Jucker, et al.'s (2003) claims that vague quantifiers are more informative than complete numbers. It also corroborates with Prince, Frader, & Bosk (1982)'s research on physician-physician discourse and Salager-Meyer's (1994) medical English written discourse that advance that accuracy through use of numbers “may communicate unwarranted and/or undesired” exactness.

The study supports Ewata's (2014) research on Nigerian undergraduates' comprehension of English general extenders in newspaper editorials, and Prince et al.'s (1982) study that view quantification as a natural human reasoning component. It also gives credence to Jucker et al. (2003) which assert that the vague quantifiers are intentional linguistic strategies meant to make “contextual assumptions”; that being inexact, does not impair understanding in communication.

This study also found that there are significant differences between the male and female participants' comprehensibility of the English vague expression in the COVID-19 news reportage. Some of the factors that could lead to the gender differences are communication styles, social and cognitive factors. Gender socialization and societal expectations can influence how individuals perceive and interpret language. Cultural norms and stereotypes about gender can shape individuals' understanding of vague language. The findings of this study is in line with the findings of Holmes (1995), who found that females tend to use more vague language than men, This could imply that females may have a better understanding

due to their higher usage. Another study by James & Clarke (1993) revealed that females are more attuned to the use of vague language and are better able to interpret the meaning. They found that female students were adapt at decoding the implied meanings in vague language in comparison to male students.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

Based on the responses from the questionnaire used to answer the research question and the hypothesis, like the study of Boakye (2007) that examines vague language-use in both formal and informal contexts by both genders that admits that there is a difference in the use of vague language of women and men, this study too proves that there is difference in the comprehensibility of vagueness in COVID-19 Online News Reportage. Also like the study of Yang & Wu (2008), which investigates the vague words measurement across native and non-native English speakers and gender differences, this study also shows that there is gender difference in the comprehensibility of vagueness in COVID-19 Online News Reportage. In the same vein, this study tallies with those of Newman, et al. (2008) that states that women's words use in communication is different from men; this study shows that there is difference in the comprehensibility of vagueness in COVID-19 Online News Reportage by men and female respondents. In addition, our study also agrees with Essa (2017) that observes that there is a difference between male and female speakers' use of general extenders as the women use the vague elements more than the men; our study indicates that there is a difference between men and women comprehensibility of vagueness in COVID-19 Online News Reportage.

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