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"Negotiating vagueness in the asylum interview:

an ELF perspective"

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Abstract

This thesis examines the use of vague language in the asylum interview from an 'English as a lingua franca' perspective. Thereby, the focus of the current analysis lies on ELF speakers and their strategies to communicate successfully in high-stake immigration encounters. The asylum interview is defined as a bureaucratic procedure that investigates an applicant's eligibility to international protection. Thus, the goal of the interview is to establish a clear and precise account of why an applicant's life is under threat in his or her home country, as well as a coherent timeline of their escape. This goal is challenged by a number of communicative difficulties, such as language barriers, diverging background knowledge, and differing expectations of what it means to be precise and coherent. There is little research to date on how speakers cooperate to achieve this goal and reach a mutual understanding of which expressions are too vague for the context of the asylum interview.

This paper investigates the transcripts of three authentic asylum interviews recorded in Austria, Graz, and conducted in English as a lingua franca. A brief quantitative assessment describes the frequencies of vague quantifiers, general extenders, and general nouns in the data. The main and qualitative analysis investigates how these vague expressions are used, negotiated, and tolerated in the discourse. Further, this thesis takes into account the written report, which subsequent to the interview serves as the prime document in the asylum procedure. By comparing vague expressions in the interview with how they are recorded in the report, this thesis aims to identify the required level of precision and how the inclusion of vague language in the report might differ from one instance to the other.

The findings suggest that vague language is an important and highly functional element of the asylum interview that can help the discourse to move forward. They further highlight that the differences in the participants' expectations and pragmalinguistic schemata might act as a disadvantage to the asylum seeker if not explicitly addressed. Therefore, the joint negotiation of language and strategic use of vagueness can help participants to cope with the demands of the asylum interview.

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1. Introduction

Every year, thousands of people are forced to seek international protection to escape persecution or war in their home countries. In order to be granted asylum, an applicant's eligibility under international asylum law has to be thoroughly investigated by the host country. Throughout Europe, this is done with the help of the asylum interview; an institutional and bureaucratic procedure that aims to verify an asylum seeker's identity and claim to protection. The asylum interview is a crucial opportunity for the applicant to tell his or her story, and the outcome of the interview often depends on whether the official in charge perceives the story as plausible, precise, and coherent. Reaching shared understanding in the asylum interview is, however, complicated by several factors, including language barriers and the participants' diverging background knowledge and expectations regarding precision and coherence.

By law, every person facing administrative and legal procedures has the right to an interpreter in order to "be informed promptly and in detail in a language which he understands of the nature and cause of charge against him" (*International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* 1966, Article 14). Yet, this law does not necessarily ensure that the language used for mediation is the applicant's first language. In fact, it has become a frequent occurrence within EU countries to bridge language barriers in a legal setting with the use of English as a lingua franca (Maryns 2015; Felici 2015; Bajcic 2018). Hence, it is possible for asylum interviews in Austria to be conducted in English, even though English does not have an official status within the country and is not the first language of the participants.

Despite the high stakes and communicative challenges associated with the asylum interview, there is little research to date on the use of English as a lingua franca in this specialised context (Guido 2008; Maryns 2015). The present thesis therefore aims to work towards filling this gap by examining how the participants of the asylum interview negotiate a shared understanding of important details in a lingua franca. Particularly, this thesis focuses on vague expressions, such as vague quantifiers, general extenders, and general nouns. These lexical items can make conversation more effective but also more difficult, depending on how much background knowledge is shared by speakers. Previous research into the asylum interview has shown that the decision whether an applicant is granted asylum is greatly influenced by whether his or her narrative satisfies the official's expectations of accuracy and coherence (Blommaert

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1999: 21). It is therefore of central interest to examine how participants use, negotiate, and accept vague language in immigration encounters.

This thesis is situated on the intersection between research on English as a lingua franca, the asylum interview, and vague language. The qualitative analysis relies on three transcripts of authentic asylum interviews conducted in English as lingua franca at the Federal Asylum Office in Graz, Austria, and is guided by the following questions:

1. How and to what end is vague language used in the asylum interview?
2. What patterns and strategies can be observed in the negotiation of vague language?
3. How is the negotiation and use of vague language summarized and recorded in the preliminary written report during the interview?

As a starting point, chapter 2 provides the theoretical foundation for the analysis of vague language. While widely used in linguistics, there is little consensus on what the term 'vague' actually refers to. Thus, section 2.1. Summarizes and compares the most important approaches and conceptualisations of vagueness. Subsequently, section 2.2. focuses on various functions that vague expressions may fulfil and section 2.3. offers a description of specific examples of vague language. This includes vague quantifiers, general extenders, placeholder words, and referential expressions. Lastly, section 2.4. discusses core terms and definitions important to the analysis of the current thesis, such as 'vagueness, 'ambiguity', and 'specificity'.

Chapter 3 presents a brief introduction to the research field of English as a lingua franca, with a focus on ELF in the European Union. Following the general introduction in 3.1., section 3.2. discusses ELF as a multilingual practice and the difficulties associated with multilingual language policies of the EU. Section 3.3. homes in on the use of ELF as a *de iure* working language in the EU legal context. Finally, section 3.4. connects ELF to vague language and examines previous research on how ELF speakers negotiate shared understanding and precision.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the genre under investigation, the asylum interview. The first subsection provides basic background information regarding the legal procedure of the asylum interview in Europe and specifically in Austria. Section 4.2. examines the communicative challenges in the asylum interview and discusses findings of previous research on the matter. The last portion of this chapter considers the legal perspective on vague language and summarizes how vagueness is treated and perceived in the legal setting.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed description of the data and methodological approach of this thesis. This includes general information concerning the transcription conventions and how to read the extracts presented in the analysis. Further, the three asylum interviews investigated for this thesis are summarized in terms of participants, structure, and contents. Lastly, section 5.2. delineates the methodology used for the analysis and provides a step-by-step account of the analysis procedure.

Chapter 6 offer a brief quantitative analysis of the data. First, section 6.1. describes the findings in terms of overall frequency and distribution over the data sets. Subsequently, these findings are discussed in section 6.2.

Chapter 7 presents the main analysis of this thesis, namely the qualitative analysis of vague expressions in the data. Each extract taken from the transcripts is analysed in regard to the vague expressions it includes and the strategies employed by the participants to arrive at shared meaning. Further, the extracts are compared with their counterparts in the preliminary report of the interview. This comparison makes it possible to see the end result of the negotiation and offers insights into which degree of vagueness is accepted for the goal of the interview. The chapter begins by examining instances in which vague language is used strategically in order to help the discourse move on. Further, this section considers how the participants of the interview cooperate to reach an agreement concerning which vague expressions are tolerated. The second part, section 7.2., focuses on the negotiation of general nouns. This section looks in detail at how nouns that denote locations, people, and dates are discussed and identified together by the participants of the asylum interview. To consider the other side of the coin, this section also deals with overspecified nouns and compares their use and function to those of their underspecified counterparts.

Lastly, the conclusion summarizes and highlights the most important findings of this study.

2. Theoretical background: towards a definition of vague language

This chapter aims to provide the theoretical background for the qualitative analysis of vague language in the asylum interview. The first section delineates and discusses previous approaches to vagueness within the field of linguistics. Subsequently, section 2.2. narrows in on the various functions vague language can fulfil. Section 2.3. outlines well-researched examples of vague language that can be expected to bear relevance with regard to the asylum interview, starting with vague quantifiers, general extenders, placeholder words, and lastly referential expressions. The final section of this chapter summarizes the most important ideas from the review and provides the working definitions for key terms, such as 'vagueness', 'ambiguity', and 'specificity'.

2.1. Previous views on vague language

We use vague language every day, be it intentionally or unintentionally. Examples of these instances range from *let's meet around three* to *I am talking about that thingy*. It is a fact that language can be successful in spite of - or even because of - its vagueness and utterances such as *around three* and *thingy* can, in most cases, still be interpreted correctly by our listeners thanks to shared knowledge about the world. Vague language has therefore been described as a "natural trait" (Devos 2003: 121) and an even "indispensable element" (Christie 1963: 885) of language. But why would speakers choose to use vague language in the first place and risk the misinterpretations of their intended meaning? After all, fuzzy language can also be viewed as an "abusage of language" (Partridge 1947), best to be avoided and indicative of deceptive motives. Therein lies the fundamental question that has driven the discourse around vague language, with scholars from philosophy, psychology, literature, and linguistics attempting to find their own answer to the question whether vagueness in language is a 'bad' or a 'good' thing.

Yet, this might be the wrong question to begin with. Channell (1994), one of the most important linguistic voices on vague language, draws a swift conclusion to this argument. Neither side is correct, as "what matters is that vague language is used appropriately" (Channell 1994: 3). With "appropriately", Channell refers to both the situational context as well as the linguistic co-text of an utterance. Additionally, she differentiates between appropriate language uses in spoken and written text types.

Depending on these factors, language can be either suitable to the circumstances or fail to meet the expected or required level of specificity (Channell 1994: 4-5). Her description follows Russell's (1923: 90) claim that vagueness has to be regarded as a "matter of degree", with accuracy being "an ideal limit." This makes a comprehensive description of vague language almost impossible, which is reflected in the manifold definitions of 'vagueness' and related terminology found in the literature. The more relevant questions, then, appear to be about the factors that can render language too vague or too precise for certain contexts, and how speakers navigate through diverging norms of explicitness.

In an attempt to arrive at a comprehensive answer to these questions, the views of scholars such as Peirce (1902), Ullmann (1962), Crystal and Davy (1975), and Channell (1994) lead the way. As one of the earliest voices on the matter, Peirce (1902: 748) states the following in the "Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology":

> A proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition.

In other words, the meaning of words is flexible and context-depended, which attributes an uncertainty to language regarding the exact meaning words are supposed to express in a given utterance. This enables speakers to use a word with a certain sense at one point, but with another sense at another point in time (Peirce 1902: 748). Several decades later, Ullmann (1962: 118) starts his investigation of vague language by stating that the term 'vagueness' in itself is rather vague, as it does not refer to a "uniform feature". In an attempt to identify contexts and reasons responsible for making language in use vague, he formulates four factors. Language may be vague because of (1) the generic character of words, (2) the context-bound meaning of words, (3) the fuzzy boundaries transferred from the real world into the linguistic world, and lastly because of (4) a speaker's unfamiliarity with the true meaning of certain words (Ullmann 2062: 118).

While generally agreeing with Ullmann's position, Channell (1994: 6-7) expresses doubts concerning some of these factors. First, she rejects the implication of Ullmann's argument regarding context-bound meaning, as his stance suggests that context will ultimately suffice to guide listeners to correct interpretations of vague utterances. Arguing that some words will always remain ambiguous or vague regardless of the context they are used in, Channell (1994: 6-7) dismisses the idea that exact

interpretations exist for every linguistic unit. Second, and more importantly, she calls the relationship of Ullmann's four factors into question, arguing that they cannot be treated in the same way. Generic words and context-bound meaning are a direct consequence of the fluid boundaries in the real world and of unfamiliar concepts. Therefore, Ullmann's latter two factors must, in fact, be treated as the cause of the first two factors (Channell 1994:7). Nevertheless, Ullmann's (1962) four factors provide an important perspective that has served as a starting point for many subsequent definitions of vague language.

Crystal and Davy (1975) provide the earliest account of vague language from the perspectives of applied linguistics. Similarly to Ullmann (1962), they delineate four reasons for linguistic vagueness: (1) temporary loss of words, (2) a speaker's lack of a suitable word to express a certain meaning, (3) a perceived lack of need to be precise, and lastly, (4) a speaker's conscious choice to use vague terms in order to fit the nature of the given conversation (Crystal & Davy 1975: 111). Their reasons, thus, differ significantly from Ullmann's description. Another difference is that Crystal & Davy's (1975) account puts emphasis on the speaker and his or her intentions, or as Channell (1994: 8) puts it, they "[shift] the problem away from linguistics and into psychology". While Crystal & Davy's first two reasons remain outside the speaker's power, the latter two are, in essence, choices controlled by the speaker. This marks an important deviation away from Ullmann's factors, which can all be considered to lie beyond the power of the speaker. Hence, Crystal and Davy's (1975) take on vague language assumes active speakers who consciously position themselves on a gradation of formality and appropriateness through their word choice.

Building in part on these descriptions, Channell (1994: 18) formulates her own understanding of vague language and defines three categories of vagueness: (1) vague additives, (2) vagueness by choice of words, and lastly, (3) vagueness by implicature. The first category concerns instances in which an otherwise grammatically complete and precise statement is extended with an additional word or phrase, which ultimately renders the whole utterance vague. An example is the utterance *A team of around ten people*, in which the word *around* leaves leeway into both directions concerning the actual number of team members (Channell 1994: 18). The second category refers to words that will always remain vague, no matter the context they are used in. For example, the quantifier *loads of* will never allow a precise inference concerning the exact number of items referred to. Using such words, which are "always, and unabashedly

vague", is an active choice by the speaker (Channell 1994: 18). The third category concerns the pragmatic implications that can add vagueness to a seemingly precise utterance. The statement *Sam is six feet tall* can mean that Sam measures precisely six feet, yet it can also be intended or interpreted to mean that Sam measures at least six feet (Channell 1994: 18). The theoretical basis for these three categories is summarized by Channel (1994: 20) in the following working definition of vague language:

> An expression or word is vague if:
> a. it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition
> b. it is 'purposely and unabashedly vague'
> c. its meaning arises from the 'intrinsic uncertainty' referred to by Peirce.

In other words, a word is understood as vague if another word can communicate the same proposition or if the word's exact proposition remains unclear even if considered within its co-text and context. Moreover, words are vague if it remains unclear which facts of its propositions are excluded or allowed in a particular instance.

Finally, this section will consider Devos' (2003) account on vagueness in light of its critique of the above-discussed frameworks. Disagreeing with Ullmann's (1962: 229) notion of extralinguistic reasons for vagueness, Devos (2003: 123) emphasises that vagueness has to be an intrinsic and therefore semantic phenomenon of language. This claim implies that fuzziness in language exists independently of possible fuzzy borders in the outside world. Vague language, consequently, is always a result of the speaker's intrinsic uncertainty concerning the use of a particular word (Devos 2003: 123). While proclaiming vagueness to be a predominantly semantic issue, Devos also mentions another kind of vagueness that results from pragmatics. Pragmatic vagueness, however, is reduced to the intentional use of semantic vagueness (Devos 2003: 123-124). Semantic vagueness is thus the prerequisite for pragmatic vagueness.

Devos' view does align with previous approaches in so far as vagueness is described as a matter of drawing boundaries between concepts. Here, Devos distinguishes between categorical or conditional vagueness on the one hand, and vagueness in degree on the other hand (Devos 2003: 124). The first type, categorical vagueness, applies to terms for which it is unclear what conditions are exactly necessary for their use. Devos exemplifies this type of vagueness with the utterance *big trip*. The necessary conditions for a trip to be characterised as *big* are categorically variable, and thus vague. This stands in contrast to the second type, referred to as either vagueness in degree, gradual vagueness, or quantitative vagueness. This type of vagueness implies

that there is a certain established norm to which the word relates (Devos 2003: 124). This may be a norm of class (i.e. How does the word compare to its norm?) or of hyponymy (i.e. How does the word compare to its closest superordinate?). Examples for vagueness in degree are the phrase *in the afternoon* or the word *teenager* (Devos 2003: 124). Categorical vagueness and vagueness in degree are not mutually exclusive and many lexical items can be regarded as vague in both senses (Devos 2003: 125).

More recent accounts on vague language generally base their definitions on the seminal work by Channell and subsequent interpretations of it. An increase in interest in the matter has generated a considerable amount of publications in the past few decades that investigate the use of vague language in diverse settings and genres. Vague language has been explored from the L1 perspective (Crystal and Davy 1975; Channell 1994; Cutting 1999, 2000; Jucker, Smith & Lüdge 2003, Koester 2007) as well as from the perspectives of L2 and intercultural communication (Cheng & Tsui 2009; Cheng and Warren 2001, 2003; Drave 2001; Terraschke 2007; Gasser 2012; Lin 2013). Other research has shed light on the use of vague expressions in specific genres and contexts, such as instant messages (Fernandes and Yuldavez 2011), English as lingua franca (Metsä-Ketelä 2016), academic text types (Ruzaite 2004; Cutting 2012), the healthcare context (Adolphs, Atkins & Harvey 2007) and the legal context (Christie 1963; Janney 2002; Cotterill 2007; Bhatia, Langton & Lung 2004; Vass 2017). The cumulative findings generated by these studies have demonstrated that, no matter whether considered 'bad' or 'good', vague language is a frequent and highly functional element of human language.

2.2. Functions of vague language

Vague language can perform an array of functions in communication, some more obvious than others. Probably the most often cited functions of vague expressions are of interpersonal nature, namely hedging (Cutting 2012; O'Keeffe 2007; Overstreet 1999; Ruzaite 2014; Vass 2017) and marking of in-group membership (Cutting 2000; O'Keeffe, McCarthy & Carter 2007, Cheng & Warren 2003; Cater & McCarthy 2006). On a more abstract level, vague language has been argued to provide language with elasticity and flexibility, thus allowing communication to be more effective (Christie 1963; Jucker, Smith & Lüdge 2003; Devos 2003; Zhang 2011).

The phenomenon of hedging has been studied extensively since Lakoff (1973) introduced the term to talk about the fuzzy meanings of words from a mostly semantic

viewpoint. Nowadays, hedging is firmly grounded within the pragmatic paradigm, with hedging devices commonly referred to as "pragmatic markers" (Carter and McCarthy 2006). Hedging devices, however, are not exclusively vague expressions; and vague expressions do not always function as hedges. Analysing vague language and hedging in academic discourse, Cutting (2012) provides a highly useful description of the functions that vague language used as hedging devices can achieve in communication. The descriptions of these functions are based on previous works (Banks 1998; Drave 2001; Trappes-Lomax 2007; Carter & McCarthy 2006) and engage with well-established pragmatic concepts, such as Politeness Theory (Brown and Levison 1987). Overall, Cutting identifies three main functions: 'courtesy', 'modesty' and 'caution'. The function of 'courtesy' refers to instances in which a speaker consciously chooses vague expressions over precise alternatives to express politeness (Cutting 2012: 285). Used with positive politeness, a vague expression may emphasis the close relationship between speaker and listener; used with negative politeness, it may signal respect and awareness for the listener's prior knowledge (Cutting 2012: 285). The second function, 'modesty', acts as a strategy for saving face. Despite being certain of his or her assertion, a speaker may prefer to use vague hedges in order to avoid being perceived as arrogant (Cutting 2012: 285). Lastly, vague language as a strategy to express 'caution' enables speakers to mark their statement in a tentative or preliminary manner. The vague expression thus signals uncertainty about the truth-value of an utterance and leaves room for doubt (Cutting 2012: 286). Although formulated for the academic context, Cutting's (2012) three hedging functions provide useful categories for analysing the function of vague language across many genres, including the asylum interview.

Because of its strong interpersonal function, vague language can also be considered an effective tool for group formation (Cutting 2000). In order for interlocutors to communicate successfully in spite of vague language, they need to possess equal access to the contextual reality necessary to decode the vague expressions. Carter and McCarthy (2006) therefore argue that vague language creates a presumed shared social space between interlocutors. Members of this shared space can be expected to know the referents of vague expressions, and, in turn, knowing these referents marks speakers as in-group members. A possible explanation for the appropriateness of vague expressions between in-group members comes from Lehrer (1975: 901-902), who investigated communication between professional wine experts. She concludes that the primary goal of the observed communication was "to share an

experience rather than to convey precise information" (Lehrer 1975: 901). This is backed up by Channell (1994: 193), who argues that "any social group sharing interests and knowledge employs non-specificity in talking about their shared interests".

Observing the use of vagueness in communication between medical professionals, Prince et al. (1982) also noticed that vague expressions were a frequent and appropriate communication device. Instead of hindering understanding between doctors, the vague items signalled competence and further in-group membership in the field of medicine. Lehrer's (1975) and Prince et al.'s (1982) observations can be considered examples of in-group membership due to a shared profession and interest. However, shared space between speakers does not have to be pre-existent, but can also evolve in real-time and create in-group membership on the spot. One example of such a dynamic space is presented by Cheng and Warren (2003: 387), who investigate vagueness in naturally occurring language between Hong Kong Chinese speakers and native English speakers. Their findings demonstrate that shared understanding between speakers can be flexible, external, and never fixed, and still provide a basis for the joint construction of meaning. By "fill[ing] in the gaps in each other's knowledge", speakers gradually build up their own context in spite of diverging socio-lingual backgrounds (Chang & Warren 2003: 387). As a consequence, the exact reality may also differ between participants, with not everyone having "full and equal access" (Cheng & Warren 2003: 381).

Moreover, vague expressions have been connected to efficiency in language. Jucker, Smith and Lüdge (2003) and Zhang (2011) see vagueness as beneficial to communication efficiency, as vague expressions have the potential to communicate more knowledge than precise expressions could. This is demonstrated in the two utterances "*Twelve friends came to my birthday party*" and "*Most of my friends came to my birthday party*" (Zhang 2011: 575, [original emphasis]). While the first utterance uses a concrete number, the second relies on the vague non-numerical quantifier *most*. According to Zhang (2011: 575), the choice of *most* in the given context can communicate additional and highly informative meaning; namely that the speaker must be quite popular since most friends came to the party. This implicature cannot be inferred from the concrete number *twelve*. Hence, vague language can be "strategically utilized for certain communicative needs" (Zhang 2011: 577) and allows speakers to guide the attention of their listeners into the intended direction. Fraser (2010), along

these lines, speaks of pragmatic competence which allows speakers to use vague language effectively and to maximally enrich the illocutionary force of their message.

While vagueness can act as an efficiency booster in some contexts, others require speakers to be maximally precise in order for communication to be efficient. Approaching the debate from a cognitive perspective, Arts et al. (2011) investigate the identification time of underspecified, minimally specified, and overspecified referential expressions in an experimental setting. Their findings show that overspecified expressions lead to a faster identification time in some contexts, namely concerning object identification, but not in others, such as location identification (Arts et al. 2011: 373). They conclude that too much information might violate Grice's maxim of quantity, but seldomly affects the listener's inferencing process to a negative end. Coming back to naturally occurring speech, a multitude of factors can be expected to have an influence on whether overspecified expressions are perceived as easier or more difficult to interpret. This brings to mind Channell's (1994) comment on the 'appropriateness' of vague language, which might differ from context to context.

Apart from these main functions of vague language, there are also other functions worth mentioning for the purpose of this paper. Returning to Crystal and Davy (1975: 111), a vague expression may act as a placeholder for a word or phrase momentarily inaccessible to the speaker. This highly functional use of vague items should be of particular interest when investigating English as a lingua franca communication. Loss of words and the search for a suitable word is a common occurrence in ELF data (i.e. Mauranen 2006: 138, Cogo 2009: 266; Dewey 2009: 66; Wolfartsberger 2011: 171-172), and the use of vague language in such situations is in effect a problem-solving strategy to avoid a breakdown in communication. Crystal and Davy (1975: 112) further mention a speaker's idiolect or a "lack of control due to emotional involvement in the conversation" as potential reasons for the use of vague expressions. Both of these factors may bear importance for legal genres, such as the asylum interview.

2.3. Examples of vague language

The manifold functions that vague language can serve are reflected in the variety of linguistic expressions that vague language can take. It is not within the scope of this paper to give anything close to a complete account of vague lexical units. Therefore, this chapter presents some of the most widely discussed examples of vague language that

can be expected to have relevance in regard to the text type under investigation, the asylum interview. As will be discussed in section 4, the asylum interview is situated within the legal context; yet, it is subject to unique conditions due to its communicative goal, high stakes, and the power asymmetry between participants. This leads to the assumption that the language used in the asylum interview will be formal and institutionalised, but also include features of a spoken, informal, and intercultural nature. Potential examples of vague language found in the present data may therefore include types of vague quantifiers, general extenders, placeholder words, and referential expressions of varying degrees of specificity.

2.3.1. Vague quantifiers

The term 'vague quantifiers' often serves as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of vague number approximations. This section will first discuss the frequent numerical quantifiers *about, around, round, approximately,* and *roughly*. Subsequently, non-numerical quantifiers including *loads of, lots, all* and *some* will be examined.

Numerical quantifiers have a basic structure of *approximator + n* and modify the specificity of the number they precede (Channell 1994: 44). Highly frequent examples of such numerical quantifiers are the largely interchangeable *about*, *around*, and its shorter version *round*. Relating back to Channell's (1994) claim of vagueness being a matter of appropriateness, these words may appear perfectly fitting in certain environments, while highly inappropriate in others. This is demonstrated in the following invented examples:

(1) A judge to the accused: "You are sentenced to about 5 years in prison."
(2) A friend to a friend: "I lived in the UK for about 5 years."

There are several reasons why *about* will be considered too vague and subsequently inappropriate in Example (1). In short, the sentencing of an accused is a formal procedure and the formulaic phrasing bears performative force. Hence, the vague quantifier of *about 5 years* undermines the performative speech act and renders the utterance and its legal consequences unclear. Contrarily, the same phrase used in the informal and conversational context of Example (2) appears familiar and appropriate, and can be comprehended effortlessly.

The term *approximately*, also preceding an exact number or quantity, has been observed to act similarly to, if not in the same way, as *about* and *around*. According to Channell (1994: 53), the choice between using *approximately*, *about*, *around* or *round* is ultimately a question of style, and therefore a question of context. *Approximately* is likely to be used in official, technical or scientific discourse, while the latter three approximators are usually preferred in informal settings. However, they all share the characteristic of describing a quantity potentially smaller or bigger than the number they precede. Other vague numerical quantifiers have a more narrow range. Terms such as *odd*, *more than,* and *over* always indicate a bigger quantity than the given number; *almost* or *nearly* indicate a smaller quantity (Ruzaite 2004: 217-218). Concerning the main function of such quantifiers beyond their semantic contribution to the utterance, Ruzaite (2004: 217) suggests that they introduce distance between the speaker and their claim, thus acting as hedging devices.

Another group that needs to be considered under the term 'vague quantifiers' are non-numerical quantifiers, such as *some, loads of, lots, several, sometimes*, or *few*. In contrast to their numerical counterparts, non-numerical approximators do not precede a number, but take over a number's place and function in the phrase. Further, non-numerical approximators have been observed to enter into relationships with each other (Channell 1994: 97). An example of a set of nun-numerical quantifiers linked through scalar relations, taken from Channell (1994: 97), is given in (3) below.

(3) <all, most, many, some, few>

The words in (3) are ordered in such a way that the left item will always entail the items to its right (Channell 1994: 97), meaning that *most books* entails *many books*. While non-numerical quantifiers stand in for a number, they do not communicate any specific information about the factual number they substitute. In some sense, this makes them a "weak" element in an utterance (Channel 1994: 99). Consider the following invented sentence in (4).

(4) All stolen painting were returned to the museum.

The non-numerical approximator *all* informs the listener that every stolen painting was returned to the museum, yet, this quantity remains wholly unspecified. In order for this

utterance to be informative, the listener has to have access to the relevant co-text and context. In an important comment, Channell (1994: 99) notes that the understanding of the gradation of such scales cannot be considered a given but relies on common perception and often unconscious shared knowledge between the speakers. Non-numerical quantifiers are often preferred in informal and spoken contexts, rather than in formal, technical or institutional contexts.

2.3.2. General extenders

A second example of vague language is the group of so-called general extenders, which has received a fair amount of attention over the past years. General extenders (henceforth GE) are defined as a specific type of a vague lexical unit that usually consists of a clause final conjunction followed by a noun phrase, such as the adjunctive *and what* or the disjunctive *or something* (Overstreet 1999: 3). They are considered to be a relatively fixed and closed set of nonspecific and formulaic morpho-syntactic structures.

From a grammatical perspective, GEs can be regarded as rather independent elements, as they do not necessarily have to agree with the syntactic category preceding them and can also differ in number and gender (Overstreet 1999: 10). This characteristic can make it difficult to match the extender to its intended conjoined part in the utterance (Overstreet 1999: 10). Further, GEs are usually attached to an already grammatically complete utterance. Hence, Overstreet (1999: 11) suggests that speakers must employ general extenders for non-grammatical reasons. Channell (1994) suggests the function of GEs to be predominantly referential and describes them as list completers or category identifiers. Disagreeing with this notion, Overstreet (1999: 13) proposes that GEs serve a mainly pragmatic and interpersonal function. This view is consistent with Ariel's (1994: 3250) description of GEs as "pragmatic operators". Overstreet (1999: 12) further claims that the use of GEs can indicate speakers' assumptions of their shared background knowledge and "mark an attitude toward the message expressed, or toward the hearer". Moreover, the use of GEs has been linked to politeness, hedging, and the alignment with social stance (Jucker, Smith & Lüdge 2003; Evison, McCarthy & O'Keeffe 2007; Fernandez & Yuldavez 2011).

Concerning their distribution, GEs mostly occur in informal and spoken conversations. This assertion is substantiated by findings from a.o. Overstreet (1999: 6-7), who counted 156 instances of general extenders in a corpus of 10 hours of

interaction between familiar participants. Within the same time span but in a formal setting with unfamiliar participants, such as courtroom deliberations or academic discourse, the number of GEs was only 30. Based on her extensive corpus study, Overstreet (1999: 144) concludes that the frequency of GEs "appears to be greatest in informal, spoken interactions among familiars". The study further revealed that certain GEs appeared exclusively in either the informal or formal setting. For example, the GE *and stuff* was frequently used in an informal setting, while *et cetera* appeared only in formal conversations (Overstreet 1999: 7). The use of vague expressions may therefore not only be a matter of whether vagueness is considered appropriate within a certain context, but also of which forms of vagueness are considered appropriate. A complete list of the GEs investigated by Overstreet (1999: 7) is provided in the appendix (cf. section 10.).

2.3.3 Placeholder words

Another well-researched type of vague expressions is one of many names. Channell 1994: 157) uses the word 'placeholder words', Crystal and Davy (1975: 112) speak of 'vague stand-in words', Cutting (2012) includes them under the term 'dummy nouns', and Mahlberg (2005) discusses this type of vagueness under the term 'general nouns'. No matter the label, they all denote roughly the same thing: a general word stands in for another more specific word and fulfils its function in the discourse. While the various terms are to a certain degree understood as synonymous, they do refer to varying sets of words, some more limited and others more inclusive.

Channell (1994: 157) restricts her conception of 'placeholder words' to spoken and informal words that are not part of the standard written language, such as *thingy* or *whatshisname*. These terms are used to replace either a name, an item name, or in some case both. The words they stand in for may temporarily be inaccessible to the speaker or be words the speaker is trying to avoid (1994: 162). Placeholder words thus carry mainly pragmatic importance and can be considered "almost completely empty semantically" (Channell 1994: 157). Channell's description is largely identical with Crystal and Davy's (1975: 112) view of 'vague stand-in words', which argues that placeholder words such as *thing* or *thingy* express "total" vagueness.

Cutting (2012) approaches this type of vagueness from a slightly different angle and discusses it under the term 'general nouns' that act as 'dummy nouns'. To illustrate

her conception of dummy nouns, she refers to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) examples of *thing, people* and *place*, which act similarly to pronouns and are semantically dependent on the word they stand in for. The correct interpretations of such "doubly vague" unmodified nouns can thus only be successful if the listener has access to the context and co-text of the utterance (Cutting 2012: 285). This view aligns with Mahlberg's (2005) discussion of general nouns, which also follows Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal contribution to the topic. Halliday and Hasan (1976: 274) identify general nouns as "having a generalized reference within the major noun classes" and differentiate between 'human nouns', 'fact nouns', and 'place nouns'. Mahlberg (2005: 3) adopts this approach in her own work but with revised labels, speaking of 'time nouns', 'world nouns', and 'people nouns'.

The category of time nouns includes terms such as *time, times, year, years,* and *day* (Mahlberg 2005: 63). Syntactically, these time nouns most often occur within time adverbials and can express a variety of meanings. They might be used to indicate the passing of time or a certain time orientation, they can inform about time invested into a particular activity, or be used to evaluate and support text orientation (Mahlberg 2005: 81). In most cases, the exact physical and measurable time these words stand in for remains unclear and thus vague, even though words such as *day* have a conventionalised fixed duration. In the sentence *I spent all day working on my essay*, the actual time that the noun *day* expresses does not equal 24 hours.

The category of world nouns is the most diverse group of the three and includes the terms such as *world, way, life, part, end, place, thing, things,* and *business.* While seemingly unrelated at first glance, the listed nouns share a number of evaluative and textual functions (Mahlberg 2005: 141). Moreover, most of them are connected by their inherent multifunctionality. The noun *place*, for instance, is listed with 15 senses in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary and can in addition also occur in multi-word verbs, such as *to take place* (Mahlberg 2005: 143).

The group of people nouns contains words such as *man, men, woman, women, family, person*, and *people* and is considered a less problematic category than the world nouns (Mahlberg 2005: 100). This is in part due to the limited contexts that people nouns can be used in, and in part to their prototypical noun behaviour. Still, words such as *person* and *people* can display a great functional variety. Mahlberg's (2005: 99) set of people nouns consists of exclusively countable nouns that function in both their singular and plural forms. Further, people nouns can be classified as concrete nouns, as they

refer to observable and physical entities instead of abstract concepts. Regarding their functional contribution to the creation of a person's identity, Mahlberg (2005: 105) formulates three categories that help understand the sense with which a people noun in its singular form can be used in a given text.

A The text deals with a specific person and the name of this person is given in the text.

B The text deals with a specific person, but no name is mentioned.

C Neither A nor B is the case, the text deals with a type and not with an individual person."

A people noun such as *woman* used in context A can be presumed to be easily connected to its referent in the discourse, as it simply stands in for an already specified and named person. The same holds for context B, even though the referent in itself is less specific. Given context C, the word *woman* has to be understood as a placeholder for an unspecified entity. From these categories it becomes clear that it is the word's relationship to its referent that is the decisive factor in *how vague* the word appears. This relationship, in turn, might be more or less overt based on the interlocutors' shared background knowledge and access to the given co-text.

2.3.4. Referential expressions

In every conversation, speakers decide consciously or unconsciously how much information they want or need to convey in their utterances. This choice becomes particularly obvious in referential expressions, such as *this girl* or *here*, which help speakers to point towards entities inside and outside of language (Arts et al. 2011: 361). Endophoric referential expressions point inside language and reference information that is already given in the co-text of the unfolding discourse. Contrarily, exophoric referential expressions point towards the physical and extralinguistic knowledge of a listener (Arts et al. 2011: 362).

Concerning their linguistic form, referential expressions are realised in different ways and can be modified to diverging degrees (Koolen et al. 2011: 3233). Depending on the amount of information they provide, they can be regarded as overspecification, minimal specification, and underspecification. Overspecification refers to a referential expression that conveys "more information than what is necessary for unique identification of the referent" (Arts et al. 2011: 362). Contrarily, minimally specified referential expressions provide neither more nor less information than necessary to

clearly and unambiguously identify the target. Lastly, underspecified referential expressions lack the required amount of information necessary for target identification. Both Arts et al. (2011) and Koolen et al. (2011) relate referential expressions to Grice's maxim of quantity, which can be violated by overspecified and underspecified referential expressions. Only the concept of minimal specification adheres to the maxim, providing sufficient information for correct target identification.

Experimental studies have shown that overspecification, while attributing redundant information, does not necessarily impede successful conversation. Instead, overspecification is hypothesised to make a signal "robust" and may even "speed up identification processes in communication" (Arts et al. 2011: 373). However, the same has been said about underspecified and vague referential expressions, which are speculated to increase communication efficiency (Jucker, Smith & Lüdge 2003; Zhang 2011). Moreover, perception studies have indicated that participants tend to overspecify more frequently when the stakes of the task are high. These findings, in spite of coming from task-related object testing in an experimental setting, raise the question of how referential expressions are used within high-stake contexts, such as in the legal setting. Arnold and Griffin (2007) furthermore connect referential expressions to audience-design, as a speaker has to consider their interlocutor's prior knowledge in order to avoid their utterance being too vague. Deciding on the necessary amount of specification can be particularly challenging in intercultural contexts, in which background knowledge and presumed norms are likely to differ.

2.4. Core terms and working definitions

In consideration of the above exploration of vagueness in language, the terms 'vagueness', 'ambiguity', and 'precision' can now be defined for the purpose of the current analysis. The aim of this brief section is to further align the approach taken in this study with other research.

As shown, definitions of the relevant terms are anything but straightforward and there is overall "relatively little terminological consensus on vagueness" (Cotterill 2007: 98). Before entering the debate, it is important to note that this paper considers vague language a natural feature of human language use and agrees with Channell's claim that vagueness is a matter of appropriateness, rather than of 'good and 'bad'. Concerning the interrelated terms 'vagueness' and 'ambiguity', this paper follows the distinction

proposed by Christie (1963), who approaches the subject from the background of law and legal reasoning. According to Christie (1963: 886), the term 'vagueness' refers to a "general term with an open textured meaning", while the term 'ambiguity' denotes "a situation where a general term may be at once *clearly* true of certain objects and at the same time *clearly* false of the same objects" (1964: 886, original emphasis). In other words, 'vagueness' applies to words that have a generic meaning open to further interpretation. As an example, Christie (1964: 886) names colour terms. The term "red" can be used to describe many shades of red, from crimson to mahogany. Whether a couch is referred as *red* or as *crimson* is thus a matter of precision, but will in any case evoke the colour *red* in the listener's mind. Ambiguous words, however, can be interpreted with different or even opposite meanings instead of with diverging levels of the same meaning (Christie 1964: 886). This is exemplified by the phrase *light feathers*. The word *light* can refer to either the feathers' colour or weight; thus, the listener's correct inference of the utterance depends on his or her shared knowledge of the situational context and co-text with the speaker (Christie 1964: 886). To summarize, vague words are vague due to their vague sense, whereas ambiguous words are ambiguous due to having more than one sense. The distinction between the two terms is subtle, yet important, especially in the eye of the law.

In contrast then, the intended meaning of a 'specific' or 'precise' lexical item can be inferred effortlessly, without "interpretative issues" (Anesa 2014: 197). However, since vagueness is defined as a matter of degree, precision also has to be regarded as nuanced. The notion of 'precision' will therefore be considered an "ideal limit" (Russell 1923: 90) and it can be assumed that there are various ways to be precise enough for a given communication to be successful. Hence, a term is specific enough if it can be processed without difficulties by the interlocutors; but it is too vague in cases in which the term's intended meaning requires further negotiations. This definition rules out cases in which the lack of understanding stems from reasons other than the word's vague semantic or pragmatic sense. A prototypical example for a vague semantic sense is Christie's (1964: 886) discussion of colour terms. A vague pragmatic sense is understood along the lines of Jucker, Smith and Lüdge (2003) and Zhang (2011), who speak of strategic vagueness realised through implicatures that can only be understood in light of shared context.

3. English as a lingua franca: a 'neutral' instrument?

After the discussion of different theoretical conceptualisations of vague language in chapter 2, the present chapter provides a short introduction to the research field of English as a lingua franca (henceforth ELF) and the role of ELF in the legal system of the European Union. First, section 3.1. describes the conceptualisation of ELF and the aims of the research field. The next section outlines the relationship between ELF and multilingualism, with a special focus on the language situation in the European Union. Section 3.3. focuses on the language policies inside the EU judicial system and discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of ELF. Finally, section 3.4. aims to provide an ELF perspective on vague language. For this purpose, strategies used by ELF speakers to negotiate specific meaning and common ground in spite of linguacultural differences are outlined.

3.1. What is ELF?

The research field of English as a Lingua Franca has received much attention over the past decades, and for good reason. Never before has one language connected the globe like English is doing it today, allowing people from different cultures and countries to communicate and engage with each other despite L1 differences. A lot has been accomplished since Seidlhofer's (2001) call for a description of English as lingua franca, in order to understand how speakers converse in English successfully and independently from dominant native English standards.

Every conceptualisation starts with a clear and shared understanding of the used terminology. The term *lingua franca* in its most basic sense refers to the use of an intermediary language in order to bridge the gap between interlocutors from different L1s (House 2003: 557). Definitions of a lingua franca do not only focus on the lack of a shared language, however, and the conceptualisation of English as a lingua franca has become increasingly fine-grained and inclusive. Seidlhofer (2011: 7) states that ELF communication includes "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option". This definition leaves room also for native English speakers, an issue that will be addressed in more detail below. Another aspect included in the description of ELF communication is that speakers often lack a shared cultural background. As Firth (1996:

240) puts it, ELF can be considered a "contact language between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture". This emphasis on the cultural aspect is echoed in Cogo's (2010: 298) description of ELF speakers' "shared repertoire", which only gradually develops and evolves between speakers who do not share culturally specific expressions. Instead, pragmalinguistic and culture specific aspects of language have to be negotiated locally by the participants for their shared usage of English.

In a recent article, Sherman (2017: 115) identifies two main reasons for the use of ELF. The first reason can be equated to the need of solving a language problem, with English being selected for the functional reason of enabling communication. The second reason is motivated by the fact that every language and every variety is "laden with historical and political connotations" (Sherman 2017: 115-116). Therefore, the conscious choice to use a lingua franca may help to avert power asymmetries. These two reasons reflect the current conceptualisation and description of ELF in a number of ways. Most importantly, the motivation of choosing a lingua franca for socio-political reasons shows that nowadays English native speakers are widely considered to be part of ELF communication. This aspect differentiates English from other lingua francas and justifies the bulk of research dedicated to the investigation of ELF.

While English native speakers are part of the ELF community, the majority of ELF participants remains non-native speakers (Crystal 2003: 61; Cogo 2010: 295). Non-native English speakers vastly outnumber native English speakers in our globalised world. This creates a reality that Seidlhofer (2005: 339) describes as a "somewhat paradoxical situation". On the one hand, English interactions between non-natives across the globe outweigh those between natives of English. On the other hand, native English standards still prescribe how English can and should be used. This raises the question of where the "ownership of English" resides and who may act as the "custodians" of so-called proper English (Widdowson 1994: 380). The notion of what can be considered the 'right' English has since been thoroughly discussed within the ELF community and Widdowson's claim (1994: 388) concerning the norms of English that are taught in pedagogical resources still holds true today: the standards promoted by inner-circle English varieties might not be suited for those learning and using English as an international language.

This highlights the need for a thorough and systematic description of English as lingua franca communication in order to capture how communication can function in

spite of – or maybe because of – the speakers' diverging language resources. Research has shown that the communicative value of ELF is not limited by its heterogeneous nature and that "norms are negotiated ad hoc" (Seidlhofer 2011: 8). Instead of depending on native-speaker norms, ELF speakers use their full linguistic repertoires to "find their own ways of being co-operative and idiomatic on line in the very process of their interaction" (Widdowson 2015: 366). And, indeed, multiple studies have demonstrated that ELF speakers find ways to bridge proficiency differences and the lack of common repertoires by using an array of interactive strategies, such as repetition, accommodation, co-constructions, code-switching, and more (cf. Mauranen 2006; Cogo 2009; Pitzl 2010; Kaur 2011; Cogo & Pitzl 2016).

A complete or 'correct' account of English as a lingua franca might be impossible due to its inherent variability. It is the goal of ELF research to provide a systematic description of this variability by recording and analysing "what [ELF] looks and sounds like and how people actually use it and make it work" (Seidlhofer 2005: 340). In general, ELF research has concentrated on two main domains of language use. According to Jenkins (2017: 596), these are Business ELF, or BELF (e.g. Seidlhofer 2004; Pitzl 2010; Cogo 2012; Ehrenreich 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen 2007), and ELF in the academic setting (e.g. Jenkins 2011; Mauranen 2012, 2014). A far less researched domain so far is the legal setting and its many genres, such as the police interview, courtroom language, or immigrations encounters. In the subsequent chapters, the most important research to date on the crossroad between ELF and the law will be outlined, starting with the role of multilingualism in the EU judicial system.

3.2. ELF as a multilingual practice

In recent years, multilingualism has become an increasingly important component in ELF research (Pitzl 2018a: 38). When looking at ELF talk, it becomes clear that it has to be a primarily multilingual phenomenon, as it includes "one speaker's first language, another speaker's first language as well as the lingua franca element" (Hülmbauer & Seidlhofer 2013: 389). The importance of including multilingualism in the research interest of the ELF domain becomes especially apparent when looking at the real world and how language attitudes can be exploited and weaponized for the sake of political agendas. In her recent article on ELF and multilingualism, Jenkins (2018) makes this a point by drawing attention to the situations in the US and post-Brexit UK; two norm-

providing countries of standard English that have seen a spike in xenophobia-related attacks on non-native English speaking immigrants. According to Jenkins (2018), the way forward in ELF research is to replace the out-dated view of only one 'correct' and homogenous English in favour of a more realistic view of language as an inherently heterogeneous and deeply variable practice. This is in line with Cogo (2017: 366), who likewise suggests that the multilingual aspects of ELF need to be emphasised more strongly in research, as ELF does not consist of English alone, but of the diversity of all the L1s that ELF speakers bring to the table.

In regard to research, Cogo (2017) identifies two approaches commonly used to study the intersection of ELF and multilingualism. The first approach, referred to as "the code-switching perspective", focuses on how ELF speakers use their multilingual resources to establish a social space and create shared understanding (Cogo 2017: 357). Instances of code-switching are described as an "overt multilingual phenomenon", with the use of different languages clearly visible. A speaker's multilingual repertoire can, however, also surface in a more covert way, for example in the transfer of syntactic structures from a speaker's L1 to lingua franca English. While such utterances might appear to be English, "they are the result of cross-linguistic or cross-cultural influences in the speakers' repertoires" (Cogo 2017: 358). The second approach foregrounds the flexible use of multilingual repertoires in different situational contexts, with ELF being "part of a constellation of practices" (Cogo 2017: 357). Especially interesting are studies of how members of different domains of expertise use ELF to achieve high-stake communicative goals, such as in the context of the EU parliament. Albeit different, these approaches do not contradict each other, but offer insights of particular nature into ELF interactions and can therefore complement each other.

In regard to the real world, the focus on multilingualism and ELF has become particularly relevant since the UK, the biggest native-English speaking country of the EU, is preparing to leave the European Union in 2019. While the EU is considered a multilingual union built on linguistic equality, it is a fact that English is frequently used as a 'de facto' working language inside the EU (Felici 2015: 123). The vast political and economical changes as a result of Brexit can thus be expected to go hand in hand with changes in the Union's language uses and language attitudes, especially concerning English. Jenkins (2018: 10) suggests two possible consequences of Britain's exit for EU's language policies: Another language, such as French or German, could take over as the EU's 'de facto' lingua franca and, due to its increasing importance, this language might

even replace ELF on a grander scale than just the EU in the future. A second outcome could be the continuing use of ELF as a working language within the EU, with the consequence that the use of English would become "more relaxed" in the absence of the norm-providing UK. This outcome, according to Jenkins (2018: 10), might even be beneficial to ELF communication and encourage speakers to make use of their own L1 resources.

3.3. ELF as 'de jure' working language of the EU

As a political and economic union of currently 28 culturally and linguistically diverse member states, the European Union is by definition inherently multilingual. The EU takes great pride in its language diversity and its policies on multilingualism can in many ways be considered an important factor in ensuring a functioning and fair democracy (Felici 2010: 96). It is thus the right of every EU citizen to demand a conversation to be held in his or her language when interacting with institutions belonging to the EU (Felici 2010: 96). Likewise, inside the EU judicial system all languages are regarded as equal and, hence, all laws and official documents have to be translated into all the languages recognized by the EU (Felici 2015: 124). Living language diversity is, however, also a quite ambitious and challenging undertaking. In reality, multilingual policies often take quite different shapes. For example, English increasingly serves as an "unofficial working language for drafting and for political negotiations" (Felici 2015: 123-124). This trend of de facto language use has been noted and commented on by several researches, leading to a debate on essential issues, such as whether multilingualism of this scale is feasible and whether English can or should serve as a lingua franca within the EU.

The starting point of this debate is the fact that multilingualism within the EU has come to be understood as "a process whereby there can be equal rights for all the official languages and for all citizens, regardless of their cultural differences" (Felici 2010: 96). This attitude reflects the very dogma of the EU that every member is an equal partner. Why, then, does this inclusive stance appear impractical in reality? According to Bajcic's (2018: 14) recent article on the role of EU Legal English in shaping EU Legal Culture, the increased use of Legal English as a working language inside the EU reflects "a growing need of the enlarged, fragmented Union for a common means of communication." To put it simply, in order to get things done and get them done quickly, speakers will naturally

resort to a shared code. In the context of the EU institutions this may well be French or German, but in the overwhelming majority of cases, the shared language remains English.

Albeit bridging local communicative problems, the trend of using English as a working language inside the EU legal context has been noted to have its potential downsides. Campos-Pardillos (2010: 2) argues that every language is entrenched in a specific culture and therefore the transmitted meaning is not merely referential, but also entails meta-linguistic connotations. This is especially true for legal language, which is necessarily coloured by its nation's legal culture and adapted to its country's legal system. Consequently, the English language cannot and should not be viewed as an "empty instrument" (Campos-Pardillos 2010: 2) and many terms and formulaic legal phrases in English will be "inappropriate in the international setting" (Beveridge 2000: 12). Bajcic (2018: 22) agrees with this notion, claiming that languages can hardly be "divorced from extralinguistic knowledge". This debate raises crucial questions concerning the use of English as a de facto lingua franca inside the EU legal system, which have yet to be answered: If the English language, and especially English legal jargon, cannot be viewed as "empty" (Bajcic 2018: 22) but as connected to English legal culture, should it still be used as a lingua franca within the EU legal context? On the other hand, what could a viable and practical alternative look like that does not disadvantage speakers in the multilingual setting of the EU? Campos-Pardillos (2010: 3) notes that, should English continue to serve as a legal lingua franca within the EU, "a conscious effort must be made to eliminate some of the culturally distinct elements which are contained in some of its genres". Thus, one feasible solution might be a shift in how EU Legal English is conceptualised – a shift away from the view of only one correct English and towards an understanding of a dynamic lingua franca that belongs to its multilingual speakers. This debate situated in the EU legal context hence connects to core issues of ELF research concerning the "ownership of English" (Widdowson 1994).

While the shift in conceptualisation of English used in the EU legal system is visible in research, it occurs at a much slower pace in practice. Concerning the asylum interview in Europe, Maryns' (2015) study of eight Belgian asylum interviews conducted in ELF illustrates that the ad hoc use of ELF may lead to several communicative challenges that can negatively impact the perceived credibility of the asylum seeker. The choice of language in a legal setting such as the asylum interview can have real consequences and in most cases the choice will benefit the people in charge over the

people in need. When the language choice is English, it needs to be taken into account that the English language is not homogeneous and the asylum seeker and the officials are likely to speak different varieties of English and bring different first languages to the table. The assumption that there is only one right way to speak English will necessarily "constrain the ability of individuals to communicate, to make themselves heard, and to understand the language use of institutional representatives" (Angermeyer 2013: 106). It is therefore especially relevant to further the research on ELF used in immigration encounters and strengthen the link between research and practice in order to determine better ways for multilingual communication in this setting.

As one of the important voices in the debate surrounding ELF in EU immigration encounters, Guido (2008: 21) agrees that the special status English has been given puts non-native and especially non-Western non-native immigrants at a disadvantage. Her conceptualisation of ELF follows Seidlhofer's (2000) understanding that lingua franca English is not a variety of Standard English, but rather it is created by its speakers and thus also includes the speakers' pragmalinguistic repertoires (Guido 2012: 23). Part of a pragmalinguistic repertoire are pragmalinguistic schemata, which are influenced by a speaker's native language. According to their schemata, meaning their "background knowledge of culturally-determined linguistic and social behaviour stored in [their] minds", speakers will behave differently, have access to different cognitive frames and also employ different communication strategies (Guido 2012: 22-23). In her research Guido aims to expose the cognitive frames and communication strategies used by "Western experts" in the context of immigration encounters in order to shed more light on power asymmetries due to differences in cognitive and linguistic access to concepts. She further raises the question of whether "a mode of ELF specialized communication that can be acknowledged and even shared by both Western experts and non-Western immigrants" is possible and can be conceptualised (Guido 2008: 21). This comment highlights again that a conscious effort and a strong link between research and practice is needed in order to create a reality in which the use of legal ELF is not subjected to native speaker norms or a specific legal culture.

3.4. An ELF perspective on vague language: negotiating common ground

This section aims to bring together the two research areas of vague language and English as a lingua franca. Reaching mutual understanding in a conversation "is not just

the listener's job", it requires a shared effort by all participants involved (Cogo & Pitzl 2016: 339). This can be especially challenging for speakers conversing in a lingua franca and who might have diverging degrees of shared background knowledge. ELF speakers employ a variety of interactive strategies to work towards shared understanding, such as strategies that allow them to make their messages explicit and precise.

A first way to raise explicitness is to replace general terms with more specific terms. According to Kaur (2011: 2710), the choice of specific over general words can help to "eliminate any ambiguity that may detract the interlocutor from arriving at shared understanding". This relates to Mahlberg's (2005) analysis of nouns that act as placeholders for more specific terms in the discourse. Apart from substitution, another way to avoid generic meaning of nouns is to insert a qualifying lexical item into the utterance (Kaur 2011: 2710). This strategy is often realised through so-called 'self-repair', in which a speaker tries to enhance a previous statement's clarity by adjusting various features, such as grammar, pronunciation, or specificity (Kaur 2011: 2710). Self-repair can be especially helpful concerning problematic references. By replacing, for example, an underspecified pronoun with its referent, speakers may avoid an impending communication breakdown (Kaur 2011: 2710).

Based on her research in the academic ELF setting, Mauranen (2007) has observed self-repair and repetition as pro-active strategies to make utterances more explicit. Both strategies assume a certain awareness of potential communication problems on the speaker's part and may therefore be referred to as pre-empting strategies (cf. Cogo & Pitzl 2016). Another useful pre-emptive explicitation strategy is to spell out potentially ambiguous terms (Cogo & Pitzl 2016: 341). Connecting this strategy mostly to phonetic intelligibility, Cogo and Pitzl (2016) state that spelling out confusing or unfamiliar terms can create a better understanding of what speakers are trying to convey. Furthermore, the authors note that explicitation can be achieved through the avoidance of contractions (*will not* instead of *won't*) and the introduction of a possible word variant into the utterance (such as a 'dummy do' or a synonym) (Cogo & Pitzl 2016: 342).

Moreover, a common way for speakers to avoid communication breakdowns is code-switching. The switching of languages in ELF conversations has been linked to a variety of functions, such as the "desire to promote communicative efficiency" (Rogerson-Revell 2010: 446) or an effort to "appeal for assistance" (Klimpfinger 2009: 362). A speaker may also choose to switch between languages in order to use all

available language resources, especially in cases in which another code can help to "overcome [...] own limitations in ELF" (Cogo & House 2017: 218). In many cases, the practice of code-switching goes hand in hand with accommodation strategies. Cogo and House (2017: 220) note that the choice of language can signal convergence to another speaker's multilingual resources as well as to their identity. While code-switching is not usually identified as an explicitation strategy, it can focus the attention of interlocutors on certain parts of an utterance and thereby help to make the indented meaning more explicit.

Investigating vagueness in academic ELF communication, Metsä-Ketelä (2016: 326) suggests the use of vague language to be an intentional choice. She refers to vague expressions such as approximators, general extenders, placeholder words, or vague category identifiers as "lexical markers of imprecision" (2016: 327). This seems to echo Channell's (1994: 18) description of these expressions as "unabashedly vague". Metsä-Ketelä (2016: 327) claims that by using such words, a speaker "deliberately chooses to add fuzziness to an otherwise syntactically and ideationally complete utterance". Concerning a speaker's motivation to include vagueness in their utterances, Metsä-Ketelä (2016: 335) identifies reasons such as politeness, interpersonal involvement, and the marking of in-group membership. For example, speakers may use underspecified referential expressions because they assume their interlocutors to possess the required in-group background knowledge to comprehend and correctly interpret them. Further, Metsä-Ketelä (2016: 328) notes that, while non-native speakers did use vague expressions in "non-standard" ways, this did not impede the conversation. Hence, her findings suggest that vague language is used successfully and appropriately between ELF speakers.

To sum up, this chapter has discussed ELF as a multilingual practice and addressed several problems that have been raised in regard to the de facto use of English in the EU legal setting. Section 3.3. has established that language choice and the common assumption of one correct English can negatively impact legal genres such as the asylum interview. Further, this section has highlighted the need for a stronger relationship between research and practice in order to overturn this assumption. Section 3.4. has looked at strategies used by ELF speakers to negotiate common ground, with a focus on ways that can help to raise explicitness. One strategy was to repair one's own utterance by, for example, replacing a general noun with a more specific term. Other pro-active strategies were to spell out difficult terms, avoid contractions or use a

'dummy do' to make one's message easier to understand. Furthermore, this section has mentioned several motivations for code-switching, a practice that can also help speakers to communicate more successfully and can be expected to occur in the data set investigated in this study. Lastly, a study by Metsä-Ketelä (2016) on the use of vague language by ELF speakers was addressed. The study found that reasons for the use of vague language range from politeness and in-group membership to interpersonal involvement. Further, the findings implicate that ELF speakers successfully use vague language to convey meaning. This section on ELF research and explicitation strategies has therefore provided an important part of the context for the current analysis.

4. The asylum interview

> "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14)

Following the discussion of vague language in section 2. and an introduction to English as a lingua Franca in the EU legal system in section 3., this part turns to the genre under investigation, the asylum interview. Section 4.1. surveys previous research into the asylum interview, conducted mostly but not exclusively within Europe. First, the aims and purpose of the asylum interview are defined by considering the law and, crucially, also its execution. Second, the structure, procedure, and norms pertaining to the asylum interview will be described. Section 4.2. narrows in on the communicative challenges that arise in the asylum interview. Lastly, section 4.3. provides a brief yet important excursion into vague language within the legal realm. Concerning the used terminology, this thesis subscribes to Bjorghild's notion (2014) of asylum interviews as a genre, with genres being defined as "formal categories of texts with certain structural characteristics" (Bjorghild 2014: 92). She aligns herself with Hanks' description (1987: 670) of a genre as an "orientating framework[s], interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations that are not part of discourse structure, but of ways actors relate to and use language".

4.1 Previous research on the asylum interview

Twenty-five years ago, Barsky (1994: 65) pointedly described the asylum interview as the following:

> [...] a peculiar hybrid of courtroom-style interrogation, loosely-structured story-telling, and inter-cultural discussions involving bureaucrats (who rarely exhibit an understanding of the Third World countries from which most refugees come) and claimants (who generally exhibit as little understanding of the host country as the bureaucrats do of the country of origin).

The above passage was written about asylum seekers coming to Canada in the 1980s. However, given the current critical refugee situation in Europe, Barsky's description of the highly specialised asylum interview and the inevitable clash of cultures can be called more relevant than ever. Further, it begs the question whether anything has changed

over the years and whether the 'bureaucrats', 'claimants', and of course the public have learned to exhibit a greater understanding for each other as fellow human beings.

Concerning Austria, the country recorded 88.340 applications for asylum in the year 2015 alone, the by far highest number received in recent years (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior 2018: 4). While the number of applications has drastically decreased since 2015, many then opened procedures are still on-going. The annual reports of the asylum statistics published by the *Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior* further show that usually only around half of the applicants will be granted asylum. In 2018, 48% of applications were evaluated positively in a legally binding decision, with 42% being rejected and the remaining 10% labelled as 'Sonstige Entscheidungen'" (translation: 'other decisions') (Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior 2018: 7). The decision whether an applicant is granted international protection largely relies on the main asylum interview and the written record produced during the interview.

Several factors need to be taken into account when defining the asylum interview, its aims and its difficulties. To start with, the term 'asylum seeker' refers to individuals who apply for the right to stay and live in another country in order to escape prosecution in the country of their nationality (Eades 2005: 505). The long application process to be granted this right includes the asylum interview. The purpose of this hearing between officials and the asylum seeker is for the host country to examine the asylum seeker's claim to protection and judge whether the person's fear or unwillingness to return to their country of nationality is well grounded. The genre of the asylum hearing can be viewed as a "legal grill or template which is applied to evaluate legitimacy"; however, the surrounding circumstances and institutionalised norms of the asylum hearing often lead to an impoverished account of the asylum seeker's experience that only covers a "very small and extremely problematic segment" of the bigger narrative (Barsky 1994: 4).

The asylum hearing is thus by definition a high-stakes conversation that can lead, in the worst case, to the deportation of the applicant into an uncertain future. The decision of whether asylum is granted or not is often based solely on the applicant's oral narrative produced in the asylum interview. Especially in cases where the applicants are unable to provide official documents that prove their identity, the interview provides the only opportunity for officials to collect and negotiate the needed information (Pöllabauer 2004: 146). In such cases, the asylum interview serves the purpose of both "obtaining relevant evidence, but also [of] assessing applicants' credibility" (Pöllabauer

2004: 146). The blurry line between these two aims, obtaining information on the one hand and assessing credibility on the other, often leads to an array of communication difficulties due to unclear expectations (Crawley 1999:47).

These factors situate the asylum interview on an intersection between multiple languages, cultures, politics, legal obligations and psychological factors (Doornbos 2005: 103). Inevitably, the asylum interview is subject to diverging expectations and characteristics. It is a spoken and formal text type, but is likely to include elements of informal language due to its oral nature and the fact that its participants might be unfamiliar with the required formal terms. It is an interview similar to the police interview, but the asylum seeker is neither accused of, nor a witness to, a crime. It is an institutional genre, but the participants' knowledge of the institutional norms pertaining to the conversation is likely to differ. Bjorghild (2014: 90) befittingly summarizes the complicated nature of the asylum hearing as "identity negotiations in narrative discourse, but with the added complexities of asymmetric power relations, legal procedures, and veracity control for institutional purposes".

Its specialised aim requires the asylum interview to be administered, structured, and conducted according to specific standards. Concerning the administration of the asylum interview, treaties such as the *Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* dictate how the right to seek asylum is to be formally executed within the United Nations. As a result, asylum procedures are nowadays similar across many European nations (Pöllabauer 2004: 145). The legal-administrative procedure of application includes several phases. Once the asylum seeker has officially applied for protection, their application is evaluated in terms of admissibility (Maryns 2005: 301). If accepted, the application moves on to the second stage, which assesses whether the applicant's fear to return to their home country is reasonable and well grounded. In Austria, this means that the asylum seeker will generally be interviewed at least twice; first by the police and, if the application proceeds, by an immigration official (Bergunde & Pöllabauer 2019: 2). The aim of the first interview, the 'Erstbefragung' (translation: 'first screening'), is to record basic information. The applicant is usually asked to provide their name, date of birth, nationality, and a brief statement concerning why they left their home country and came to Austria (UNHCR Austria 2019). The main interview, the 'Einvernahme' (translation: 'interrogation'), is overseen by the BFA (*Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl*, translation: *Federal Asylum Office*). Applicants will be asked to elaborate on why they had to leave their home country and justify their eligibility for

international protection (UNHCR Austria 2019). Apart from the asylum seeker and the immigration official tasked with conducting the detailed interview, there may be other people present, such as an interpreter, a typist, a trusted person of the asylum seeker, a legal representative, or a lawyer (Pöllabauer 2004: 153).

The interview is conducted orally and last several hours, written statements instead of the interview are not eligible (Pöllabauer 2004). Parallel to the interview, a written report (translation: 'Niederschrift') of the contents is produced. In the last stage of the interview, this report is read back to the applicant by one of the officials or the interpreter. The applicant is given the opportunity to add something to the record or correct an inaccuracy before signing the document. However, Maryns (2005:311) has noted that this opportunity is not always given to applicants. After the interview, this report serves as the official document in the decision as to whether the applicant will be granted asylum and is thus the "only version surviving the interaction process" (Maryns 2005: 311). Unfortunately, many asylum seekers remain unaware of the importance of the written report and of their right to refuse to sign it if they think that certain information is recorded incorrectly. While changing an already signed record is not impossible, it includes a number of legal challenges and is overall very difficult to achieve (UNHCR Austria). Despite its central and crucial role, the written report has been widely neglected in research so far (Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009: 119).

The structure of the main interview itself generally follows an established pattern (Pöllabauer 2004: 146). Especially important in this phase is that the applicant provides a factual and detailed account of the places they lived in, what these places were called and looked like, and the events that led to their forced escape (UNHCR Austria 2019). After establishing personal details again, the applicant is therefore asked to argue his or her claim to asylum in 'free reproduction'; meaning, with as few interrupting questions as possible (Doornbos 2005: 114). Subsequently, the officials may question potential incongruences in the applicant's report and ask for clarification. Throughout the whole procedure, the roles of the participants are very clear. The officials are the "demanders" of information, while the applicant is the "supplier" (Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996: 57-58). It is, however, not only the responsibility of the applicant to establish a coherent narrative (Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009: 120). The asylum seeker's perceptions of narrative strategies and their awareness for the need of a chronological presentation of events are likely to differ from the Western institutional expectations (Pöllabauer 2004: 171).

Therefore, it should be the officials' aim to guide the applicant with specific and comprehensible questions to a satisfying account of their flight.

Previous studies, mostly qualitative in nature, have provided thorough and detailed investigations into how the asylum interview is administered in a variety of European and non-European countries, such as in Austria (Pöllabauer 2004, 2005; Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009), Belgium (Blommaert 1999, 2001; Maryns 2005, 2013, 2015), the Netherlands (Doornbos 2005), Italy (Guido 2008, 2012, 2017), Norway (Bjorghild 2014), the UK (Bohmer & Shuman 2007; Gill et al. 2016), Canada (Barsky 1994), and Australia (Eades 2005). Based on overlapping insights from these studies, we can summarize several narrative characteristics and discursive strategies that appear to be desired and expected by officials conducting the asylum interview: overall coherence of events, a logical and chronological presentation of the escape, precision regarding geographical details of the applicant's claimed home country as well as of the route of their journey, omission of 'irrelevant' details, and precision regarding individuals relevant to the events and the escape (such as family members, friends, helpers, smugglers).

Whether a satisfying coherent narrative is achieved during the asylum interview or not may depend on a multitude of factors. These include extra-linguistic factors, such as the discussed institutional norms, political attitudes, and diverging expectations. The strain of traumatic experiences might further impact the asylum seeker's performance during the interview (i.e. Anthonissen 2006). The outcome may also be influenced by seemingly insignificant factors, such as time pressure and interruptions of the procedure, which may distract the participants or lead to an increased pace of the interview (Maryns 2005: 308). The focus of this paper, however, is on certain the linguistic and communicative challenges that both the officials and the applicants face during the asylum interview.

4.2. Communicative challenges in the asylum interview

The asylum interview is a legal as well as an intercultural conversation; thus, the potential communicative challenges are plenty. The participants of the asylum interview bring "diverging narrative-linguistic and pragmatic profiles and expectations" (Maryns 2005: 312) to the table; yet time and opportunity to establish a common space in which misunderstandings and expectations can be sufficiently negotiated are short. Previous

research into the asylum interview has shown that the final decision is all too often based not on the applicant's information provided during the hearing, but rather on narrative and textual features, such as inconsistencies, inaccuracies, lack of coherence, and vague references to places or dates (Blommaert 1999: 21). Thus, Barsky (1994: 65-66) predicts that the discourse on the asylum interview might benefit even more from a linguistic than from a legal analysis. In addition, he suggests that the examination of particular conversational elements may be able to shed light on how the "actual discursive proceedings" differ from what the law dictates (Barsky 1994: 65 – 66). This chapter therefore briefly looks at communicative challenges that are of particular relevance to the data investigated in this thesis, starting with difficulties in the interpreter-mediated asylum interview and proceeding with difficulties due to out-dated conceptions of language.

A first challenge arises out of language barriers, which lead to the need for an interpreter to mitigate between the official and the asylum seeker. The United Nations *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,* adopted in 1966, is one of several treaties that guarantee the right to an interpreter for anyone under legal investigation. In reference to the execution of this right in Austria, Pöllabauer (2004: 145) notes that this right does not ensure that the interpreter has received special training for the setting of the asylum interview. Neither does it ensure, that the interpreters are exclusively professionals. Reasons for this shortcoming are on the one hand the high costs of special training programmes and on the other hand a lack of qualified trainers for all required languages and the difficulty of finding a curriculum that "suits different types of adult learners" (Bergunde & Pöllabauer 2019: 5). Albeit serving the important role of "bridging the linguistic gap between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Doornbos 2009: 107), interpreters may introduce other problems into the conversation, such as inaccuracies, power dependencies, the forming of coalitions, or unprofessional behaviour due to the interpreter's "emotional involvement" in the conversation (Bergunde & Pöllabauer 2019: 8). Due to the critical role the interpreter occupies in the asylum interview, the topic has received increasing attention in recent years (a.o. Barsky 1994; Pöllabauer 2004, 2005; Tipton 2008; Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009; Maryns 2013; Lee 2013; Maatta 2015).

The most comprehensive research into the Austrian interpreter-mediated asylum interview is provided by Pöllabauer (2004, 2005, 2008, 2015). Investigating the role of the interpreter in this "highly charged and challenging field of work", she

identifies a lack of agreement on the responsibilities of the interpreter (Pöllabauer 2004: 171). The reasons for this may in part be due to the unclear and diverging expectations that officials have of interpreters. Pöllabauer's research is situated within translation studies and has also resulted in a curricular design of a training course for interpreters in an asylum context (cf. Bergunde & Pöllabauer 2019). It also contributes to the research on the asylum interview from an ELF perspective. For her investigations she compiled a corpus of 20 asylum hearings conducted in Austria, which were interpreter-mediated in English as a lingua franca. Pöllabauer (2004: 171) reports the participants' shared non-nativeness of English as a "potential source of misunderstanding" and further makes note of the variety of dialects and registers that are used among the participants. She concludes that "provisions are needed for training people who are to work as interpreters in the asylum setting" (Pöllabauer 2004: 174-175). Today, this need is addressed by projects such as QUADA (*Qualitätsvolles Dolmetschen im Asylverfahren*, translation: *High-quality interpreting in the asylum procedure*). Initiated by the UNHCR Austria in 2014, QUADA is co-financed by the European Refugee Fund and the Austrian Ministry of the Interior. Together with experts from various fields, such as law, linguistics, and translation and interpreting studies, this project aims to improve the Austrian asylum procedures by ensuring the quality of interpreting and implementing specifically designed training courses for interpreters (Bergunde & Pöllabauer 2019).

The goal, after all, should be to provide every asylum seeker with a translator able to converse with the asylum seeker in his or her own language. In cases where this appears impossible, it is often English as a lingua franca that helps to bridge communication difficulties. While the use of ELF in asylum interviews can be highly practical and sometimes the only available option, it often goes hand in hand with the belief that language is homogenous. This widespread view may lead to the assumption that all ELF speakers will possess the same knowledge of English. According to Maryns' (2005: 309) observations of the Belgian asylum interview, the underestimation of linguistic diversity often results in harmful consequences for the applicant's credibility. In a critical comment, Maryns (2005: 313) suggests that the use of English as a lingua franca in the asylum interview rather than the asylum seeker's L1 may in fact "[diminish] an applicant's chances to perform and to contextualise meaning in interaction". This claim is substantiated by findings from a later study, in which Maryns (2015) reports on a case involving a West African refugee expected to conduct his

asylum interview in English as a lingua franca. The qualitative analysis reveals several communication problems due to factors such as diverging pronunciations or even variations in socio-political meaning of certain terms. Similar intelligibility problems occurred also in another examined interview conducted in ELF between an Amharic-speaking asylum seeker and a Flemish officer. Based on her detailed investigations, Maryns (2015: 744) concludes that the use of ELF can easily lead to the "entextualisation of the applicant's account" in the asylum interview, especially since the applicant is often expected to accommodate and assimilate to the host country's variety of English. This begs the question whether ELF communication is "malleable" enough for the complex setting of the asylum interview, in which the institutional context might negatively influence cooperative attitudes towards the use of ELF (Maryns 2015: 755).

Recently, another area of language differences in immigration encounters has received increased attention for different reasons, namely the Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (henceforth LADO). LADO, first used in the 1990s in Sweden and Switzerland, is described as a forensic method of identity authentication that relies on the assumption that the analysis of language samples can provide sufficient and conclusive evidence of a person's origin (cf. Eades 2005). According to LADO, so-called language 'experts' are able to reliably establish a person's identity based on the analysis of linguistic features of their speech. This approach thus assumes language varieties to be self-enclosed and stable entities, with variation being a systematic and context-independent phenomenon that can be measured against a standard (cf. Dorn et al. 2014: 420-421). LADO has been met with vigorous criticism from the linguistic community. Dorn et al. (2014: 422) state that, based on their re-evaluation of a LADO-case, the method is "likely only to lead to a miscarriage of justice". Their assessment aligns with Eades' (2005: 514) conclusion that "[l]inguists are not responsible for, nor qualified to, provide a solution to this problem, namely the validation of nationality claims". While the debate around LADO is not directly relevant to the current thesis, it illustrates that ELF research can provide an important perspective on the communicative challenges of the asylum interview.

4.3. The legal perspective on vague language: negotiating exactitude

Gaining a comprehensive picture of legal language is not an easy endeavour. The vast majority of linguistic accounts on legal language concentrate on written genres, leaving

spoken communication in legal settings often neglected. Within the spoken legal genres, attention has been paid in particular to the police interview (Gibbons 2003; Jones 2008; Berg-Selingson 2009; Berg-Seligson 2014; Haworth 2013, Mulaim & Lai 2013; Szczyrbak 2014; Filipovic & Hijazo-Gascon 2017) and courtroom language (Cotterill 2007; Eades 2002; Hale 2007; Lee 2009; Vass 2018).

No matter whether in regard to the written or spoken legal genres, it is commonly agreed that linguistic vagueness is a core element of the law, despite the purpose of legal language to "state incontrovertible principles and notions" (Anesa 2014: 207), which in turn requires great precision and exactitude. Addressing this apparent paradox, Bhatia (2005) speaks of 'specificity' and 'generality' as the "two sides of the same coin". This echoes Christie (1963: 885), one of the earlier voices on legal language, who argues that "it is precisely [this] vagueness in language which often permits the law to perform so many social functions".

One of these functions is to make legislation flexible, as laws need to be applicable to an array of different cases. Drafting individual laws that specify "what is and what is not to be permitted" would be an "impossible task" and result in a number of specialised terms impossible to remember (Christie 1963: 890). Anesa's analysis (2014) of vagueness in legal documents confirms this claim. In a specific example, she suggests that the vague term *several* lends the law under investigation greater "general applicability" than an overspecification (a specific number) could have (Anesa 2014: 205). Moreover, Christie (1963: 895) argues that vagueness can act as "a tool for the achievement of accuracy". The use of several general nouns can draw the listener's attention towards the commonalities and overlaps of these nouns. The advantage of this use of vague over precise terms is that it permits practical communication through words most people can be expected to know, instead of highly specialised terms only experts could comprehend (Christie 1963: 895).

Concerning the investigation of vague expressions in the spoken legal setting, Janney (2002) provides an interesting account of the O.J. Simpsons civil murder trial. In a detailed analysis, Janney discusses possible reasons why certain answers in O.J. Simpsons' testimony were found to be 'vague', 'elusive', or 'unresponsive'. The findings demonstrate that the perceived vagueness was more frequently due to pragmatic reasons, rather than lexical reasons. For example, some answers were judged as 'vague' because of their lack of "relation to the prior context", or because of a slight rewording of the question, which left the repeated answer suddenly lacking in specificity (Janney:

461-462). This kind of vagueness clearly originated from diverging perceptions of presuppositions, implicatures, and the overall "immediate linguistic environment in which a unit of discourse […] occurred" (Janney 2002: 458). Moreover, Janney (2002: 462) points out the difficulty of establishing differences before the law between 'vague' utterances such as *feeling responsible* in comparison to *being responsible* for a certain deed. Concerning lexical vagueness, he delineates how changes in wording can introduce vagueness into the discourse, such as the change from a definite article (e.g. *the tie*) to an indefinite article (e.g. *a tie*) or the change from an exact point in time (e.g. *exactly 6:56*) to a time approximation (e.g. *about that time*) (Janney 2002: 468). Janney's conclusion (2002: 470) suggests that in the case of O.J. Simpson, 'vagueness' resulted mainly from "perceived disparities at the text/context interface". The study illustrates that even slight changes in lexis can influence the perceived credibility of a person.

Narrowing down on the asylum interview, the use of vague language has only been dealt with minimally. Maryns (2005) notes linguistic constraints as one reasons for vagueness in the applicant's narrative. Language barriers can lead to unintentional and even forced vague accounts, which are then often misinterpreted as unwillingness and incoherence. Detailing one such case, Maryns (2005: 310) states that the official "fails to see the connection between the applicant's struggle to express herself in English and the vagueness of her account".

Furthermore, applicants might resort to vague expressions due to an unclear understanding of what is expected from them, as often the "motives for specific questions will not necessarily be obvious to the applicants" (Pöllabauer 2004: 157). This may lead the applicant to give answers that appear specific to them but vague to the official, as they are communicating under diverging assumptions. This observation is corroborated by Doornbos (2005: 117), who suggests that vague answers can be the result of ambiguously formulated questions. Unaware of their own imprecision, officials may fail to see the wording of their question as the source of vague answers. Moreover, applicants are often asked to retell their stories over and over again (Busch 2015), which will inevitably lead to some inconsistencies and the use of vague words that appear to lack a clearly identifiable referent (Maryns 2005: 308). The repetition and re-telling of events can thus render time lines confusing in the eyes of the official.

Another reason for vagueness in the asylum interview may be the diverging socio-cultural and pragmalinguistic schemata (Guido 2012, 2017). A schema refers to culturally determined structures of knowledge that serve as templates to speakers and

help them to behave and speak in terms and patterns considered appropriate inside their speech community (Guido 2012). Analysing ELF immigration encounters in Italy, Guido (2017) observed that the participants' interpretations of meaning and events differed according to their native linguacultural schemata. In order to successfully negotiate shared meaning, she notes that participants of immigration encounters need to "develop accommodation strategies of ELF re-formulation and hybridization to make culture-bound discourses conceptually accessible and socially acceptable to all participants" (Guido 2017: 553). Guido thereby draws attention to the importance of co-constructed communicative behaviours that will allow interlocutors from diverse backgrounds to negotiate a shared understanding of meaning using a lingua franca.

Similarly, Maryns and Blommaert (2001: 65) identify the different perspectives that the applicant and the official have on the narrated events as a source of communication breakdowns. For the asylum seeker, the telling of their journey is often connected to traumatic memories, which can make the coherent articulation of certain experiences a challenge. Maryns and Blommaert (2001: 65) therefore speak of an "experiential" event perspective for the asylum seeker. In contrast, the perspective of officials will differ quite substantially. It is their task to fit applicants into "established categories used in processing asylum applications (e.g. 'political prosecution victim', 'war victim', 'economic refugee', etc.)" (Maryns & Blommaert 2001: 65). Their perspectives will therefore be influenced by institutional standards and stories will be processed with a bureaucratic mind-set (Maryns & Blommaert 2001: 65).

This chapter has presented several key points regarding the asylum procedure in Austria and the specifics of the Austrian asylum interview. Further, this section has detailed previous research into the asylum interview and connected the genre under investigation to vague language. As the summary above has demonstrated, the body of literature on vague language in the asylum interview leaves many questions unanswered; some of which will be explored in the subsequent analysis.

5. Data and Methodology

The present chapter provides a description of the data investigated for this thesis and delineates the methodology used for both the quantitative and qualitative analysis. Section 5.1. first offers some general information concerning the nature of the data and the transcription conventions that are followed. Subsequently, the three asylum interviews under investigation are described in terms of structure, participants and their contents. Section 5.2. considers methodological aspects of the data analysis and presents a step-by-step description of the analysis procedure.

5.1. Description of the data

5.1.1. General Information about the data

The data analysed for this project consist of the partial transcripts of three audio recordings of asylum interviews. The interviews are part of a larger corpus of overall 30 authentic asylum hearings, which was recorded and transcribed by Pöllabauer (2004). The recordings took place between 2000 and 2001 at the Federal Asylum Office in Graz, Austria. All interviews are interpreter-mediated and conducted in English as lingua franca. None of the participants of the interviews are native English speakers. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a computer-based transcription tool using the HIAT transcription system (Ehlich & Rehbein 1976). The current analysis is based solely on the transcripts; thus, an analysis of factors such as body language, mimic and other extra-linguistic clues fall without the scope of this thesis.

The transcripts are named BAG5B, BAG16, and BAG17. The acronym 'BAG' refers to the place where the data was collected (Bundesasylamt Graz, translation: Federal Asylum Office Graz). The number that follows indicates the recording's number within the larger corpus. Further, the name shows whether the transcript is the first part of a particular recording or a continuation. Thus, BAG16 and BAG17 start at the beginning of their respective interviews, while the *B* in BAG5B indicates that this transcript is a continuation of BAG5. These fairly complex names are maintained in this thesis in order to enable cross-comparisons with Pöllabauer's research (2004, 2005), which has analysed these transcripts from a translation point of view. However, for reasons of readability, the style of the original transcripts is slightly altered in regard to the speaker

labels. For the current analysis, the official is marked as 'O' (original label: 'B1'), the applicant as 'A' (original label: 'AW') and the interpreter as 'I' (original labels: 'D1' or 'D2'). The same official, who is reported to be male, conducted all three interviews under investigation. Both BAG5B and BAG16 are mediated by the same female interpreter (D2 in the original transcript), while BAG17 is mediated by a different female interpreter (D1 in the original transcript). As the focus of this analysis is not on the role of the interpreter, the present transcription excludes this information and uses 'I' for both interpreters. All three asylum applicants originally come from Nigeria and are male.

The transcript can be read in two directions. The lines from left to right present the speakers' utterances in the unfolding discourse, whereas the vertical direction indicates how these utterances overlap in the conversation. This is demonstrated in Extract 1 below. Further, the line number 280 on the lower left side indicates the extract's place within the interview. The speakers also appear on the left side and are always listed in the same order, with the official in the upper, the applicant in the middle, and the interpreter in the bottom line. In cases where one or two speakers do not participate in a certain stretch of speech, their lines are not included in the transcript. This can be seen in line 281 of Extract 1 with regard to the applicant.

Extract 1 (BAG17, 280-281)

```
         -----------------------------------------------------------
         ³O[                                              Der Ab-
         ³A[                      On TAG.
         ³I[ When did it arrive?        Und es kam am TAG an.
    280  -----------------------------------------------------------
         -----------------------------------------------------------
         ³O[ flug in ORT2?
         ³I[          You mean ah . it took off in ORT2 on the TAG?
    281  -----------------------------------------------------------
```

For reasons of anonymity, certain information is withheld in the transcripts. This concerns specific dates, proper names, city names, and other sensitive information. This can be seen in Extract 1, where a specific day is indicated as TAG (translation: DAY)in line 280 and a city is references as ORT2 (translation: PLACE2) in line 281. These labels always appear in German and are continuously numbered throughout the interview. For the purpose of the present study, some words and phrases in the transcripts have been highlighted in bold. The aim is to make it easier for the reader to find the vague expressions under investigation in the transcripts.

The transcription conventions followed in this thesis are adapted from Pöllabauer (2005: 137) and are summarized and explained in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Transcription conventions

convention	explanation
O	official
A	asylum applicant
I	interpreter
T	typist
PT	person of trust
LO	legal official
.	short pause (1 second)
..	short pause (2 seconds)
((3s))	longer pause, number of seconds in parentheses
can	emphasis or prominence is marked in bold
::	lengthened sound
< < <	rising intonation, symbol appears above the relevant word
> > >	falling intonation, symbol appears above the relevant word
<1>	signals a comment, numbered continuously throughout the transcript
(xxx)	unintelligible word or phrase
(can)	unintelligible word or phrase, presumed word or phrase is given in parentheses
/	false start or correction
((reads))	comment or explanation

This analysis is not only interested in the language used during the interviews, but also in the way that statements are recorded in the written report. It has to be noted, however, that the actual written reports of the interviews were not accessible for this analysis. Instead, this study looks at the texts that are read back to the applicants by the interpreters several times throughout each interview. These texts are produced parallel to the interview and summarise the applicants' answers. Subsequent to the interview, these summaries inform the written report. Throughout this thesis, these texts are referred to as 'preliminary reports', in order to distinguish them from the actual written report.

5.1.2. Description of the asylum interviews

The three transcripts differ in length, structure, and type of interview. The most important details of the respective interviews are summarized here.

The shortest interview, BAG5B, spans 319 lines (4,968 words) and is a continuation of BAG5, which is not available for analysis. The interview is an

'Ersteinvernahme'; meaning, it is the applicant's first interview. Apart from the applicant, the official, and the interpreter (the 'primary participants'), a typist and a trusted person of the asylum seeker are also present during the interview. Neither the typist nor the person of trust are involved in the interview, however, they both make comments in German towards the end of the transcript regarding the applicant's signature and health. The transcript starts with the interpreter reading back previously established answers to the applicant. It proceeds with the discussion of geographical details of the applicant's home country, including the names of towns, streets, and rivers. The terms *west* and *east* in regard to different landmarks are discussed at length. The interview then moves on to a recounting of how the applicant escaped from prison and what the term *prison* means for the applicant. In the end, the interpreter reads back the newly established answers to the applicant, who acknowledges their accuracy by signing twice.

Transcript BAG16, also an 'Ersteinvernahme', spans 548 lines (8,674 words). Apart from the primary participants, a typist is also present. Throughout the interview, the typist sometimes asks for clarification regarding the spelling of names, the chronology of events, or whether certain information should be included in the report. The interview starts with a discussion of the applicant's last address and then moves on to his escape from Nigeria. A big part of the interview concerns how the applicant made arrangements for his flight to Europe, including details such as the colour of the ship he hid on, the name of the ports, and the identity of the smuggler. From line 134 to 186, the interpreter reads back the established answers from the preliminary report and asks the applicant to sign. The next part of the interview revolves around the political events in the applicant's home country, the death of the applicant's father, and why these events compromise the applicant's safety. The answers are read back to the applicant again from line 471 until the end of the transcript.

The longest transcript, BAG17, spans 715 lines (10,940 words) and is in contrast to the other two transcripts a "Neuaufnahme des Asylverfahrens"; meaning, it is a follow-up interview to clarify previous statements and fill gaps in the narrative. The interview includes the primary participants as well as a legal official, who does not participate as a speaker in the transcript. The first part of the interview revolves around the applicant's identity. At his first interview, the applicant had provided a false name, thus his real personal details need to be clarified again. The interview then moves on to the details of the escape to Europe and focuses on dates, time lines, and a step-by-step

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recounting of the journey to Graz. Further topics are the financing of the trip, the identity of the smuggler, and finally the reasons that forced the applicant to flee his home country. A fair portion of the interview concentrates on the destruction of hotels and gas stations in Nigeria, which the applicant was party to. The interpreter reads back the established answers to the applicant from line 488 to 646. Throughout the process, the applicant points out certain inaccuracies, which are then briefly discussed and corrected by the interpreter. The last part until the abrupt end of the transcript concentrates again on the identity of the smuggler.

The three interviews were chosen for analysis from the larger corpus because of the official's active participation in negotiations between the interpreter and the applicant. Despite the clear roles assigned to every participant in the asylum interview, the official frequently switches to English and directly takes part in discussion. Therefore, the current three interviews present highly interesting material for an analysis from an ELF perspective.

5.2. Data examination and analysis procedure

The methodology of this thesis combines descriptive statistics with discourse analysis. The aim of this two-way approach is to offer both a concise assessment of vague expressions in the investigated interviews, as well as a qualitative analysis of how some of these expressions are negotiated, explained, and accepted for the overall goal of the asylum interview. The qualitative analysis focuses on individual fragments that are extracted from the whole text of the conversation because they include vague expressions. However, the analysis aims to also consider the extracts in relation to the rest of the conversation, in order to investigate the possible function of vague expressions in the ongoing discourse. For this purpose, extracts of vague language are compared with each other and also with the preliminary report, which is repeatedly read back to the applicants throughout the interviews. This way, it is hoped to establish "intertextuality within the text itself" (Widdowson 2004: 149) and arrive at a rich data analysis.

Descriptive research is often complicated by a lack of context and insufficient information about the data, which forces the researcher to rely on their own assumptions. Especially when working with conversation data, it is always important to keep in mind that the data present only fragments of the real conversation and, thus, the

analysis always remains incomplete. Overstreet (1999: 143) notes that as researchers "we often find that we have said very little about some instances of the phenomenon we have so carefully studied." Channell (1994: 4-6) also hints at these difficulties in her pioneering corpus-linguistic study of vagueness, commenting that she aims to "work towards answers" to her research questions, as complete answers might be impossible. Concerning ELF research, the descriptive analysis of linguistic items is a common and established approach. However, there has been a shift away from "the surface description of particular features" in ELF research and towards the analysis of why and for what communicative purposes these features are used by the speakers (Seidlhofer 2009b: 241). This paper seeks to do the same, with the aim to add to the growing insights on asylum interviews, the use of vague language, and English as a lingua franca in the legal setting.

The analysis of the data was carried out using MAXQDA (VERBI software 2017). The software offers several advantages for the qualitative analysis of texts due to its ability to quickly search a large number of documents, compute a comprehensive annotation of textual elements, and compare codes not only in one but several documents. The software can also compute lexical searches and provide basic information concerning the frequency of lexical items in the data. The output of these searches was used to create graphs in R (R Core Team 2014), in order to visualise the collected data.

The search for vague language within the three transcripts involved three main examination phases. The aim of this first phase was to gain a general overview of the quantitative aspects of vague language present in the data. In an initial step, the transcripts were fed into MAXQDA and examined for selected instances of vague language using the lexical-search and auto-code function. In order to keep the general overview focused and manageable, only some vague items were included in the lexical search. The selection was based on the literature review presented in section 2. Thus, the focus was on vague numerical and non-numerical quantifiers (Channell 1994), general extenders (Overstreet 1999: 10), and the 20 most frequent general nouns according to Mahlberg (2005).

The second phase of the examination procedure aimed to find instances of vague language missed by the lexical-search function. For this purpose, the transcripts were read through carefully to find instances of placeholder words and general nouns not included in the above-named lists, but used with a vague sense in the discourse. A

further focus of this phase was to establish a preliminary classification system, which was subsequently adapted and fine-grained in repeated readings of the interviews. The classification system helped to group instances of vague language according to how they were used and negotiated in the data.

The third and last phase concentrated on connecting individual instances of vague language with each other. This included the comparison of vague expressions in the conversation with their counterparts in the preliminary report. Further, the use of vague expressions across the time span of the interviews was investigated. Subsequently, the most promising examples were chosen for the qualitative analysis. This selection has its limits of course but includes instances of all of the above listed vague expressions, and it is hoped that it will provide interesting insights into the data.

6. Quantitative analysis: frequencies of vague expressions

This chapter presents a brief description of quantitative findings regarding vague language in the three data sets. As a first step, chapter 6.1. reports the statistical findings, such as the frequencies of vague quantifiers and general extenders and their distribution over the data. As a second step, chapter 6.2. discusses the findings in light of the theory presented in the first section of this paper.

6.1. Quantitative findings

The findings were obtained using the lexical search function in MAXQDA; instances in which the words were not used as approximators or general extenders were excluded manually from the findings. The first focus of the quantitative analysis was on vague quantifiers. Concerning numerical vague quantifiers, the transcripts were searched for the five most frequent examples in the literature (Channell 1994): *about, around, round, roughly,* and *approximately.* A manual search for less frequent numerical quantifiers produced three additional candidates used by the participants of the interviews, namely *up to*, *maybe,* and *n or m* (example: *five or six*). In some instances, two or more numerical quantifiers were combined with each other, as shown in (5).

(5) "maybe about twenty or fifty" (BAG17, 705)

The utterance in (5) includes three instances of vague numerical quantifiers: *maybe*, *about*, and *twenty or fifty* (n or m). In cases such as in (5), every numerical quantifier was counted individually for their respective categories. Concerning non-numerical vague quantifiers, the transcripts were searched for a variety of approximators suggested by Channell (1994, chapter 5). The raw figures of the vague quantifiers in the three transcripts can be seen below in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. It has to be noted that the investigated items occur only sparsely across the relatively small data set, which is why the numbers were not normalized. Instead, the tables show the raw figures of vague expressions to see their frequency relative to each other. Further, the tables include the total number of words the respective transcripts consist of.

Table 2 Frequencies of numerical quantifiers in the data

	BAG5B	BAG16	BAG17	sum
total words	4,968	8,674	10,940	
about	-	2	7	9
around	-	1	6	7
round	-	-	-	-
roughly	-	1	4	5
approximately	-	-	-	-
up to	-	-	1	1
maybe	-	2	1	3
n or m	-	2	-	2
sum	-	8	19	27

Table 3 Frequencies of non-numerical quantifiers in the data

	BAG5B	BAG16	BAG17	sum
total words	4,968	8,674	10,940	
all	7	1	11	19
masses of	-	-	-	-
many	2	1	6	9
a lot/ lots	-	-	4	4
several	-	-	-	-
some	-	1	15	16
sometimes	-	1	-	1
a few/ few	-	1	-	1
a bit/ bits	-	-	-	-
seldom	-	-	-	-
rarely/ rare	-	-	-	-
sum	9	5	36	50

The second focus of the quantitative analysis was on general extenders (GEs). The lexical search concentrated on a sample of 19 GEs investigated by Overstreet (1999: 7). The current transcripts were searched for all 19 GEs, however, only three of the GEs were found in the data. Thus, only these three GEs are represented in Table 4 below. A complete list of all 19 GEs that were included in the search can be seen in the appendix.

Table 4 Frequencies of general extenders in the data

	BAG5B	**BAG16**	**BAG17**	sum
total words	4,968	8,674	10,940	
or what	2	4	6	12
or somewhere	-	-	1	1
whatever	-	1	-	1
sum	2	5	7	14

The last focus of the lexical search was on general nouns. First, the transcripts were searched for placeholder words suggested by Channell (1994): *thingy, thingummy, whatshisname*. The search, however, revealed that there were no instances of the listed words in the data. A wider search looked for general nouns suggested by Mahlberg (2005). Mahlberg concentrates her analysis on overall 20 items taken from the groups of time nouns, world nouns and people nouns. The frequencies of these items in the current data are shown below in Table 5. The table does not report the singular and plural form of the same noun in two entries. Instead, the entry for the noun in singular also includes possible instances of this noun in its plural form (i.e. the entry 'man' includes findings for 'men'). This practice excludes the words *person* and *people*, as *people* is not always used to denote the plural of *person*.

Table 5 Frequencies of general nouns in the data

	BAG5B	BAG16	BAG17	sum		BAG5B	BAG16	BAG17	sum
time	-	13	20	33	**woman**	-	-	1	1
end	1	1	2	4	**person**	1	6	2	9
year	-	1	11	12	**place**	5	8	17	30
day	-	19	3	22	**way**	4	6	6	16
people	3	17	13	33	**life**	2	-	2	4
man	8	9	15	32	**thing**	2	5	1	8

6.2. Discussion of quantitative findings

The lexical search for vague items in the data demonstrates that a wide variety of vague expressions are used across all three transcripts. It appears that a certain amount of approximation is unavoidable, even in the genre of the asylum interview.

Concerning vague quantifiers, we can see that some approximators are used much more frequently than others. To begin with, table 2 shows that numerical approximators occur unevenly across the transcripts. Of the overall 27 instances, 19 occur in BAG17, eight in BAG16, and none in BAG5B. A possible explanation for this unequal distribution is the varying length of the transcripts, with BAG17 being the longest and BAG5B the shortest. Another reason might be the topics discussed in the respective transcripts. Since BAG5B is the continuation of an interview, it does not revolve around the establishment of personal details and timelines as much as the other transcripts. With nine occurrences, the approximator *about* is the most frequently used numeric quantifier in the data. Interestingly, despite the small sample size, this finding is in line with Ruizaite's (2004: 228) extensive corpus analysis of various types of discourses, which identify *about* as the most frequently used numerical vague quantifier. Table 3 shows a similar pattern for the group of numerical vague quantifiers. The majority of numerical approximators occur in the longest transcript, BAG17. Further, with 19 and 16 occurrences respectively, *all* and *some* are clearly preferred over other numerical approximators. The majority of approximators that indicate less than a certain quantity, such as *a bit*, *seldom*, and *rare*, are not used by the participants of the interviews at all.

The findings concerning general extenders show that they are used even more sparingly in the data than vague quantifiers. Overall, the low frequency of GEs in the data is in line with the findings of Overstreet's (1999: 7) corpus study, which indicates that GEs are less frequent in spoken formal data than in spoken informal data. Her findings further suggest that GEs are more frequently used between familiar speakers (Overstreet 1999: 6), which does not apply to the asylum interview. Overstreet (1999: 7) identifies only six different forms of GEs in formal spoken data, none of which occur in the current transcripts *(et cetera, and all that, and so forth, or something, and so on, and all these things)*. The most frequently used expression in the current data which can be used as a GE is the disjunctive *or what*, which occurs 12 times and is used in all transcripts. Looking at the function of *or what* in the discourse, we can see that the expression is uttered almost exclusively by the official and the interpreter, with only one instance spoken by an applicant. It further becomes clear that the expression *or what* is mainly used in questions. This can be seen in Extracts 2 and 3 below.

Extract 2 (BAG17, 89)

```
        -----------------------------------------------------
        ³O[ car?                                      Und . wann?
        ³A[               Yea.        Yea. Moto.
        ³I[     By car? Or what? By moto?                 And?
     89 -----------------------------------------------------
```

Extract 3 (BAG16, 461)

```
        -----------------------------------------------------
        ³O[                                   Yes! . Please send/
        ³A[ Something like passport or what?
        ³I[                                   Yes.
    461 -----------------------------------------------------
```

It is up for discussion whether the expression *or what* is in fact used as a GE in the above extracts, or whether it fulfils a different purpose when used in a question. Overstreet (1999: 54-55) does include expressions such as *or anything* that are attached to yes/no questions in her definition of GEs. When GEs are used at the end of a question, the listener is challenged to make his or her own inference "of the category implicated by the general extender in the phrase" (Overstreet 1999: 54). In other words, the listener has to decide for him or herself what belongs to the vaguely referenced category. In turn, the speaker has to reject or accept this interpretation, which mean that the meaning of the GE is "negotiated via the hearer's interpretation" (Overstreet 1999: 54).

A GE attached to a question can fulfil a highly practical function in the discourse: By using a vague and non-specific extender, the speaker can ask for "a category whose name [he or she] either doesn't know, or can't recall" (Overstreet 1999: 44). For example, in Extract 2 above, the use of the expression *or what* enables the interpreter to ask for vehicles other than a car, without having to specify these vehicles. Thus, this use of a GE can be especially useful in interaction in which participants come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The non-specific phrasing makes it possible for the interpreter in Extract 2 to ask for examples of vehicles unknown to her; after all, the applicant might have used a vehicle not present in the interpreter's schema of vehicles. The same can be observed in Extract 3, in which the applicant aims to clarify what kind of documents are expected from him. This makes the GE *or what* at the end of a question a highly effective communicative item, which might explain why this expression is the most frequent of the investigated GEs in the data.

The last focus of the quantitative analysis was on a list of 20 general nouns previously investigated by Mahlberg (2005). The frequencies in Table 5 show that overall general nouns are a reoccurring and constitutive element in the participants'

utterances. Regarding people nouns, the words *people* and *man* occur 33 and 32 times respectively. The time noun *time* is also used 33 times and the world noun *place* occurs 30 times. Therefore, all three categories are represented in the most frequently used nouns. This is visualized in Figure 1 below.
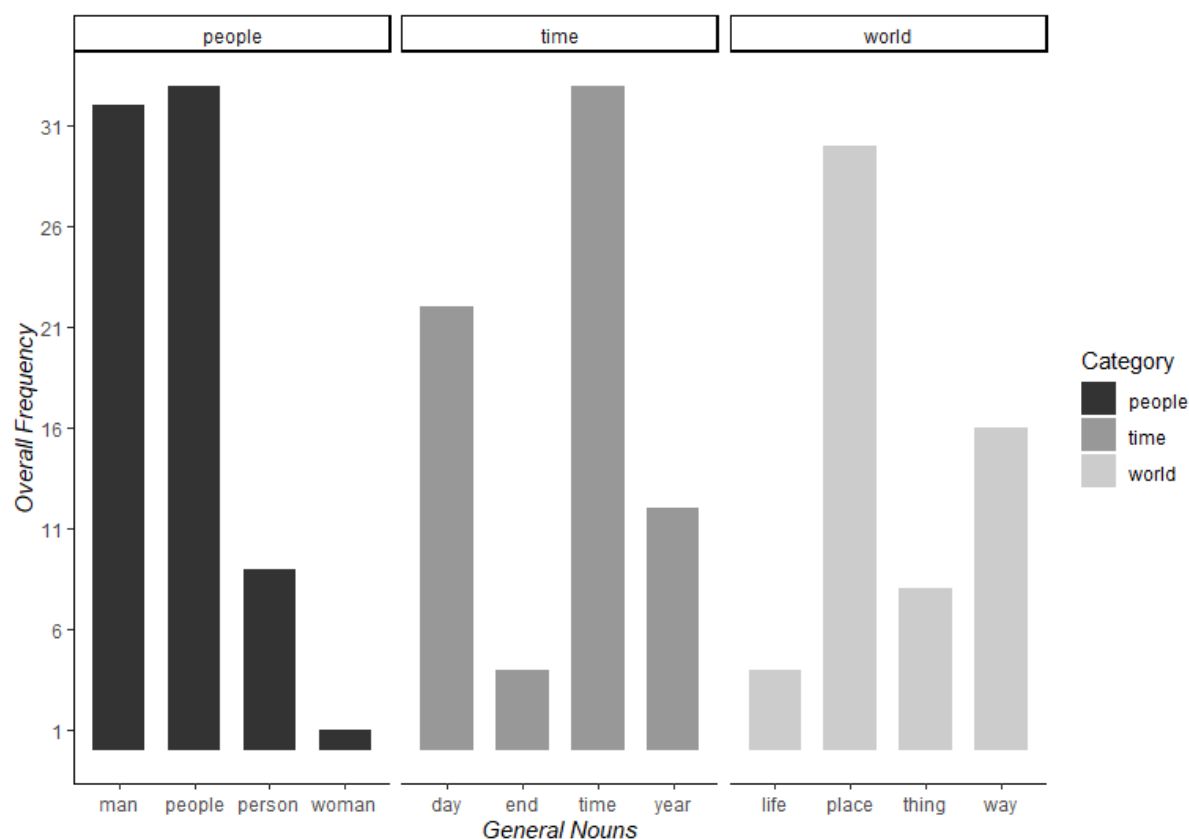
Figure 1 Frequencies of general nouns according to categories

The balanced representation of all three categories of general nouns might be explained by considering the topics that are crucial to the asylum interview. The applicant has to specify the people close to him or her and further provide specific dates, numbers, and locations. Thus, it makes sense that these key topics are reflected in the frequencies of the general nouns used by the participants. While informative, this brief descriptive assessment of general nouns in the data cannot tell us much about the way these nouns are used or whether they occur in modified phrases or by themselves. These nouns are also not always part of vague expressions and we can further expect that they are not the only nouns used as placeholders for more specific terms by the participants. These aspects will be explored in the next chapter, the qualitative analysis.

7. Qualitative analysis: Negotiating vague language

This section presents the main analysis of the current thesis and examines how the participants of the asylum interview negotiate vague expressions in order to reach shared understanding. The goal of this analysis is to arrive at tentative answers concerning the research questions presented in section 1.3. The overarching question aims to explore the "degree of vagueness which is right" (Channell 1994: 3) for the speech events under analysis.

For this purpose, the qualitative analysis is structured as follows: Section 7.1. presents instances in which vague language is used as a tool in order to arrive at a presumably satisfactory degree of precision. Section 7.2. examines local negotiations of general nouns and describes how participants arrive at shared conceptualisations of words such as *place*, *man*, and *name*. Lastly, section 7.3. summarizes and highlights the most important findings of this analysis.

7.1. Vagueness as a tool to negotiate precision

The discussion of previous research on immigration encounters in section 4 has shown that the purpose of the asylum interview is to examine the validity of an applicant's claim for international protection. As a consequence, applicants are encouraged to be as specific as possible and to provide coherent descriptions of places, people, and the timeline of their journeys (UNHCR Austria 2019). However, the quantitative analysis has demonstrated that vague language is a recurring element in all three examined interviews. This chapter discusses contexts in which vague expressions seem to be accepted, encouraged, and helpful discourse element in the asylum interview.

7.1.1. Encouraging the use of vagueness

The following extracts present instances of vagueness that are the result of direct encouragement by the official to use vague expressions. The extracts are analysed first according to their basic structure and the vague lexical items they include. A next step aims to explain the potential functions of the vague items in light of the literature review. Last but not least, the vague expressions that occur in the interview are compared with their respective counterparts in the preliminary report of the interview.

The first extract comes from BAG17 and revolves around the determination of the timeline of the applicant's first arrival in Europe; specifically, the take-off and arrival time of the plane.

Extract 3 (BAG17, 277-288)

```
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[          The plane took off . . at the TAG. But I'm not/
    ³I[ Brussels?
277 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ I cannot (remember) the day (xxx).
    ³I[                            Das Flugzeug flog,
278 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[                                                  Yea.
    ³I[ glaube ich, am TAG ab. . You think it was the TAG?
279 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[                                          Der Ab-
    ³A[                On TAG.
    ³I[ When did it arrive?      Und es kam am TAG an.
280 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[ flug in ORT2?
    ³I[           You mean ah . it took off in ORT2 on the TAG?
281 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[        Wann ungef„hr? Uhrzeit?
    ³A[ Yea.
    ³I[     Genau.              At what .  what time? .
282 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[                                          Should be
    ³I[ You remember the time? Or roughly, what time?
283 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ around/ around eight.
    ³I[             Eight, when? In the morning or in
284 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[          Yea, in the evening.
    ³I[ the evening?                 Um zirka zwanzig Uhr.
285 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[ ((7s)) Und die Ankunft?
    ³I[              And when did it arrive? . . Or when
286 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[                      Around seven. Seven o clock
    ³I[ did it arrive in Brussels?
287 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ in the morning.
288 ------------------------------------------------------------
```

In the above extract, the applicant is asked to narrate his journey to Europe. After providing a specific date for the departure of the plane in Nigeria, the applicant immediately expresses insecurity about the date's accuracy (line 278: "But I'm not/ I cannot (remember) the day (xxx)"). A few lines later, the official asks for even more specific information, namely the time of departure. However, he appears to accommodate the applicant's previously expressed insecurity by using the word *ungefähr*, which the interpreter translates as *roughly*. Encouraged to use an estimate, the

applicant states a vague point in time ("Should be around/ around eight"). In the subsequent lines, this statement is narrowed down with the help of follow-up questions, until a sufficiently specific answer has been established ("eight in the evening"). When asked for the time of the plane's arrival in Europe in lines 286 – 287, the applicant answers with "around seven", but immediately attaches the specification "in the morning" to the utterance without having been asked for it.

A first element to examine in regard to the above extract is the vague language used by the participants. The word *roughly* is a frequent approximator and indicates a degree of uncertainty about the exact quantity that it refers to (Ruzaite 2004: 236). In the above example, this term thus signals to the applicant that speculations concerning the exact point in time are allowed. The encouragement to guess is accepted by the applicant in line 283 ("should be around/ around eight"). His answer is clearly marked as an estimate by two approximators, one of them being repeated. The first approximator is the modal verb *should*. Acting as a hedging device, the modal renders the applicant's assertion "less strong than if *should* were not present" (Fraser 2010: 18, [original emphasis]). The second approximator used by the applicant is the numerical vague quantifier *around*. Placed before a number, *around* allows for leeway in either direction and effectively reduces the applicant's commitment to his assertion. The applicant's rough statement "around eight" is made more specific by anchoring it "in the evening" in line 285. Looking at the applicant's next answer concerning the arrival time of the plane, we can see that he immediately attaches "in the morning" without having been asked by the interpreter. The plane's arrival time still includes an approximator ("Around seven. Seven o'clock in the morning"), but it seems precise enough for the official, who moves on the next question.

Structurally speaking, the applicant's expression of uncertainty in line 278 can be considered the trigger for the encouragement of vagueness in line 283. The encouragement, in turn, leads to a negotiation process in which the specifics of the applicant's vague answer are discussed. The basic structure of the process of negotiation can hence be described as trigger – encouragement – vague response – discussion of response. The applicant's unsolicited inclusion of *in the morning* in line 288 indicates that he clearly intends to accommodate the required level of precision. The negotiation process therefore not only aids the overall outcome of the interview, but also communicates the official's expectations to the applicant.

As a next step, let us consider the representation of this exchange in the preliminary report of the interview. In Extract 4 below, the interpreter is reading back the established facts to the applicant. Looking at the phrasing of the interpreter, it becomes evident that the vague expressions survived the oral discussion and are recorded in the preliminary report. The approximator *around* is included for both the plane's departure time in line 590 and the plane's arrival time in line 592. The applicant's reluctant commitment to precise points in time is further acknowledged by the interpreter in line 589 by the use of the phrase "You think that the plane took off [...]".

Extract 4 - Preliminary Report (BAG17, 588-593)

```
          ----------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ airline. The one you took from ORT2 to Brussels. And you
      588 ----------------------------------------------------------
          ----------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ think that . you think . that the plane took off in ORT2
      589 ----------------------------------------------------------
          ----------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ on the TAG of MONAT at around eight o'clock in the
      590 ----------------------------------------------------------
          ----------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ evening. And you say the plane dropped you in Brussels
      591 ----------------------------------------------------------
          ----------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ on the TAG of this MONAT. At around 7 o'clock in the
      592 ----------------------------------------------------------
          ----------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ morning. Right? . You say there was one stop-over in
      593 ----------------------------------------------------------
```

The same basic negotiation structure can be observed in Extract 5 below, which occurs towards the end of the same transcript. At this point in the interview, the official wants to know more about the person who helped the applicant escape to Europe. However, the applicant appears unable to provide the requested information concerning the smuggler's age and distances himself from the smuggler in line 701 ("I don't know him very well"). This lack of knowledge triggers the encouragement from the interpreter to make a vague guess.

Extract 5 (BAG17, 700-705)

```
           ----------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[ afrikaner?                              Wie alt?
           ³A[                  Yea, he's black.
           ³I[       He's black?                      How old? .
     700   ----------------------------------------------------------
           ----------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[             I can't tell his (age) as I don't know him
           ³I[ Give me his age.
     701   ----------------------------------------------------------
           ----------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[ very well.
           ³I[        Könnte ich nicht sagen, ich kenne ihn nicht
     702   ----------------------------------------------------------
           ----------------------------------------------------------
           ³I[ sehr gut.              Roughly.
     703   ----------------------------------------------------------
           ----------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[ Is er hundert?
           ³A[                                       He should be
           ³I[             Ah, roughly. Try to . yea . estimate.
     704   ----------------------------------------------------------
           ----------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[ about fourty.              No, about forty, forty-one.
           ³I[   Maybe about twenty or fifty?
     705   ----------------------------------------------------------
```

Hiding the identity of a smuggler is likely to be counterproductive to the applicant, who is expected to be cooperative and supply the requested information. However, untruthful statements will prove equally detrimental to the applicant's credibility, and thus he opts not to answer the official's question concerning the smuggler's age in lines 700-701. Only after the interpreter asks him to "try to estimate" is the applicant willing to make a rough guess. His answer is marked by the same vague language as his previous statements concerning the plane's arrival and departure times. It starts with the modal *should* and the number is preceded by the numerical vague quantifier *about*. In order to narrow down the applicant's estimate of *around forty*, the interpreter offers two extremes to the applicant ("Maybe about twenty or fifty?"). This negotiation strategy proves to be successful. The applicant appears to grow more confident in his estimate and the final statement ("No, about forty, forty-one") drastically minimizes the age range and the direction that the remaining approximator *around* refers to.

As the transcript ends after the asylum seeker's statement in line 705, a comparison with the preliminary report was not possible for this analysis. Given the inclusion of the vague approximators in the preliminary report of the first extract discussed in this chapter, it can be speculated that the written record of the present negotiation also includes the term *around*.

The two instances demonstrate how vague language aids the negotiation process of important information and opens up a discussion that might otherwise have been

perceived as 'inappropriate' by the participants. The invitation to guess communicates relaxed expectations regarding the required degree of the applicant's specificity. This strategy brings to mind Pöchhacker and Kolb's (2009: 120) claim that both the applicant and the official are responsible for the production of a coherent and chronological narrative. The applicant's ability to produce a coherent narrative is likely to be negatively influenced by several factors, such as traumatic experiences, lack of sleep, and malnutrition (Doornbos 2005: 118). Further, the legal and formal setting of the asylum interview might discourage applicants from making assertions they cannot absolutely commit to. Hence, from the perspective of the applicant, giving no answer might appear a better option than being caught in potential lies or discrepancies. As shown, the official's permission to be vague opens up the floor for negotiations and the use of vague approximations enables efficient communication despite the applicant's insecurity concerning certain details.

In some cases, the negotiation process may differ from the basic structure described above and result in a more complex discussion. The following extract, which is also taken from BAG17, starts with a trigger - encouragement sequence; however, the applicant insists that he cannot provide the requested information.

Extract 6 (BAG17, 457-477)

```
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[                          ((3s)) Frage: Welchen Schaden
     ³A[ ((Schreibt, 10s)) GRUPPE.
457  ------------------------------------------------------------
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[ hat er ungefähr verursacht?
     ³I[                          Ahm . h . the damage you
458  ------------------------------------------------------------
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³A[      You say?                              You mean
     ³I[ caused?    How much was the damage caused by you?
459  ------------------------------------------------------------
     -------------------------------------------------
     ³O[        Kann man das sagen? In Naira oder in Dollars?
     ³A[ how much/
     ³I[        The damage, yea.             Can you estimate,
460  ------------------------------------------------------------
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ maybe in nairas, how much the damage was caused by you?
461  ------------------------------------------------------------
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[                                             Waren das
     ³A[ I cannot estimate.
     ³I[              Ich kann keine Schätzung geben.
462  ------------------------------------------------------------
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[ tausend Dollar, waren das hundertausend Dollar?
     ³A[                                             I don't
     ³I[                                       Maybe a damage
463  ------------------------------------------------------------
     ------------------------------------------------------------
     ³A[ (can) say it.             I cannot (guess). I don't know/
     ³I[ of one thousand dollars?                           Or
464  ------------------------------------------------------------
```

59

```
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[     I don't know. . I . I don't know how much they spent
    ³I[ less or more?
465 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ in building the hotels. And the (filling stations) I
    ³I[                                        Ich weiß nicht.
466 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[                                    Sind die Hotels komplett
    ³A[ cannot/
    ³I[  Ich kann's nicht schätzen. Ich weiß nicht, wie viel die
467 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[ niedergebrannt?
    ³I[  . aufgebrach/ also gebraucht haben zum Aufbau der Ho-
468 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[                                              Yea.
    ³I[ tels. . Were the hotels **totally** burnt down?   Die Hotels
469 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[     Waren das groáe Hotels?
    ³I[ .sind vollständig niedergebrannt. . And the hotels were
470 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[        You say?
    ³I[ . **big**?        Were they . the hotels, you burnt down,
471 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[                                              Welche
    ³A[                   Yes. (Is) a **big hotels**.
    ³I[ were they big hotels?
472 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[ Hotels?
    ³A[           People used to lodge. . Lodge in the place.
    ³I[ What hotels?
473 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ And **even** they are selling food. Is a/ is a big hotel.
    ³I[  Leute . haben dort genächtigt.                Mhm?
474 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ Is a **big** hotel. People lodge there. They sell food
475 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ there.
    ³I[      Es war ein großes Hotel. Leute nächtigen dort. Und
476 -----------------------------------------------------------
       -----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[ Ja, des is kloar.
    ³I[  sie haben . auch . . „h . man kann dort auch essen.
477 -----------------------------------------------------------
```

Previous to the above exchange, the applicant explained that a rival community had murdered the leader of his community, the so-called 'king'. As a response, his group had set fire to hotels and gas stations owned by the rival group. In an attempt to reconstruct these events in detail, the official asks for an estimate of the damage caused by the fire in lines 457-458. The applicant appears confused and unable to provide an answer. In a German comment, the official asks the interpreter whether an assessment of the damage is be possible ("Kann man das sagen? In Naira oder in Dollars?", translation: "Can this be said? In naira or in dollars?"). Subsequently, the interpreter invites the applicant to guess ("Can you estimate, maybe in nairas, how much the damage was caused by you?").

However, the applicant refuses to make any statement, stressing that he has no conceptualisation of the amount of money needed to build hotels. Without a vague statement serving as a reference point, the interpreter provides suggestive estimates ("Maybe a damage of one thousand dollars?", "Or less or more?") and asks the applicant to agree or disagree. The applicant continues to refuse any statement.

The negotiation in Extract 6 demonstrates that, despite being useful, the strategy of encouraging the applicant to guess will not always elicit the desired information. While the applicant is comfortable with voicing an estimate in the previously discussed extracts, he now insists that he cannot give a truthful answer or even guess concerning the possible damage of the destroyed hotels. From line 467 on, the official appears to change his strategy and asks the applicant whether the hotels were *totally* burned down and whether they were *big hotels*. The applicant is willing to supply this information and further, from line 467 onwards, shares his conceptualisation of the word *big* in the context of hotels.

Taking the multilingual nature of the asylum interview into consideration, a variety of interesting layers should be discussed in regard to the phrase *big hotels*. First, the exact semantics of adjectives such as *big* or its counterpart *small* are mainly relationally determined (Devos 2003: 125), meaning that only the awareness of how the terms relate to other sizes enables participants to reach the intended inference about the actual proportions of *big*. Using Devos' (2003: 124) working definition, the expression *big hotels* can thus be categorised as vague in degree. Turning to Channell (1994: 20), it can also be argued that the term *big* is easily contrasted with other terms that would render the same proposition, such as a *sizable* or *huge* hotel. It is therefore obvious why the vague expression *big hotel* requires further negotiation, so that all participants can reach the same understanding.

The concrete meaning of the word *big* in relation to hotels is also likely to be influenced by the participants' respective socio-cultural and pragmalinguistic schema of hotels. The term *pragmalinguistic schema* is used by Guido (2012, 2017) to refer to templates of behaviours and language patterns that we have stored in our minds and that guide us in our interactions with other people. In a sense, a schema informs us of what to expect and how to react in certain situation. Since schemata are informed by our socio-cultural surroundings, as well as by the habits of our speech community, the conceptualisation of what a *big hotel* actually looks like can be expected to differ between speakers from different backgrounds. Guido (2017) suggests that a lack of

awareness of diverging schemata can lead to misunderstandings in the asylum interview and thus, it is important for speakers to co-operate and make "culture-bound discourses conceptually accessible" (Guido 2017: 553). We can see this co-operative behaviour in the extract above, when the official changes his strategy and, instead of insisting on a specific assessment of the damage costs, asks the applicant about the size of the hotel. The applicant explains that people could sleep and dine in the hotels (lines 473-474: "People used to lodge. Lodge in the place. And even they are selling food. Is a/ is a big hotel."). His use of the word *even* hints that he considers the fact that the hotels offered food to its guests a significant indication of their sizes. The applicant's description earns a German comment from the official ("Ja, des is kloar", translation: "Yes, that is a given"). The comment indicates that the applicant's description did not reveal anything new to the official; people lodging and eating in big hotels appears to be self-evident of the official's own schema of hotels.

A comparison of this extract with the preliminary report, shown in Extract 7 below, shows that the applicant's refusal to guess is recorded in a neutral manner. The report includes that the applicant was not able to estimate the amount of damage caused by the burning of the hotels. The joint negotiations of the hotel's size are reduced to the short statement "But it was big hotels" in line 640. A possible explanation for this straightforward answer in the record, which does not reflect the actual exchange during the interview, is that the applicant's description of *big* was ultimately congruent with the official's notion of the word. This is in line with a finding by Pöchhacker and Kolb (2009: 133), who suggest that adapting and "tailoring the answer to the recorded question" is a frequent occurrence in the asylum interview.

Extract 7 – Preliminary Report (BAG 17 637-641)

```
     ---------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ And next one, the damage. You should estimate the damage
637  ---------------------------------------------------------
     ---------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ that was caused by you. Your answer: You say you can't
638  ---------------------------------------------------------
     ---------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ tell. You don't know how much the reconstruction of the
639  ---------------------------------------------------------
     ---------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ property cost. But it was big hotels and they were all
640  ---------------------------------------------------------
     ---------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ burnt down totally. . You say ah . you are not in a
641  ---------------------------------------------------------
```

The last extract that will be discussed in this section is taken from a different interview, namely from BAG16. Structurally speaking, the stretch of exchange in this extract follows the same sequence of trigger – encouragement – vague response – discussion of response. From the perspective of role allocation, however, the current exchange is complicated by the official breaking his role and switching to English in order to directly participate in the discussion.

Extract 8 (BAG16, 356-365)

```
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[                              Um wie viel Uhr passierte das?
        ³I[ At what time did this happen?
    356 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³A[ Actually it happen in the afternoon, but I don't know
    357 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[      Der Vater wurde/            the father/ they kill
        ³A[ the actual time.      It happen in the afternoon.
        ³I[                 Pardon?                    Am Nach-
    358 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[ your father in the afternoon? In the later afternoon?
        ³A[                                     Yea?
        ³I[ mittag.               Your father was killed in the
    359 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[                                          In the
        ³A[      Yes. In the afternoon. But I don't remember the
        ³I[ afternoon?
    360 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[ later afternoon? Early afternoon?
        ³A[ time.                          What time? (I don't
    361 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[                                       Afternoon
        ³A[ understand).
        ³I[      About what time, just roughly? Immediately after
    362 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[ is maybe six hours or more.
        ³A[                            Not late afternoon. Not
        ³I[ noon? Or in the late afternoon?
    363 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³A[ so much late.               It was that period.
        ³I[        Was it at two pm, at six pm?
    364 ------------------------------------------------------------
        ------------------------------------------------------------
        ³O[                                     Er wurde
        ³A[ But not late, not six or four, no. Just mid-afternoon.
        ³I[                                     Two or
    365 ------------------------------------------------------------
```

The negotiations in Extract 8 revolve around a highly sensitive topic, namely the murder of the applicant's father. In line 357, the applicant states that he does not recall when exactly his father had been killed ("Actually it happened in the afternoon, but I don't know the actual time"). The official starts dictating a sentence in German to the interpreter, but then switches to English and directly asks the applicant for clarification. The subsequent exchange, in which both the official and the interpreter repeat their own

questions, leaves the applicant visibly confused and he signals that he does not understand what is expected from him ("What time? (I don't understand)"). This likely leads the interpreter to weaken the categorical expectations of the applicant's answer by adding an approximator to her question ("About what time, just roughly?"). She further provides the applicant with possible answers ("Immediately after noon? Or in the late afternoon?"). While the interpreter still holds the floor, the official joins the discussion again in line 362 and comments in English that "Afternoon is maybe six hours or more". The applicant subsequently settles on "mid-afternoon", which according to his description refers to a time period before four o'clock. The interpreter attempts to narrow down this description even further ("two or three?"), but the official already moves on to the next question.

The above instance involves a complicated and high-involvement discussion centering around a concrete point in time and, subsequently, the conceptualisation of *afternoon*. When the applicant cannot provide the required accuracy, the official switches to English in the middle of his otherwise German comment. Code-switching in ELF communication, a common phenomenon, has been linked to several motivations and purposes, such as specifying an addressee (Cogo 2010: 298) or improving the communicative efficiency and accommodating another speaker (Rogerson-Revell 2010: 446). The reason for code-switching in the current example, however, may also be rooted in impatience rather than accommodation. In regard to the asylum interview, Maryns (2005: 309) notes that unsuccessful communication between the official and the applicant, such as a failure to establish the required facts, can easily "[culminate] in frustration". Starting from this assumption, the official's switch to English might be an attempt to draw the applicant's attention to the required degree of specificity.

Regardless of the official's motivation to code-switch, the applicant appears confused as to whether he is supposed to reply to the questions posed by the official or those posed by the interpreter. His answers necessarily appear non-corresponding and vague. The official offers another comment in English, in which he expresses his conceptualisation of the term *afternoon* ("Afternoon is maybe six hours or more"). This comment illustrates the difficulty in arriving at the required level of accuracy: What do the respective participants regard as *afternoon*, what is the *early* and what is the *late afternoon*? The subsequent lines of negotiation are rich in vague terms, such the interpreter's question "Immediately after noon?" in line 362 and the applicant's answer "Not late afternoon. Not so much late". This adjacency pair brings to mind Doornbos'

(2005: 117) observation that vagueness on the applicant's part can also be the result of vagueness on the official's or the interpreter's part. After all, the term *immediately*, used by the interpreter, can denote a wide range of time intervals, depending on the context the word is used in. The Oxford Learner's Dictionary, listing *at once* and *without delay* as synonyms, provides an arguably vague definition for *immediately*: "next to or very close to a particular place or time". While useful on a surface level, this description does not provide a stable or fixed referent for the duration or the spatial measurement of the word. Only after the interpreter uses concrete points in time in line 364 ("Was is at two pm, at six pm?"), the applicant arrives at *mid-afternoon*, which the official tolerates as specific enough. The official switches back to his original role and dictates in German what should be recorded in the preliminary report.

Turning to the preliminary report, seen below in Extract 10, the complicated exchange between the applicant, the interpreter, and the official is not referenced in any way. The applicant's insecurity concerning the exact point in time is in part visible in lines 521 – 522 ("My father was killed early afternoon, or in the middle of the afternoon"). The report does not include obviously vague words such as approximators, but instead uses the categorical statements "early afternoon" and "or in the middle of the afternoon". This steers the interpretation of the point in time towards the later rather then the earlier end of the frame *early afternoon*.

Extract 10 – Preliminary Report (BAG16, 520-523)

```
     ----------------------------------------------------------
     I[ want to terminate my family. Question: What time did
520  ----------------------------------------------------------
     ----------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ this happen? My father was . killed early afternoon, or
521  ----------------------------------------------------------
     ----------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ in the middle of the afternoon and at the same time my
522  ----------------------------------------------------------
     ----------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ mother was kidnapped by members of the OPC. Question:
523  ----------------------------------------------------------
```

So far, we can say that all of the extracts revolve around topics crucial to the overall goal of the asylum interview. They concern the applicant's first arrival in Europe, the personal details of the smuggler, and the events that forced the applicant to flee his home country. Given the importance of these topics, it is understandable why the official tries to elicit answers from the applicant that are as precise as possible. The analysis has shown that in cases where this appears impossible, vague language is used as a tool to

approach a satisfactory level of accuracy. The encouragement to guess and estimate opens up a communicative space within the overall discourse, in which the applicant is relieved of the expectations to be specific. The applicant's vague response is then negotiated through various strategies. In Extract 3, the interpreter provides two options for the applicant to choose from ("morning or evening"), while in Extract 5 the smuggler's age is narrowed down by the applicant taking position in regard to two extremes ("twenty or fifty"). Vague language thus fulfils a highly useful function in the negotiations that have been analysed so far. This is especially evident in Extract 5, in which the applicant goes from "I cannot say, I don't know him" to the arguably precise statement "around fourty. fourty-one".

Regarding the preliminary report, the analysis has shown that vague expressions and hedging devices do partially survive the oral interview and make it into the report. This can be expected to be an advantage to the applicant, should his or her assertions be re-examined at some later point in the application procedure. Moreover, this finding is in line with Wardhaugh's (1993: 181) comment that "vagueness rather than precision will prevail". Vagueness, being a useful and natural feature of language, allows speakers to communicate efficiently and should thus be tolerated (Wardhaugh 1993: 181). As the present analysis has shown, accepting an approximated number, such as *around eight*, allows the conversation to move on to the next topic. While not being prototypically specific, the answer *around eight* still constitutes a useful piece of information for the overall goal of the interview. This is particularly relevant for Extract 6, in which the applicant is not willing to estimate the damage of the destroyed hotels. It is ultimately better for the goal of the interview to tolerate the applicant's vague descriptions, instead of demanding answers he cannot provide.

We have also seen that the preliminary report does not include much detail about the complex negotiation procedures. One reasons for this might be the fact that sometimes interpreters "deliberately omit statements they regard as 'irrelevant'" (Pöllabauer 2004: 159) and thereby reduce the original answer to a shorter version. This practice of omission can also be observed in regard to negotiation processes. In their research, Pöchhacker and Kolb (2009: 130) identify several instances in which complicated negotiation processes were reduced to seemingly straightforward answers in the written report. This sort of entextualisation of how statements were established can in some cases lead to apparent inconsistencies in the applicant's narrative (Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009: 131). While the current analysis cannot corroborate this

consequence, it supports the claim that the written report might provide only little to no information about complex or high-involvement discussions.

7.1.2. Converging on vague expressions

While the applicants were actively encouraged to use vague language in the previous examples, this section examines instances in which vague language is discussed and agreed on at a subtler level. Instead of using signal words such as *roughly* or *estimate*, the following examples rely on other strategies to arrive at the required level of specificity. In the first extract, taken from BAG16, the timeline of the events that forced the applicant to flee his country is reconstructed. Specifically, the official is trying to establish the date on which two police officers had been killed.

Extract 11 (BAG 16, 249-257)

```
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[                             Einen Polizeisergeant und
      ³A[      Yea, two were killed.
      ³I[ killed?
245   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[ einen Inspektor. Wann? . When . do they kill them?
      ³I[                                                  When
246   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[                                 This happen on the
      ³I[ did this occur? When did this happen?
247   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[ same day, on the TAG of MONAT.                     On
      ³I[                             Am TAG, am gleichen Tag.
248   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[ TAG of MONAT, they caught the girl and the boy.
      ³I[                                            Yes, and
249   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[                    Yea, it happen . I think . . I don't
      ³I[ when did this happen?
250   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[ actually . I can no remember the date but it should be
251   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[                                        Das passierte/
      ³A[ that same MONAT. But I can no remember the date. But it
252   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[                      In that period?
      ³A[ happened in that period.                          Yea.
      ³I[                                   Around this period?
253   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[                                               Eini-
      ³A[ This period. Is not too far from that date, I think.
254   ------------------------------------------------------------
       ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[ ge Tage später, oder wie?
      ³A[                                   Yea, it should
      ³I[                      So some days after?
255   ------------------------------------------------------------
```

```
          ----------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[                            Einige Tage nach/   Einige Tage,
     ³A[ be. Maybe two days, just.
     ³I[                            Zwei Tage später.
 256 ----------------------------------------------------------
     ----------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[ mach ma zwei Tage nach dieser Verhaftung . und? Dann?
 257 ----------------------------------------------------------
```

Already in the beginning of the extract, the official switches to English and directly questions the applicant concerning the killed police officers. The applicant cannot remember the exact date, but states that it happened on the same day "the boy and the girl" were captured (lines 248-249). The focus then shifts to establishing the date of this other event, the capture of the boy and the girl. The identity of the boy and girl is not further negotiated throughout the conversation, as they do not play a primary role in the narrative. However, their capture led to tensions between the police and a political group in the applicant's home city, which culminated in the killing of the police officers. In line 250, the applicant repeats that he cannot remember the exact date on which these events happened. Yet, aware of the importance of this information, he adds in line 253 that "it happened in that period". This triggers the official to switch to English again and directly ask the applicant for clarification ("In that period?"). The interpreter joins in and asks the same question. In an attempt to narrow down the time frame, the applicant uses a previously named date as point of reference and states the capture of the boy and the girl happened "not too far from this day, I think". A subsequent negotiation narrows down the vague statement to "maybe two days, just" after the referenced date. The official is satisfied with this level of precision and further relativizes the information in a German comment most likely directed to the typist ("Einige Tage/ mach ma zwei Tage", translation: " Some days/ let's make it two days").

What makes this extract particularly interesting is, on the one hand, the official's switch to English and involvement in the conversation and, on the other hand, the negotiation and convergence on what the expression *that period* refers to. Regarding the first point, the official's shift to English in lines 246 and 253 can be considered unnecessary and potentially disadvantageous to the outcome of the interview, as an interpreter is present and directs the same questions to the applicant only seconds later. As already mentioned above, there are several reasons for speakers to code-switch in interaction. Yet, the asylum interview cannot be called a 'normal' interaction; it is an institutional genre with strict role allocation. Therefore, the official's switches to English are particularly salient and difficult to explain. As Ruzaite (2004: 222) notes, vague

language demands from the participants of a conversation to take on active roles in the process of meaning negotiation. Interlocutors are challenged to infer possible implicatures attached to the vague expressions and co-construct the intended meaning. While this might help to understand the official's involvement in line 253, it does not hold for the first instance in line 246, which follows an unambiguous statement by the applicant. Tannen (1989: 17) suggests that active participation of interlocutors in the meaning-making process serves as a rewarding activity that creates "emotional involvement" in the discourse. If interlocutors care for, and are invested in, the outcome of a conversation, this involvement will ultimately lead to better comprehension of the matter at hand (Tannen 1989: 17). The official's switch to English in line 246 may therefore be motivated by the desire to emotionally engage not only with the interpreter, but also with the applicant.

Cogo and Pitzl (2016: 339), approaching the question from the ELF perspective, stress the other side of the coin: "Understanding is, in fact, not just a receptive ability; [...] it is not just the listener's job". Their comment refers to the interactive nature of creating shared understanding, which is described as a dynamic and joint process in both L1 and in L2 communication. Investigating strategies used by ELF speakers to avoid possible non-understanding, Cogo and Pitzl (2016: 340) identify partial repetition as a proactive way to increase the explicitness of utterances. In the present example, the official can, due to his sufficient proficiency in English, bypass the interpreter and signal directly to the applicant that the phrasing *in that period* poses a potential non-understanding. From this perspective, the official's active participation and repetition in the meaning-making process might count as helpful and can even be seen as building a direct relationship with the applicant. Given the strict role-allocation in the asylum interview, however, it remains questionable whether this interaction ultimately has a positive or negative effect on the overall communication. Additionally, the official's first lingua franca involvement concerning this particular negotiation remains unexplained even from the perspective of the strategy to pre-empt non-understanding, as suggested by Cogo and Pitzl (2016) A more detailed discussion of role allocation within the asylum interview, a complicated and sensitive issue in itself, goes beyond the scope of this paper and is better discussed from the perspective of translation studies (i.e. Pöllabauer 2004).

The second interesting element in regard to the exchange in Extract 11 is the vague expression *that period* and the subsequent agreement on what the phrase refers to. The official's question in line 253 ("In that period?") is syntactically formulated as a

yes/no – question. However, the official's intention behind the question is likely a different one. As mentioned above, by partially repeating the applicant's turn, the official highlights a potential source of confusion. The illocutionary force behind the official's repetition is then more likely to request an explanation from the applicant regarding the specific meaning and referent of *that period*.

Considering not only the current excerpt but also its preceding co-text, it becomes evident that a specific date for the capture of "the boy and the girl" has already been established, confirmed, and dictated to the typist in lines 226-227. The applicant unambiguously repeats this date in lines 248 and 249 as the same date the police officers were killed. However, the interpreter asks the applicant again "Yes, and when did this happen?", with the pronoun *this* referring to the killing of the police officers. The applicant's subsequent answer is marked by several pauses and self-repetition, hinting at possible confusion. This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that the applicant now changes his previous specific statement to a more vague answer, stating in line 252 that "I can no remember the date but it should be that same MONAT (translation: month). But I can no remember the date. But it happened in that period." This exchange shows how the applicant grows uncomfortable with his specific statement and introduces distance into his assertion through vague expressions.

In the subsequent lines, the span of *that period* is narrowed down. At first, the applicant provides a rather vague description ("Is not too far from that date, I think"), using the unspecific approximation of *not too far* and the hedging devices *I think* to signal his uncertainty. The phrase *not too far from that date* could refer to both directions in the timeline, earlier and later than the given date. The context, however, eliminates the first option, as it has already been established that the killing happened after the capture of the "boy and the girl". This shared background knowledge is visible in the official's question in line 255, which only focuses on the days after the capture ("Einige Tage später, oder wie?", translation: "So some days after?"). The applicant agrees and suggests a time span of "maybe two days, just". The official is satisfied with this answer and dictates a statement in German to the typist ("Einige Tage, mach ma zwei Tage nach dieser Verhaftung"). What makes this comment particularly interesting is the official's shift in word choice, from vague to more specific. He starts the report with "Einige Tage" (translation: "a few days"), but then converges to two days, the time span suggested by the applicant. The official's comment is a good example for how the appropriate degree of vagueness is negotiated locally and in-action. While some vague

items, such as the general nouns in the phrase *the girl and the boy* are accepted, other vague expressions require negotiation and vagueness can only be accepted after it has been discussed. Moreover, the above exchange shows that in the end it is the official who decides which vague expressions are tolerated and which ones are not.

Finally, let us consider the preliminary report of the current extract. As can be seen below, the report starts out with *a few days after* in line 488, which is subsequently narrowed down to "about . about two days after the arrest". This is in line with the official's German statement and includes the hedging devices employed by the applicant.

Extract 12 – Preliminary Report (BAG16, 487-489)

```
     --------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ GABE and killed one police sergeant and one inspector.
487  --------------------------------------------------------
     --------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ This happened a few days after . about . about two days
488  --------------------------------------------------------
     --------------------------------------------------------
     ³I[ after this arrest. Ah, this caused misunderstandings
489  --------------------------------------------------------
```

An additional interesting observation in relation to the exchange in Extract 11 emerges when we consider it within its co-text. Looking at the whole transcript, we can see that the applicant uses the expression *that period* in two different negotiations throughout the interview. It first occurs during the discussion about the date on which the applicant's father had been murdered. This exchange has already been discussed above in Extract 8 in regard to the conceptualisation of *afternoon*. A comparison of Extract 8 with the current Extract 11 shows that the applicant uses the word *period* to refer to different stretches of time in the respective contexts. In Extract 11, the word *period* denotes a time span of about two days. In contrast, the same word in Extract 8 denotes a time span of just a few hours.

While not featuring on Mahlberg's (2005: 3) list of most frequent general nouns, the word *period* clearly belongs to the category of general time nouns. It can be argued that the word *period* is even more general then other time nouns, such as *year* and *day*. Both *year* and *day* refer to a conventionalised time span and their lexical meanings are best derived by looking at how they relate to each other. One year consists of 365 days; one day consists of 24 hours, and so forth. The term *period*, however, refers to "a particular length of time" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary Online 2019), a description which is neither countable nor does it share a stable or fixed relation to other time

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words. The exact length of *period* is therefore inherently vague and has to be inferred from its context and co-text. The comparison of Extracts 8 and 11 further indicates that the length of *period* may even differ within the same conversation and within the use of the same speaker.

This subchapter has demonstrated that vague language can serve a beneficial function to the overall outcome of the asylum interview and aid the negotiation process of crucial information. It further suggests that vague statements are preferable over no statements and, hence, a certain degree of vague language is tolerated both in the conversation and in the written report written report.

7.2. Vagueness and precision as a way to direct attention

The next section focuses in more detail on the negotiation procedures of general nouns and how the use of vague or precise terms can steer the conversation in a certain direction. As the following analysis will show, the choice of words can inform about what speakers consider important or irrelevant to their communicative goal. Further, the participants employ several strategies to reach the presumably required level of precision in regard to general nouns. The first subsection discusses three instances in which vague world nouns are debated, while the second subsection concentrates on vague people nouns. Lastly, the other side of the coin is examined by looking at two instances of overspecification of general nouns.

7.2.1. Negotiating location: "Yea, it's in my place"

The notions of a *place* or a *home* play a central role in the narratives of asylum seekers, who are displaced from their homes in more ways than just in terms of geography (Maryns & Blommaert 2001: 64). In the first extract below, taken from BAG17, the applicant attempts to explain the political situation that forced him to flee his home country; however, the conversation quickly gets sidetracked from the main topic due to the use of the vague noun *place*.

Example 13 (BAG 17, 363-372)

```
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[         Okay. You see, in our place . we are fighting
           ³I[ the problem?
       363 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[ for kingship. I don't know if you understand what you
       364 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[ mean.
           ³I[     In/ bei uns . ich weiß nicht, ob Sie das verstehen,
       365 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[                               ((4s)) Wo? Im Dorf oder
       366 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[ in der Stadt? In ORT1?
           ³A[                                      Yea.
           ³I[         Where? In your/ in your village or . in ORT1
       367 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³A[                                      Yea, it's in my
           ³I[ or where? You say in your place. Where?
       368 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[         Wo is sein Place?
           ³A[ place.                                ORT4. In
           ³I[      Where is that?     Where is your place?
       369 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[                              ((Schiebt AW Zettel hin))
           ³A[ BUNDESSTAAT-State.   ORT4. ORT4.        ((Schreibt, 6s))
           ³I[                   In?              ORT4. In/
       370 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[ ((3s)) ORT4. ORT4 oder ORT4?
           ³A[                              ORT4.
           ³I[                              ORT4. The first letter
       371 --------------------------------------------------------
           --------------------------------------------------------
           ³O[                                              ((7s))
           ³A[              BUCHSTABE, yea.            BUCHSTABE.
           ³I[ is an BUCHSTABE?              BUCHSTABE.
       372 --------------------------------------------------------
```

In the above stretch of conversation, the applicant struggles to describe the roots of the tensions in his country. He comments that the political situation might be difficult to understand for the official and the interpreter, which shows a certain degree of awareness of their lack of background knowledge (line 364: "I don't know if you understand what you mean"). The official, however, appears to be more interested in the vague location ("in our place") than in the fight for kingship, which the applicant is trying to explain. The official thus steers the conversation towards this vaguely referenced place, but the applicant remains unaware of the official's expectations and simply repeats himself ("Yea, it's in my place"). Unsatisfied, the official starts to dictate another question to the interpreter, but code-switches in the middle of the utterance and finishes the questions with the English word *place* ("Wo ist sein Place?", translation: 'Where is his Place?'). Finally, the applicant delivers the required information in line

370. Only after the name of the place has been repeated and written down is the conversation allowed to move on and return to the actual topic, the fight for kingship.

The first element to analyse in regard to Extract 13 is the word *place*, which introduces the confusion into the conversation. As the quantitative assessment has shown (cf. section 6.2.), the word *place* is one of the more frequently used general nouns in the current data. Using Mahlberg's (2005) categorisation, the word *place* can be regarded as a prototypical world noun that can appear in a variety of different contexts and fulfil several functions. One of the functions of general nouns is to allow speakers to leave out seemingly unnecessary details and communicate their "attitudes and feelings without needing to locate an exact precise referent" (Carter & McCarthy 1997: 16). This seems a highly likely explanation for the applicant's apparent ignorance regarding the official's expectations. To the applicant, the location is secondary to his explanation of the political problems; to the official, the location is a primary and essential piece of factual information. The noun *place* is thus useful to the applicant's goal of keeping his explanation brief and focused, and at the same time, it is a hindrance to the official, who is in charge of validating the truth of the applicant's account.

Looking at the applicant's motivation in more detail, we can assume that he is unaware that the referenced *place* is outside of the official's mental frame. Therefore, when asked again, the applicant repeats his previous answer "in my place" in lines 368-369. In line 370, he finally understands what is expected of him and willingly provides the required facts. Examining vague language in ELF communication, Metsä-Ketelä (2016: 327) emphasises that the use of vague language is often rooted in the speaker's assumption that they "refer to an entity contained within assumed shared knowledge". This seems to be the case in the above example. The items *our place* and *my place* have a clearly identifiable referent in the applicant's perspective. The vague language is not used to purposefully mislead the official or withhold information, but because the applicant considers *our/ my place* to have a concrete reference also in the official's mind. Moreover, by using the underspecified term *our place*, the applicant situates himself with the people of his home country, yet he also identifies the official as a member of a certain 'in-group' that has access to the relevant information needed to decode the vague expression. This way, the use of vague language indicates in-group memberships; a function also noticed by Metsä-Ketelä (2016: 327) between ELF speakers.

Turning to the official's perspective, we can assume that the word *place* functions as a prototypical placeholder noun in his mind, standing in for a real and specific

location. However, since this location is not within the official's mental frame, the placeholder word becomes "almost completely empty semantically" (Channell 1994: 157). It becomes clear that the conversation cannot move on before a clearly specified referent has been established. This is emphasised by the official's use of the English word *place* in his otherwise German comment in line 369 ("Wo ist sein Place?"). Analysing the dynamics between the ELF speakers in the asylum interview, Maryns (2005: 309) notes that unsuccessful communication between the official and the applicant, such as a failure to establish the required facts, can easily "[culminate] in frustration". Starting from this assumption, the official's repetition of the underspecified word in question, *place*, might be an attempt to highlight the problematic item and draw the applicant's attention to the impending communication breakdown.

Structurally speaking, the negotiation from the general noun to its specific referent follows a multiple-step sequence. The generic term *our place* serves as the trigger for the official's request for a closer specification. The first specification occurs through the more restrictive personal pronoun *my*; a second specification leads to the naming of the physical referent. As following examples will show, the steps of specification are straightforward in some cases and rather complex procedures in others. Moreover, they may include a variety of modifications, such as relative clauses, modifying adjectives, peripheral dependents, or paraphrases and synonyms. The last step in most of these negotiation procedures is the spelling out of the referent's name, which can be seen in the above extract in line 370.

The strategy of spelling out words or phrases that might pose a risk to the successful negotiation of meaning has been noted before in an ELF context (Rogerson-Revell 2010; Cogo & Pitzl 2016) and specifically and in the context asylum interviews conducted in ELF (Maryns 2015). The overall attention this strategy has received, however, is rather limited, including in research on other spoken legal genres, such as the police interview. This is especially striking considering how often the asylum applicants are asked to spell out words in the current data. The total number of times that words are written down in the transcripts is provided in Table 6 below. The left hand side of the table indicates what topic the spelled out items belonged to.

Table 6 Frequency of explicitation strategy: "Please write it down"

	BAG5B	BAG16	BAG17	sum
place/ location	4	3	-	7
person	1	3	3	7
phone number	-	-	1	1
sum	5	6	4	15

Unsurprisingly, the words are on the one hand names of places (such as cities, countries, and streets) and on the other hand names of people, or groups of people, that are relevant to the applicant's narrative (such as family members, politicians, or political groups). One time, the applicant is also asked to note down the phone number of an acquaintance in Graz. While these numbers cannot allow any generalisation or have any statistical merit, they do indicate that the strategy of writing down potentially unclear words is a reoccurring element in all three asylum interviews and a final frequent step in the negotiation procedures of vague items.

Based on data collected in an business ELF setting, Cogo and Pitzl (2016: 341) identify the explicitation strategy of spelling out words as a useful way to pre-empt potential communication breakdowns due to, for example, pronunciation differences. By spelling out problematic items such as near homophones or words with context-dependent meaning, speakers display awareness of linguistic variation and actively engage with each other to avoid misunderstanding. This is in accord with Maryns' (2015) findings concerning intelligibility issues between the applicant and the official in the Belgian asylum interview. Similarly to Cogo and Pitzl (2016), Maryns (2015) also identifies the strategy of spelling out words predominantly as a way to disambiguate near homophones and help clarify intended meaning.

The employment of this strategy in the asylum interview can be regarded as beneficial to both the applicant and the official. As ELF communication is inherently variable, pronunciation features such as vowel length, consonant replacement, or terminal devoicing also vary significantly between ELF speakers (Jenkins 2000) Asking the applicant to write down phonetically difficult items therefore demonstrates awareness of pronunciation differences and the misunderstandings they may cause. Further, the strategy provides written evidence of factual information for the official, who has to "distinguish facts from fiction" in the applicant's narrative (Doornbors 2005: 104). Likewise, the strategy gives the applicant the opportunity to record unambiguous

facts and meet the expectations of specificity, which may ultimately support his credibility. The next extract, taken from BAG5B, illustrates the usefulness of this strategy especially well.

Example 14 (BAG5B, 52-62)

```
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[      Wie heißen die . umliegenden Orte rund um ORT2?
   ³I[ Nein.                                            So
52 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[                              Das sind ORT4 und
   ³I[ the neighbouring villages of ORT2 are/
53 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[ ORT2.                     Ja, wie heißen die an-
   ³A[      Yea. There is many villages.
54 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[ deren Orte?
   ³I[          Please tell us the other/ the names of the
55 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[                 Die nächste größere Stadt ist ORT6. Was?
   ³A[                              ORT6.
   ³I[ other villages.
56 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[     ORT6?          Please write it again. I can't/ I'm
   ³A[ ORT6.    ORT6, ORT6.
57 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[ not sure. I hear something else.
   ³A[                              There is many **village** of
58 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³A[ ORT2, is not all I can write.
   ³I[                       But you said that this place is
59 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³A[              Yes. This, this/ all there are **villages.**
   ³I[ a **major city.**
60 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³O[ ((Buchstabiert))
   ³A[                                        Let me write
   ³I[                 What is it? ((Buchstabiert))
61 --------------------------------------------------------
   --------------------------------------------------------
   ³T[                                        ((Lacht))
   ³A[ this in this (problem) you will understand.      This
   ³I[                                        Okay.
62 --------------------------------------------------------
```

At this point in the interview, the official wants to confirm the neighbouring villages of the applicant's claimed hometown. The villages had already been named before in the interview; however, they had not been written down. In the beginning of the above excerpt, the official therefore asks the applicant to repeat his answers and then elicits the name of the main city from the applicant. Having difficulties understanding the applicant's pronunciation, the official comments that he "hears something else" in line 57-58. What follows is a short misunderstanding concerning the participants' respective

conceptualisations of *village* and *major city*; two terms that appear to be synonymous to the applicant but vastly different to the official and the interpreter. To resolve the communication problems, the applicant takes advantage of the strategy of spelling out problematic items ("Let me write this in this (problem) you will understand").

The two examples discussed in this chapter show that the word *place* can denote very different things for the participants of the asylum interview. Maryns and Blommaert (2001: 78) suggest that places are tightly connected with the applicants' experiences and with their identity. Places are a given and known element in their event perspective and are further often associated with different steps in their journey. Place may thus act as a "organising element in the shaping of a story" (Maryns & Blommaert 2001: 64). As we have seen, the official does not tolerate this use of vague references in the instances above and disrupts the applicant's narrative, until specific places have been named.

7.2.2. Negotiating identity: "This man is the one saving me"

One of the most important functions of the asylum interview is to validate the identity of the applicant. This includes their individual identity as well as their group identity; meaning, who they identify with as based on their group memberships. Hence, also the identity of people close to them might become an important topic in the asylum interview. This can be seen in the next extract below, taken from the end of BAG5B. At this point in the interview, the interpreter is reading back the established answers to the applicant and asks whether he wishes to add anything to the report. The applicant does, and in the following extract he describes that he owes his life to *this man*.

Extract 15 (BAG5B, 219-227)

```
    ----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[ ((5s)) Frage: Haben Sie noch etwas zu ergänzen?
    ³I[                                             Would you
219 ----------------------------------------------------------
    ----------------------------------------------------------
    ³O[                    Mhm?
    ³I[ like to add anything?    Is there anything else you
220 ----------------------------------------------------------
    ----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[                   Yes, because as I'm here, this man,
    ³I[ would like to say?
221 ----------------------------------------------------------
    ----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ (xxx) because this man is the one saving me today. In
222 ----------------------------------------------------------
    ----------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ my life/ you understand?  You understand what I'm
    ³I[ Pardon?              No.           I did not under-
```

```
223 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ speaking?   I said the (reason) why I'm here today, is
    ³I[ stand.   No.
224 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ the man, the white man who saved me my life. Tha's why
225 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ I'm live today.                 Because if no that man
    ³I[         Mhm. Warum ich heute noch lebe und lebendig bin,
226 ------------------------------------------------------------
    ------------------------------------------------------------
    ³A[ they will kill me to dead. I (was) not alive today.
    ³I[  ist nur, weil dieser weiße Mann mir geholfen hat. Wenn
227 ------------------------------------------------------------
```

Several aspects concerning the negotiation of identity become evident in the above conversation between the interpreter and the applicant. The exchange starts with the applicant explaining that he owes his life to *this man.* This comment leads to obvious confusion on the interpreter's side. This may in part be due to the insecure wording of the applicant, which renders his utterance difficult to comprehend (line 221-223: "Yes, because as I am here, this man (xxx) is the one saving me today. In my life/ you understand?"). The interpreter signals her non-understanding and the applicant reformulates his original sentence and modifies the general noun *man* to the more specific *the man, the white man who saved me my life*. In line 226, the applicant then refers back to the now modified noun with the phrase *that man*.

Next to the vague general noun, the applicant also uses the terms *this* and *that* to point towards the intended referent. However, this referent is situated outside of the shared co-text and context and thus, the interpreter cannot make sense of the vague utterance. The applicant's use of the demonstrative *this* gives the opposite impression, namely that the referenced person is close to the speaker and part of the general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer (Collins & Hollo 2010: 60). Usually, a referent that has not yet been introduced to a conversation and is likely to be unfamiliar to the interlocutor is referred to with an indefinite article (Collins & Hollo 2010: 60). The first time a reference is introduced into the discourse can be crucial, as it adds "a new entity to the mental model that dynamically develops in processing language" (Arts 2011: 361). Speakers therefore have to decide how informative an initial reference should be in order to be comprehended effortlessly by their interlocutors. The less shared background knowledge the interlocutors possess, the clearer and richer in information the initial reference has to be (Arts 2011: 361).

Clearly, in the short exchange above, the referent of *this man* is not mentally accessible to the interpreter. When the applicant becomes aware of this, he minimally

specifies the general noun in his second attempt in line 225 ("The man, the white man who saved me"). The modification of the noun is met with at least partial understanding on the interpreter's part. Concerning the explicitation strategy employed by the applicant, we can see that he repeats the general noun *man* but includes a qualifying lexical item and a relative clause in his utterance (line 225: "the white man who saved me"). This strategy of self-repair is a highly useful way to nuance the meaning of a generic word (cf. Kaur 2011: 2710). If we turn to the preliminary report of this exchange, quoted below in Extract 16, it seems, however, that the interpreter is still left slightly confused about the identity of the man. Her utterance in lines 295-296 is marked by several false starts, until she summarizes the applicant's messages as "I am still alive only thanks to that man. To that white man".

Extract 16 – Preliminary Report (BAG5B, 294-297)

```
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³I[ It crosses the way. Question: Would you like to add any-
294   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³I[ thing? Answer: That I'm still here/ that I'm here today,
295   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³I[ that I'm still alive is only thanks to that man. To that
296   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³I[ white man. Otherwise I would be dead. Then the officer
297   ------------------------------------------------------------
```

In other cases, the interview can only move on after a clear and unambiguous referent has been established for the underspecified people noun in question. This can be seen in Extract 17, taken from BAG17.

Extract 17 (BAG17, 150-158)

```
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[                        ((4s)) Wieso kommt er grade nach
      ³A[    I want to explain.              ³D1[ ne.
150   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[ Graz?
      ³A[                          Ah, I had a neighbour in
      ³I[    Why did you come to Graz?
151   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[ Nigeria. That stays here.         A neighbour.
      ³I[                      You had a?            Ich hatte
152   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³O[                                     Wer is des?
      ³I[ einen Nachbarn in Nigeria, der hier ist.       Who is
153   ------------------------------------------------------------
      ------------------------------------------------------------
      ³A[                      VORNAME. . VORNAME. VORNAME.
      ³I[ this? What's his name?                      VOR-
154   ------------------------------------------------------------
```

```
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³O[     ((5s)) Wie noch?
       ³A[                           NACHNAME.         NACH-
       ³I[ NAME?                VORNAME what?      NACHNAME?
   155 --------------------------------------------------------
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³O[                          Kann er das aufschreiben,
       ³A[ NAME. NACHNAME.       NACHNAME.
       ³I[            VORNAME?
   156 --------------------------------------------------------
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³O[ bitte?
       ³I[     VORNAME NACHNAME. The officer wants to/ wants you to
   157 --------------------------------------------------------
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³A[                     ((Schreibt, 5s))
       ³I[ write the name down.           The full name.
   158  --------------------------------------------------------
```

Asked why he chose to come to Graz, the applicant names a former neighbour from Nigeria as the reason. The official wants to know the neighbour's personal details and also requests the applicant to write down his name. In line 158, the interpreter stresses that the "full name" has to be written down. The extract illustrates that vague people nouns are usually not tolerated throughout the transcripts and in many cases the applicant is asked to unambiguously spell out proper names. Moreover, we can see again that it is the official who decides which degree of vagueness is tolerated, and which expressions need to be further detailed. This observation is in line with Sarangi and Slembrouck's (1996: 57-58) role-allocation of the official as the "demander" and the applicant as the "supplier". This does not mean, however, that the applicant will remain unaware of the required level of specificity throughout the whole interview. The next short stretch of conversation is taken from the same interview as Extract 17 above, but it occurs at a much later point in the discourse.

Extract 18 (BAG17, 391-341)

```
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³O[ Ja. Frage, in kurzen Worten: Was hat des mit ihm zu tun?
       ³I[                                              And just
   391 --------------------------------------------------------
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³A[                                      So the . when
       ³I[ briefly, what has all this to do with you?
   392 --------------------------------------------------------
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³A[ this king, our king „h . is „h NAME was killed/
       ³I[                                            Als unser
   393 --------------------------------------------------------
       --------------------------------------------------------
       ³A[            so we say that it was the other
       ³I[ König getötet . wurde/
   394 --------------------------------------------------------
```

We can see that in line 393 the applicant vaguely references *this king* but immediately goes on to specify the noun. First, the king is referred to as *our king*, which situates him close to the applicant. Then, the king is called by his proper name. This specification from vague to more specific is driven by the applicant alone, without any interruptions from the official or interpreter. Looking at how the short exchange above continues, it becomes obvious that the official is satisfied with the applicant's self-repair from *this king* to his proper name and the conversation can move on uninterrupted. Thus, while the official remains the so-called play-maker of the interview who decides on the appropriate level of specificity, he does not have to actively demand it in every instance. Instead, the official and the applicant appear to develop a shared understanding of the required expectations throughout the interview procedure. Hence, the applicant is able to supply some of the needed information without being asked for it.

The comparison of these two exchanges further highlights that the investigation of vague language is not only interesting on a synchronic, but also on a diachronic axis. A recent article by Pitzl (2018a) proposes that a number of interesting transcultural processes might be lost in a description that focuses only on individual instances of speech. Instead, she suggests that tracing the linear development of a conversation across a longer timespan can reveal how speakers gain a shared understanding for pragmatic norms and build "translingual and transcultural territory in interaction" (Pitzl 2018a: 54). The few linear comparisons made in this thesis indicate that this approach would lead to highly interesting results concerning the asylum interview and might generate greater insights into how exactly this shared understanding of expectations and vagueness emerges between the applicant and the official.

7.2.3 Negotiating authenticity: "Your real, correct genuine name?"

In this last subchapter, we will focus on the other side of the coin and look at overspecified expressions in the discourse. As the following extracts will show, the use of overspecified nouns can communicate that a certain topic is especially important to the speaker or signal the speaker's high expectations concerning the precision of an utterance. In the first instance, taken from BAG17, the official aims to verify the applicant's identity, as the name in the applicant's passport is not his real name.

```
     -----------------------------------------------------------
     ³A[                                      Yea.
     ³I[ the name in the passport . was yours?    Der Name im
340  -----------------------------------------------------------
     -----------------------------------------------------------
     ³O[                         Mein richtiger Name?
     ³I[ Pass war der meinige.   Das Foto nicht.  Your real name?
341  -----------------------------------------------------------
     -----------------------------------------------------------
     ³A[ Yea. It's my real name.                     Okay. No.
     ³I[                        The one in the passport?
342  -----------------------------------------------------------
     -----------------------------------------------------------
     ³A[                                 No, no.              No,
     ³I[ The passport showed your real, correct, genuine name?
343  -----------------------------------------------------------
     -----------------------------------------------------------
     ³A[ it's not. It's not my re/ it's not even my passport.
     ³I[                                              Yea.
344  -----------------------------------------------------------
```

The interpreter uses several overspecifications in the extract above to ensure that the applicant understands what is required of him. First, the interpreter asks for the applicant's "real name"; a few lines later she makes her request even more specific and asks for "your real, correct, genuine name". The modifications to the noun *name* are a great example for the claim that linguistic vagueness is a dynamic and context-depended concept. In everyday conversation, the expression *your real name* can be presumed to sound somewhat unnatural and out of place, as, conventionally, everyone has only one given name. This convention, however, is challenged in the context of the asylum interview. Throughout their journey, it may become necessary for asylum seekers to hide their identity or use forged documents to cross borders. The noun *name* then becomes underspecified, as it could refer to the applicant's real or to a temporarily assumed name. From this perspective, the interpreter's adjective-heavy expression *real, correct, genuine name* in line 343 appears appropriate and clearly signals her expectations to the applicant.

The same applies to Extract 20, also taken from BAG17. The conversation prior to this extract had revolved around forged documents. Hence, the interpreter chooses to overspecify her request in line 211 ("Your own genuine documents?")

Example 20 (BAG17, 210-212)

```
         ------------------------------------------------------------
         ³A[                                              No.
         ³I[ Ah, when you come, do you have documents with you?
     210 ------------------------------------------------------------
         ------------------------------------------------------------
         ³O[                          Kann er auch jetzt nix pr„–
         ³I[ Your own genuine documents?
     211 ------------------------------------------------------------
         ------------------------------------------------------------
         ³O[ sentieren?
         ³A[                                              No. I
         ³I[            So you . you cannot submit any documents?
     212 ------------------------------------------------------------
```

In the above extract, the interpreter tailors her utterance towards the overall goal of the asylum interview, which is to arrive at precise information. The overspecification of the noun *documents* makes her utterance more effective and further alerts the applicant that precision is needed. In effect, the overspecification orients the message towards its audience, a function which has been noted by Arnold and Griffin (2007). The interpreter is not the only one who uses overspecification in her utterances for this purpose. We can observe the same in regard to the applicant of BAG16 in Extract 21 below.

Extract 21 (BAG16, 304-306)

```
         ------------------------------------------------------------
         ³I[ am TAG, MONAT. Da war eine Versammlung. So there was a
     304 ------------------------------------------------------------
         ------------------------------------------------------------
         ³A[   So there was a meeting that very day. So that very
         ³I[ meeting?
     305 ------------------------------------------------------------
         ------------------------------------------------------------
         ³A[ day, was the day they shot him.
         ³I[                                An diesem Tag wurde er
     306 ------------------------------------------------------------
```

The overspecification *that very day* allows the applicant to draw attention to the timeline of the events and communicate unambiguously that two events coincided. Moreover, it signals that the applicant considers this piece of information particularly important. Another way to indicate the expected degree of precision is demonstrated in the short extract below, taken from BAG17.

```
          --------------------------------------------------------
          ³I[ etwas Geld, aber nicht ausreichend. Mein Freund hat mir
      226 --------------------------------------------------------
          --------------------------------------------------------
          ³O[           Gut. Wer is dieser Freund?           Freun-
          ³I[ ausgeholfen.                      Give me your friend's
      227 --------------------------------------------------------
          --------------------------------------------------------
          ³O[ de haben auch Namen.
          ³A[                      ((Schreibt, 8s))      VORNAME.
          ³I[ name. The one in ORT2.              VORNAME?
      228 --------------------------------------------------------
```

Prior to this stretch of conversation, the applicant stated that a friend had helped him to finance his journey to Europe. In line 227, the official wants to know the name of this friend. Before the applicant is given a chance to answer or even hear the question, the official makes a German comment that is likely directed towards the interpreter or maybe even to himself ("Freunde haben auch Namen", translation: "Friends also have names"). This comment, which the interpreter does not translate to the applicant, hints at possible impatience with the pace or the style of the applicant's narration. By stating the obvious, the official indicates that he considers the noun *friend* too vague for the current context. We can further infer from this comment that the official expects people nouns used by the applicant to be connected to a clearly identifiable referent. Thus, every instance of *man, person, people*, and *woman* is supposed to be unambiguously linked to its respective proper name or group name. A failure by the applicant to do so might lead to annoyance on the official's side, which seems to be the case in Extract 22 above.

The last extract discussed in this analysis is a continuation of Extract 15, which was discussed above in regard to the general noun *man* and the modification *the white man who saved me*. In the exchange below, the applicant goes on to explain why he owes his life to this man.

Extract 23 (BAG5B, 226 -229)

```
          --------------------------------------------------------
          ³A[ I'm live today.                Because if no that man
          ³I[        Mhm. Warum ich heute noch lebe und lebendig bin,
      226 --------------------------------------------------------
          --------------------------------------------------------
          ³A[ they will kill me to dead. I (was) not alive today.
          ³I[  ist nur, weil dieser weiße Mann mir geholfen hat. Wenn
      227 --------------------------------------------------------
          --------------------------------------------------------
          ³A[         So I thank God for that. And I met myself in this
          ³I[ mir dieser Mann nicht geholfen hätte, wäre ich heute
      228 --------------------------------------------------------
```

```
           ----------------------------------------------------------
         ³A[  place now. So you people should try to help me because
         ³I[ nicht mehr am Leben.
     229 ----------------------------------------------------------
```

The phrase *kill me to dead* in line 227 clearly communicates the message intended by the
applicant and is effortlessly understood by the interpreter. Yet, the phrase is unlikely to
occur in English L1 interaction. In order to be as explicit as possible, the applicant seems
to construct his own expression, which is almost formulaic and idiomatic in shape. This
is in agreement with Seidlhofer's (2009a: 203) finding that ELF speakers often resort to
new and creative idiomatic creations, which do not necessarily "conform to what native
speakers would recognize as the established idiomatic wording". Likewise, Pitzl (2018b)
notes that the ability to use language creatively is a "central" element in ELF
communication. Extract 23 shows that the overspecification of meaning can result in
new linguistic expressions in ELF interaction, which remain functional despite their
non-native form. This finding concurs well with the view that ELF speakers use their
multilingual resources in innovative ways and will find creative solutions in order to
achieve mutual understanding.

8. Summary and conclusion

This thesis examined how and to what end vague language is used by ELF speakers in the asylum interview. Thereby, this thesis connected three research foci: vague language, the asylum interview, and English as a Lingua Franca. While these topics have been considered together before, there has been little discussion so far on how these perspectives can complement and inform each other.

The qualitative analysis has focused on two main topics, namely the deliberate use of vague language in section 7.1. and the negotiation of general nouns in section 7.2. Concerning the first focus, the analysis has demonstrated that the strategic use of vague language can be a highly effective approach to a better outcome of the interview. The detailed analysis and the comparison of several extracts have shown that an applicant might prefer to withhold an answer to providing information he or she cannot completely commit to. We have seen that in order to accommodate this insecurity, the official repeatedly invited the applicants to make a guess or state a rough estimate. The encouragement to use vague language temporarily lifted the expectation of precision and created a space for negotiation.

This strategic use of vague language generally followed the same pattern of trigger – encouragement to guess – vague response – discussion of vague response. Concerning the last step of this sequence, an especially helpful strategy was to provide the applicant with two extremes on a scale (e.g. *Was he twenty or fifty years old?*) or with two options (e.g. *Was it eight in the morning or eight in the evening?*). Another strategy employed by both the official and the applicant was to describe objects or events in order to bridge a lack of shared knowledge or diverging schemata. This proved particularly effective in the lengthy discussion concerning the damage caused by the destruction of the *big hotels* in Extract 6.

The chapter on convergence highlighted that a certain degree of vagueness might be unavoidable in some contexts. In cases were a precise answer could not be established, the participants were challenged to reach an agreement on a vague expression or an approximate time frame that both the applicant and the official could tolerate. This finding emphasises that precision might not be the ultimate goal of the negotiation procedures in the asylum interview. The goal might simply be to understand each other better, and for the official to enquire why the applicant cannot provide the expected level of precision. Once it was established that the reason stemmed from

insecurity rather than from unwillingness, the analysis has shown that the official also accepted vague words in the discourse. In Extract 11, he even converged to the applicant's approximation and dictated the phrase *let's make it two days* for the preliminary report.

Overall, the analysis has demonstrated that vague expressions fulfil important functions and are a crucial element of the discourse in the asylum interview. For one, the analysis has shown that vague expressions frequently serve as hedging devices. Hedging has been identified as one of the primary functions of vague language (cf. Cutting 2012; O'Keeffe 2007; Overstreet 1999; Ruzaite 2014; Vass 2017). In terms of the three hedging functions suggested by Cutting (2012), which were 'courtesy', 'modesty', and 'caution', it seems that applicants mainly use vague language to express caution, or in other words, to downtone their assertions and weaken their commitment to a proposition. Another function of vague expressions in the data was to increase the efficiency of the conversation and guide the listeners' attention towards the most important element of a conversation. In Extract 13, the applicant aimed to explain the political struggles and the fight for kingship to the official. For this purpose, he vaguely situated the events *in our plac*e. While the vague expression aided the applicant in his attempt to focus his utterance on the main message, it hindered the task of the official to establish a clear and coherent timeline. The perception of whether vague expressions are appropriate in the discourse may therefore differ according to the immediate goals of the participants.

Moreover, vague language was used to indicate in-group membership on various levels; a function frequently suggested in the literature (Channell 1994; Cutting 2000; Carter & McCarthy 2006). By vaguely locating the fight for kingship *in our place* in Extract 13, the applicant emphasised his nationality and identity, while at the same time treated the official as having access to shared background knowledge in which *our place* has an identifiable referent.

As far as the negotiation procedures of vague language are concerned, we have seen that the speakers were equipped with a number of interactive strategies that helped them to overcome language differences and establish common ground. It became evident that the participants used various clarification and explicitation strategies that have been observed in ELF interactions (e.g. Pitzl 2005; Rogerson-Revell 2010; Cogo & Pitzl 2016; Cheng & Warren 2003; Kaur 2011; Mauranen 2006; Mätse-Ketelä 2016). The analysis in section 7.2, which concentrated on the negotiation of general nouns, showed that words that were hard to understand or unfamiliar to the interpreter and official

were frequently spelled out and written down for clarification; a practice which suggests awareness for pronunciation differences between ELF speakers. Further, the official regularly switched from German to English and directly participated in the questioning of the applicant. In his English utterances, the official made use of other-repetition and self-repetition in order to highlight potentially problematic terms and draw attention to his lack of understanding. Given the institutional context and the strict role allocation of the asylum interview, it is of particular relevance to address code switching in this context and examine the effect that this practice can have on the outcome of the interview. The current analysis suggests that code switching on the official's part can have both positive and negative consequences. Concerning the positive effect, the switch to English allowed the official to build a direct relationship with the applicant, which might be beneficial to the applicant's credibility. In regard to the negative effects, the code switching led to visible confusion, with the applicant unsure whether to answer the questions posed by the official or the interpreter. Further, code switching can be assumed to strengthen the alliance between the interpreter and the official, who can both switch between German and English, while the applicant cannot and is necessarily left out.

Other explicitation strategies used by the participants were self-repair, repetition, and rephrasing. In Extract 15, the applicant repaired his vague answer *this man* by modifying the utterance to *the white man who saved me*. This is in line with previous research on ELF strategies, which suggests that a vague referent can be made more explicit by inserting qualifying items such as adjectives in the utterance (Kaur 2011: 2710). Furthermore, in Extract 23 the applicant constructed a new and creative expression in order to make his message more explicit. Overall, the qualitative analysis substantiates Metsä-Ketelä's (2006, 2016) findings that ELF speakers use vague language successfully and appropriately in interaction.

Turning to the preliminary report, the analysis offered several comparisons of vague expressions in the conversation with their respective counterparts in the record. These comparisons have demonstrated that vague expressions do survive the oral interview and are partially included in the preliminary report. Concerning Extract 3, in which the negotiations revolved around the time of departure and arrival of the plane in Europe, the preliminary report included both a hedging device and a vague approximator, thus recording that the applicant *thinks* that the plane departed *at around eight o'clock in the evening.* Similarly, the preliminary report of Extract 9, which

concerned the murder of the applicant's father, stated that the father had been killed in the *early afternoon* or *in the middle of the afternoon*. These two categorical phrases recorded in the preliminary report emphasise that no definite answer was reached during the interview.

We have also seen, however, that in some cases lengthy and complex negotiation procedures between the participants were summarized to straightforward answers in the preliminary report. Thus, the record showed a clear answer that did not reflect the applicant's insecurity concerning the accuracy of his assertion, or the interactive way of how this assertion was established. This finding is in line with the conclusion reached by Pöchhacker & Kolb (2009), who found that interpreters are frequently "interpreting for the record"; meaning, they might adjust answers according to what is needed in the written record. This practice prioritizes the institutional expectations over the applicant's story. Since the written report functions as "the prime evidence of the case" (Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009: 121), the inclusion of vague language in the report can be considered crucial to the applicant's credibility. Stripping his or her language of approximators and hedging devices is likely to invite scepticism and may open the narrative up to inconsistencies or inaccuracies. Vague language is therefore an important element of both the negotiation procedure and the written record and should be included and tolerated in both contexts.

To sum up, the insights gained by the current study highlight the need for research into the communicative challenges posed by the asylum interview not only from the perspective of translation studies but also from the viewpoint of linguistics. Approaching the asylum transcripts from the angle of ELF research has resulted in findings that reveal how speakers use interactive strategies to reach mutual understanding. The communication between the participants of the asylum interview will always be challenged by aspects such as language barriers, unequal access to shared knowledge, and diverging schemata. However, this study emphasises that, despite the goal of the asylum interview to establish precise answers, the strategic use of vagueness can be beneficial to the communicative outcome and help the conversation to move forward. Vagueness is thus neither 'good' nor 'bad', but an appropriate and functional element of the discourse, which should be openly addressed by the participants, so that transparent expectations can develop.

Looking ahead, it is hoped that this thesis may serve as a starting point for further research into how speakers develop awareness for the use of vague language

and the precision required in the asylum interview. The current study suggests that it would be especially interesting to compare the language used during the asylum interview with the language recorded in the report in order to gain a better understanding of aspects that might be lost in the transfer process from spoken to written language. The study further implicates that a qualitative investigation into how a shared repertoire and a shared understanding of norms emerge between participants over the course of the interview can lead to valuable insights into the dynamics of ELF interactions in the asylum interview.

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10. Appendix

The table below shows the complete list of general extenders investigated by Overstreet (1999). For further information concerning the details of her study, see Overstreet (1999: 7).

Table 1.1 Distribution of General Extenders

Forms	Informal Spoken	Formal Spoken
and stuff	29	0
and everything	12	0
and blah blah blah	4	0
and all that stuff	4	0
and all	3	0
and things like that	3	1
and all this stuff	2	0
and that kind of thing	2	0
and whatever	2	0
and so on	0	8
et cetera	0	7
and all that	1	4
and so forth	0	3
or something	42	3
or something like that	4	0
or what	4	0
or whatever	16	0
or anything	19	0
or somewhere	2	0
Total adjunctive	67	27
Total disjunctive	89	3
Total*	156	30

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit vager Sprache in österreichischen Asylinterviews, die in Englisch als Lingua Franca durchgeführt wurden. Ziel ist es, einen Beitrag zur Forschung in den Bereichen von Englisch als Lingua Franca und Sprachschwierigkeiten im Asylinterview zu leisten.

Der theoretische Teil dieser Arbeit gibt einen Überblick über Formen und Funktionen von vager Sprache und beschreibt das Forschungsfeld von Englisch als Lingua Franca. Weiters beschäftigt sich dieser Teil mit dem Ziel und der Struktur des Österreichischen Asylinterviews und diskutiert wichtige Studien zu diesem Thema. Im empirischen Teil der vorliegenden Studie werden Transkripte von drei authentischen Asylinterviews, aufgenommen am Bundesasylamt Graz (Pöllabauer 2004), quantitative und qualitativ analysiert. Die Studie untersucht die Verwendung und Funktionen von vagen Wörtern und Ausdrücken in den Interviews und analysiert, wie die Teilnehmenden gemeinsam einen ausreichenden Grad an Genauigkeit gewisser Begriffe verhandeln. Weiters vergleicht diese Arbeit die gesprochene Sprache in den Interviews mit der schriftlichen Sprache in den Niederschriften der Interviews.

Die Ergebnisse der Analyse zeigen, dass vage Sprache eine wichtige Funktion im Asylinterview erfüllen kann und zeigen weiters die Wichtigkeit auf, ungleiche Erwartungen bezüglich dem angemessenen Grad an Genauigkeit gewisser Informationen im Asylinterview zu thematisieren. Schließlich führt die Arbeit Ideen für die zukünftige Forschung im Bereich Englisch als Lingua Franca im Asylinterview auf.