

## VAGUE WORDS IN LAW AND ORDER: SPECIAL VICTIM'S UNIT

Jonnathas Alves Resende Vieira<sup>1</sup>Paula Almeida Lança<sup>2</sup>**ABSTRACT**

TV series have been a source of input for English language learners, especially the ones interested in real language use. There are studies that show how close to real life some TV shows are (ORFANO, 2010, 2012). For this study a corpus of a TV series - *Law and Order: Special Victim's Unit (SVU)* - was compiled. This corpus is composed of 6 episodes (44.400 words). The analysis considered that every *Law and Order* episode carries investigation and court scenes. The main point of this investigation is to analyze the use of vague words such as *any*, *anything*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *anyway*, and *anywhere* in the TV show. An analysis of the episodes showed that these words occurred 139 times with a frequency distribution that varied in the investigation and court scenes. The results may reveal that more formal contexts, represented in the TV series by the court scenes, do not favor the use of vague language. In such argumentative contexts speakers tend to be more precise.

**Keywords:** Vague words; corpus; TV series.

**INTRODUCTION**

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Television, one of the sources of information, turned into a target of academic papers from different angles (QUAGLIO, 2009). It has called the attention of several researches on how, in particular, television series and sitcoms (situation comedies) reproduce real life conversations. Studies of linguistics aspects of TV series may be valuable in English learning contexts. The results of some studies show that TV dialogues offer a vast potential for pedagogical purposes, such as providing examples of the ‘relationship between certain structural forms and their functional correlates for second language teaching purposes’ (QUAGLIO, 2009, p. 149). Series are traditionally characterized by the way time is organized considering ‘the expectations that the main story has to be resolved in a single episode’ and the presentation of sets of characters (ORFANO, 2010, p.52). They have a limited number of episodes, but they may be on TV for years, such as *Friends* which was the sitcom studies by Quaglio (2009) and Orfano (2010).

The aim of this project is to study the use of vague words in a drama television series. *Law and Order: Special Victim’s Unit (SVU)* has been chosen to compose the data for the analysis due to the TV show structure, in investigation and court scenes. Our interest is to see if there is a variation in the use of vague language, *any* and its variations (*anything, anyone, anybody, anyway, and anywhere*) in the different scene contexts.

This study objectively intended to detect the use of vague language in the corpus composed of six episodes of *Law and Order: SVU*. In order to draw a research line, five questions were posed:

- 1) Do vague words occur in the Law and Order corpus?
- 2) What is the most frequent vague word in the corpus?
- 3) How frequent are the variations of this vague word?
- 4) Are these words frequent during investigation or court scenes? Why?
- 5) Does the use of these vague words depend on who is in the scene?

## 1 VAGUE LANGUAGE STUDIES

Vague language (VL) has been researched consistently since the 1990s when, according to Cutting (2007, p. 3), researchers began to see it as ‘a central feature of daily language in use, both spoken and written.’ Cutting (2007, p. 5) citing Channell (1994), says that “an expression or word is vague if (a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition, if (b) it is purposely or unabashedly vague or if (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty.” One of the definitions of VL is that it consists of a closed set of identifiable items, such as *kind of*, *thing*, *some* and *any*, that can be interpreted based on the context in which they occur (CHENG, 2007).

Vague language may fulfill three main functions according to Carter and McCarthy (2006 as cited in CUTTING, 2007, p. 8). First, it ‘softens expressions so that they do not appear too direct or unduly authoritative or assertive,’ in that way, it helps to avoid being offensive, derogative or critical. Second, it may function as ‘a strong indication of an assumed shared knowledge’ and maybe intimacy; for example, in casual conversations, which expresses social cohesion. Last, it can ‘mark in group membership: the referents of vague language can be assumed to be known by the listener’, and this function in communities can be used for expressing solidarity, and for excluding outsiders. Some researchers agree that the use of vague language has been allotted to ‘a lack of familiarity with more complex form of expression, or treated as a marker of inarticulateness and/or unfocused thinking’ (FERNANDEZ; YULDASHEV, 2011, p. 2610). On the other hand, Jucker et al. (2003, p. 1765) support that some ‘speakers may choose vague expressions even when they could have stated their utterances more precisely.’ They say that vague language occurs ‘in a variety of contexts, and they appear to serve a variety of functions’ (JUCKER et al. 2003, p. 1765). These expressions may also carry efficiency if one considers the context. However, it does not guarantee the absence of misunderstandings.

Therefore, it is interesting to focus on studies that present the broad relevance of the context for the use of vague words. It should be considered the reason it is used or not in a specific context. The selected data for this study presents two contexts, investigation scenes and court scenes (informal and formal contexts). Vague language is not may not be expected in forensic contexts, where a high level of explicitness is entailed, which may differ from the other contexts. In addition to that, Coterril (2007, p. 97), in her study on use of vagueness in British courtroom, affirms that 'the legal system, in all its guises, is characterized by a desire for precision and clarity.' It is by means of discourse in court settings that persuasion and conviction are achieved; therefore, the use of language has to be more accurate. The language used requires a careful choice of words in order to avoid those that carry more general meaning that would indicate informality, as stated by Gonçalves (2011). When analyzing a TV series, we have to consider that scriptwriters 'might want to make sure that the viewing audience gets the point of the dialogue and maybe the best way to guarantee this is when speakers clearly reach an assent' (ORFANO, 2010, p. 270). Because of this, the level of explicitness by the affected. Despite this issue, it is still relevant to analyze TV series and detect how scriptwriters cautiously play with the language used in each setting.

In the next section, this article presents the methodology, which includes data collection, corpus building, and data analysis to detect frequency and the context in which vague expressions appear. Next, the results are explained following the research question order. Finally, the support for the findings is based on previous research that leads to the conclusion.

## **2 METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The aim of this research is to observe the frequency and use of vague words in the television show *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*; and to further answer the research questions.

Law and Order: Special Victims Unit is an American police crime drama TV series set in New York City where the detectives investigate special victims such as victims of rape and homicide against women, children and others. The episodes are often inspired on real headlines based on real crimes that have received media attention. The series were premiered in 1999 and started its 15<sup>th</sup> season in September 2013.

The corpus compiled for this study is composed of six episodes from seasons one, five and six; the episodes chosen are A single life (S1E2<sup>3</sup>), Stalked (S1E8), Loss (S5E4), Serendipity (S5E5), Sick (S6E19) and Poison (S6E24), with a total of 44,400 words.

The episodes usually follow the same characteristics in its structure. First, there is the investigation conducted with the detectives. Once they have a suspect, they go to trial. This becomes the second part of the show, which is composed of the court scenes. The main characters are detectives Olivia Benson, John Munch, Fin Tutuola, Elliot Stabler, Chester Lake; the Captain of the squad Donald Cragen, and the Assistant District Attorneys (ADA) Cabot and Novak. The judges and defense attorneys (DA) may vary in each episode.

The scripts were found in written form on the internet<sup>4</sup> and copied to the Word program. In order to make the collection for the data, the scripts were cleaned by adding brackets to the character's names and to the descriptions of the scenes, so that it would not be recognized once the scripts analyzed by a program that treats the data. The format of the texts was also converted into .txt file to make it compatible with the program. From the chosen episodes a 44.400 words corpus was built, and AntConc, a concordance with an extensive set of text analysis tools, was used in order to generate the word list, and the frequency the words that appear in the corpus.

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<sup>3</sup> S stands for *season* and E for *episode*.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cruelhaven.org/svu/transcripts/single\\_life.html](http://www.cruelhaven.org/svu/transcripts/single_life.html)

The research was carried out following some steps. First, we selected all the scripts of the episodes chosen and opened them at AntConc. After opening the files, the investigation concentrated on finding vague words in general, which were *any\**, *some\**, *all*, *thing\**, *many*, *soon*, *stuff* and *others*. The frequency of these words was analyzed in order to see which one is the most frequent. Once the general frequent list was done, the focus turned into answering our questions. The scripts were uploaded into in the program once again and with a focus on *any\**. In order to obtain more detailed results, each episode was placed on AntConc to be analyzed carefully.

The episode script analysis was based on some steps. The first procedure was to search for *any\** in general within the episode; once we had that result, we searched for the variations of any individually such as *any*, *anything*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *anyway*, *anywhere*, *anymore*. The program displayed each sentence, where the vague word was placed, and, therefore, we could analyze the context of the sentence – court scene or investigation scene - and the character who produced the line. All this information could be retrieved using the concordance tool.

### 3 RESULTS

In order to answer the research questions, we analyzed the scripts as mentioned in methodology using the concordance tool to investigate our corpus. We found that there are 588 occurrences of vague words in Law and Order corpus in total. *Any* and its variations appear more frequently than any other vague word that was searched for (185 occurrences) (Table 1 and Excerpt 1).

Table 1  
Frequency of vague words in the Law and Order corpus.

WORD	FREQUENCY
Any*	185
Some*	167
All	138
Things*	54
Many	21
Soon	11
Stuff	9
Others	3

### Excerpt 1

<Neighbor>

I heard **some** roughhousing, like **someone** throwing **something**.

<Benson>

And then what?

<Munch>

<(walking down the stairs)>

Chains and sluts, whips and spikes, whores on the rack. This **stuff** makes de Sade read like Beatrix Potter.

<Stabler>

Fits his need to control.

Since *any* and its variations have the highest frequency in the corpus, it was investigated the frequency of each of its variations. These words are *any*, *anything*, *anyone*, *anybody*, *anyway*, *anywhere*, *anymore*. The most frequent ones are *any* and *anything*. They represent 71,35% of the occurrences (Table 2 and Excerpt 2).

Table 2  
Frequency of any\* in the Law and Order corpus

Vague word	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Any</b>	82	44,32%
<b>Anything</b>	50	27,02%
<b>Anyone</b>	24	12,97%
<b>Anybody</b>	16	8,64%
<b>Anyway</b>	5	2,70%
<b>Anywhere</b>	5	2,70%
<b>Anymore</b>	1	0,54%

### Excerpt 2

<Stabler>  
Yeah?

<Dallas Warner>  
...him knowing all of her darkest shadows and falling for her  
**anyway** — all of that. I said I thought that she should sue

him.

Throughout the research, it was possible to realize that the most frequent use of *any* and its variation is in the investigation scenes. According to the results, 161 times that any\* appeared were in investigation scenes and 18 times in court scenes (Table 3).

Table 3  
Frequency and percentage in the scenes

Scenes	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Investigation</b>	161	89,94%
<b>Court</b>	18	10,05%



Table 4 presents the frequency of *anything*, *anyone* and *any* in investigation and court scenes. These words were the most frequent ones in the analyzed scenes.

Table 4  
Frequency in each scene

Vague Words	Investigation	Court Scenes
<b>Anything</b>	44	6
<b>Anyone</b>	20	4
<b>Any</b>	73	9

It was part of the analysis to consider the context and who said the line every time vague words (*any\**) appeared. Yet, probably due to the corpus size, we were not able to find out if the frequency of vague words depend on who is on the scene.

#### 4 DISCUSSION

Based on previous studies (CUTTING, 2012), (GRANT, 2010), (FERNANDEZ and YULDASHEV, 2011) about vague language, about courtroom language (GONÇALVES, 2011), and about television show language (QUAGLIO, 2009), we were able to support our findings.

Studies have shown that television language presented in scripts try to be very close to real language use (QUAGLIO, 2009). To achieve this goal, writers make use of expressions they believe are used in the situations that they want to present. Subsequently, writers research specific real life situations to be familiar with the language used by the participants. They adapt to television language what

they observe so that viewers can understand what the characters mean. For instance, if the television show is about scientists, the writers will try to identify jargons used by them; if there is a series about the government of the U.S., the writers get closer to politicians and their routine. In our case, the writers had to be more familiar with groups of detectives, police officers, attorneys and judges.

To create a script and try to represent the daily routine of specific groups, the characters rely on shared context (QUAGLIO, 2009) and on what they think would be the right communication style in the situation. To a scriptwriter, the dialogue should be represent the way people communicate in that situation. Therefore, if the situation requires, specification of details should be avoided and more use of vague language might be necessary. In this study, for instance, during investigation scenes, the detectives deal with speculation to get to a suspect. In this case, the use of vague word is frequent and not random. Carter and McCarthy (2006), for instance, state that vague expressions can mitigate the impact that overly direct statements can produce and are strong indicators of shared knowledge and in-group membership (QUAGLIO, 2009, p. 72).

The vague words mostly used in our corpus are *any* and its variants. As it was stated before, the use of vague language is not random and it does have a meaning. The use of *any*\* is recurrent in the Law and Order corpus because it gives the idea of speculation and that allows viewers to follow the characters' line of thought. As Excerpt 3 shows, the viewers are somewhat invited to think together with the investigation scene participants as they present questions (*did you see anyone?*) and use modal verbs together with vague words (*could be anyone, anywhere*) to speculate about what happened in the crime scene.

### Excerpt 3

<Det. John Munch>

We know she had a visitor last night or early this morning,  
did you see **anyone**?

<Fin>

Could be **anyone, anywhere**. In Narcotics, we found Colombian stash houses in Yonkers, Queens, Jersey, Manhattan.

The courtroom scenes have a very different purpose from the investigation scenes. It is in these scenes that judging takes place. The objective is to find out if the defendant committed the felony (GONÇALVES, 2011). The attorneys try to convince the jury and the judge presents the arguments, accusing the defendant. Therefore, the language used in courtrooms needs to be more precise. In order to achieve such specific aims, legal discourse relies on careful planning and uses of formal language (GONÇALVES, 2011) to sound convincing. As consequence of the different purposes in both types of scenes, the use of vague words appears more in investigation scenes than in courtroom scenes. The use of vague language does depend on where the scene or the conversation takes place.

## CONCLUSION

The use of vague words bear some functions in spoken language, such as to show uncertainty, lack of information or the difficulty of accessing it, helping to sustain fluency. Besides that, it may fulfill some social functions, such as softening assertions and showing politeness. However, there may be more of a chance of misunderstanding when more vague language is used rather than expressions that are more precise.

The present research developed about the use vague language in a TV show corpus, considering the episode structure and its formal and less formal settings, made it possible to observe that vague words are employed in both situations with a difference in frequency.

According to the corpus data, treated by AntConc, *any\** and its variants were the most frequent vague expressions in the corpus. The context that those vague words are used vary and they are presented in both investigation and court contexts. In fact, court context presents less occurrences of vague expressions

because of the precision and accuracy required in forensic settings. On the other hand, the findings show that investigation contexts carry more vague words due to hypothesis process, to assumptions, and to speculations that the characters are involved in.

Vague words frequently do occur in our corpus. According to our analysis, *any* and its variants were chosen for its frequency. It was concluded the occurrence of vague words in the investigation scenes is higher than in the courtroom scenes due to the necessity that this context imposes on the characters. The participants in the investigation scene are supposed to consider different possibilities and speculate in order to reach a reasonable claim. The compilation of the Law and Order corpus allowed the investigation about two different contexts. Our research has shown that a corpus analysis can shed light on the understanding of how vague language is used in specific contexts. Further research, compiling a larger TV show corpus may reveal that the character role may also influence the use of vague expressions.

## RESUMO

Séries de TV tem sido uma fonte de contribuição para alunos de inglês, especialmente aqueles interessados no uso real da língua. Existem estudos que mostram que algumas séries de TV representam bem a vida real (ORAFANO, 2010, 2012). Para esta pesquisa um corpus baseado na série de TV *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)* foi compilado. Este corpus é composto de 6 episódios (44.400 palavras). A análise leva em consideração que cada episódio de *Law and Order* apresenta cenas de investigação e de tribunal. O ponto principal desse estudo é analisar o uso de palavras vagas como: *any, anything, anyone, anybody, anyway, e anywhere* no programa de TV. A análise dos episódios mostra que estas palavras ocorreram 139 vezes com uma distribuição que varia em cenas de investigação e de tribunal. O resultado pode revelar que contextos mais formais, representados na série de TV pelas cenas de tribunal, não favorecem o uso de palavras vagas. Falantes em tais contextos argumentativos tendem ser mais precisos.

**Palavras-chave:** Palavras vagas; corpus; séries de TV.

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Recebido em: 26 dez. 2013

Aceito em: 13 jan. 2014