

**“GO UP TO MISS THINGY”. “HE’S PROBABLY LIKE A  
WHATSIT OR SOMETHING”.  
PLACEHOLDERS IN FOCUS. THE DIFFERENCES IN USE  
BETWEEN TEENAGERS AND ADULTS IN SPOKEN ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In this paper we focus on some of the so-called ‘placeholders’, words that are almost empty semantically, used with multiple functions in communication and whose meaning has to be inferred by the listener (Jucker *et al.* 2003: 1749). This category of placeholders includes terms such as *thing*, *thingy*, *stuff*, *thingummybob*, *thingybob* and *whatsit*. We firstly identify the most common words in this category in the language of British adults and teenagers and we then consider them from a syntactic, a semantic and a pragmatic perspective. Our findings suggest that (i) the importance of these words lies in their pragmatic rather than in their semantic functions; (ii) contrary to what we expected, placeholders are not more common, statistically speaking, in the language of the younger generations than in that of adults; (iii) adults and teenagers share some of the uses of these terms; (iv) in the language of teenagers these dummy words are used in a wider range of contexts and situations. We finally contend that these lexical items show properties typical of pragmatic markers, since they help in the organisation of discourse, they are sometimes used as devices to hold or cede the floor and they also function interpersonally by promoting cooperation between the participants in the conversation.

**Keywords:** Vague language; Teen talk; Placeholders; General reference nouns; Spoken English.

**1. Introduction**

Youth language has been the focus of extensive study in recent years, not least because teenagers are generally regarded as language innovators and introducers of language change (Romaine 1984; Kerswill 1996; Eckert 1988; Tagliamonte & Hudson 1999; Andersen 2001; Stenström, Andersen & Hasund 2002; Rodríguez 2002; Tagliamonte

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2005; Palacios Martínez 2011b, 2011c). Hence it is interesting to explore youth talk from the perspective of general linguistic changes, and to see whether such features are typical only of teenagers or might also form part of adult expression. Existing research has tended to look at those linguistic traits which are exclusive to or characteristic of teens and which are either absent in adult speech, or are not present in the same form or to the same extent. Many of these special features are found at the lexical level: The tendency for linguistic creativity and play as a means of sounding different or as a form of in-group marking (Nordberg 1986), an overuse of taboo, swear words and expletives (Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002; Stenström 2006, 2014), a high occurrence of non-lexical items and onomatopoeic words (Nordberg 1986; Palacios Martínez 2013), and a notable preference for some intensifiers such as *really*, *pretty*, *so*, *fucking* and *bloody* (Paradis & Bergmark 2003; Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008; Palacios & Núñez 2012). At the syntactic and pragmatic levels, characteristic features of teentalk are not so obvious or frequent, although some are indeed worth mentioning. Teenagers tend to use more negatives than adults and are prone to formulate acts of negation and refusal in a very straightforward and direct way, without resorting to the use of the hedges and mitigators typical of the language of adults (Palacios Martínez 2011a). Quotative markers are also of interest here, in that teenagers are very fond of telling stories, with a tendency to construct dialogue directly without any introducing verb, what is known in the literature as “zero” or “null” quotatives (Palacios Martínez 2013), and to use in a particular way quotatives of their own such as *GO*, *BE like*, *like*, *this is* + pronoun, *all*, *give*, to mention a few (Dailey-O’Cain 2000; Rickford, Wasow, Zwicky & Buchstaller 2007; Buchstaller, Rickford, Traugott, Wasow & Zwicky 2010; Fox & Robles 2010; Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox & Torgersen 2011; Buchstaller & Van Alpen 2012; Fox 2012; Rodríguez Louro 2013). Some studies have also observed that teenagers use a number of pragmatic markers, such as *you know*, differently from adults and use regular question tags less than their grown-up counterparts, preferring invariant tags such as *innit*, *yeah*, *ok*, *eh*, *right*, among others (Erman 2001; Stenström, Andersen & Hasund 2002; Stenström 2005; Torgersen, Gabrielatos, Hoffman & Fox 2011). Finally, some work (Stenström, Andersen & Hasund 2002; Cheshire 2007; Palacios Martínez 2011b) has shown that teenagers favour vague words and expressions, including general extenders,<sup>ii</sup> such as *and stuff*, *and that*, *and everything*, *or something*, vague quantifiers (*loads of*) and placeholders such as *thing(s)*, *thingy*, *whatsisname*, *thingamajig*, etc. These latter forms will be analysed in detail in the current paper, which is organised as follows: Section 2 deals with the general definition of ‘vague language’ and the notion of ‘placeholders’; the aims and methodology used are discussed in sections 3 and 4, respectively. Section 5 presents the findings on each of the placeholders considered, looking at their frequency and meaning, followed by a description of their pragmatics in section 6. Finally, a summary of the study and the main conclusions are provided in section 7.

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<sup>ii</sup> The terminology used in the literature to define these items varies considerably, from *set marking tags* (Ward & Birner 1993; Winter & Norrby 2000), *discourse particle extensions* (Dubois 1992), *utterance final tags* (Aijmer 1985), *terminal tags* (Macaulay 1985), *generalized list completers* (Jefferson 1990), *post-noun hedges* (Meyerhoff 1992), *generalisers* (Simpson 2004) to *vague category identifiers* (Channell 1994), *final coordination tags* (Biber *et al.* 1999) and *general extenders* (Overstreet 1999; Cheshire 2007; Aijmer 2013).

## 2. Vague language and placeholders

Vague language has attracted a great deal of attention from a variety of fields other than linguistics, including philosophy, literary criticism, psychology, logic, psycholinguistics, language teaching and acquisition, communication and media studies, mathematics and stylistics (Channell 1994; Cutting 2007; Overstreet 2011). A detailed review of the very extensive literature on vague language (cf. Channell 1994: Chapter 1; Cutting 2007: Chapter 1; Overstreet 2011) is beyond the scope of the present study. We might, however, mention a few of the most influential works here, from the most classic and traditional (Peirce 1902; Deese 1974; Crystal & Davy 1975) to the most recent (Channell 1994; Drave 2000; Jucker, Smith & Lüdge 2003; Cutting 2007; Overstreet 2011). In this paper we will follow the traditional and widely accepted definition of vagueness provided by Channell (1994: 20), according to which an expression or word is vague when: (i) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which seems to convey the same proposition; (ii) it is purposefully and unashamedly vague; (iii) its meaning arises from its ‘intrinsic uncertainty’, this idea already mentioned by Peirce (1902). Furthermore, Channell (1994: 18) proposes that vague language includes three main phenomena: (i) vague additives, words or expressions that are added to make the statement more imprecise. This category mainly comprises *approximators* with round numbers (e.g. a *team of **around** ten people*) and *general extenders* (e.g. *I just do a lot of **weights and stuff** like that*); (ii) vagueness by implicature (utterances understood by the interlocutor as having a vague meaning in that particular context (e.g. *Tom weighs 70 kilos*), it is quite possible in this case that Tom does not weigh exactly 70 kilos but 70 kilos and some grammes; and (iii) vagueness by choice of words, which can be *approximators* with non-numerical vague quantifiers (e.g. *there were **loads** of people*), and *placeholders* (e.g. *the **thingy** coming out’s got a big tray*).

Carter & McCarthy (2006) group vague expressions in two main categories: *Approximations* (expressions such as *around, up to, about, in the region, so, odd* used with numbers and quantities which allow speakers to provide approximate figures, rather than precise or exact ones, so as to avoid sounding pretentious) and *vague language* which, in turn, includes *downtoners* (*sort of, kind of*), *general extenders* (*and everything, or something*) and *vague reference nouns* (*thing(s)*). As noted above, in this paper we will focus on some of the members of the latter group, the so-called *vague reference nouns*, which have also been referred to as *placeholders* or *dummy nouns* (Overstreet 2011: 293), and which may be defined as words that are almost empty semantically, used with multiple functions in communication and whose meaning has to be inferred by the listener (Jucker *et al.* 2003: 1749). They can stand for nouns or names of people, and have to be interpreted pragmatically. This category of placeholders includes terms such as *thing(s), thingy/thingie, stuff, thingummy(bob), thingybob, whatsit, whosit, whatnot* and *whathisname*. Channell (1994), Jucker *et al.* (2003), O’Keefe (2004) and Koester (2007) all suggest reasons why speakers use such forms, the most frequently proposed being when a speaker cannot remember the exact term they want to use, or to avoid a term so as not to sound offensive or pretentious, or even to avoid problems of pronunciation. Crystal (1995: 18) refers to them as “linguistic distress signals” since they indicate to the listener that the speakers still want to keep the conversational turn while showing at the same time problems of word retrieval. Koester,

using data recorded in the offices of several organisations in the United States, also argues that vague reference nouns are very commonly used when “it is not necessary to be more precise, as the participants can easily identify the items or concepts referred to owing to the background knowledge they share from working together” (2007: 46). O’Keefe (2004) comes to a similar conclusion with material taken from an Irish radio phone-in show. She maintains that to interpret vague categories successfully the participants in the conversation should share knowledge that is socioculturally grounded and co-constructed within a particular social group. Furthermore, she shows how the fact of being Irish, and thus being acquainted with a particular sociocultural background, allows some of the participants to understand the implications of certain vague forms that arise during interactions, whereas the opposite is true for those participants who do not share this background.

Placeholders are not exclusive to English and exist in most languages. A general distinction can be made between those that make reference to people and to inanimate objects, although others may denote places, numbers or even time. Thus Portuguese *coisa* ‘thing’ and *Fulano* and *Sicrano* ‘so and so’ to refer to humans; Dutch *dinges*, and German *Dings*, *Dingsda* and *Dingsbums* meaning ‘things’, ‘thingummy(bob)’, and *so und so Frau/Herr* with human reference; Israeli *ekh korim lo* ‘what’s-his-name’ and *hadavar* ‘the thing’; Greek *kati* ‘something’, *to pos to lene* ‘the how-do-you-call-it’; Italian *robo* (literally ‘stuff’), *cosa* ‘thing’, *affaire* ‘an item of business’, and *aggeggio* ‘device’ or ‘gadget’; Spanish *cacharro*, *chisme*, *cosa*, *cachivache*, all applied to ‘thing(s)’, *Fulano*, *Mengano*, *Zutano* and *Perengano* for people; French *machin* derived from *machine*, *chose* ‘thing’, *truc* ‘trick’, *toutim* or *toutletoutim* ‘things’ and *un/une tel(le)* to refer to a person, male or female.

The corresponding lexical items in English have no fixed spelling (i.e. *thingy/thingie*, *thingamajig*, *thingummy(bob)*, *thingamajiggery*) and are relatively modern, most having been introduced with this particular meaning and function in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or even later. According to the OED (*thing*, n., accessed December 18, 2013), *thing* with a preceding noun or noun phrase and with a full vague reference, as in *poetry thing*, was first recorded in 1906, whereas its first attestation with a preceding noun used appositively as a more general indication of the kind of object or entity in question dates from 1868::

(1) When it comes to that *poetry thing* he thinks he can make Hank Longfellow beat it up a tree (1906 H. MCHUGH *Skiddoo!* vii. 94 [OED s.v. Thing, n., I.4.c])

(2) She drew a picture of Mr. Davis, with..the words ‘Young ladies, my eye is upon you!’ coming out of his mouth in a *balloon thing* (1868 L.M. ALCOTT *Little Women* I. iv. 66 [OED s.v. Thing, n., II.8.f])

*Thingummy* is less common, although it was first recorded earlier, in 1737:

(3) It is in the Original *l’estrè des femmes*, i. e. a woman’s *Thing*. In Languedoc they call every Thing (*estree*) *Thingumy*, that they must not name (1737 J. OZELL *Urquhart’s Rabelais* III. xxvii. 178 [OED s.v. Thingummy, n. α])

*Thingamajig*, in turn, was recorded almost a century later:

(4) I'd a lot of cousins, that 'com'd all the way down from Varmount to larn the fashions, and to hear and see all the cute and curious *thingamajigs* of the Old Colony' (1824 *Casket* June 76 [OED s.v. Thingamajig, n.]

Studies on placeholders as their main focus are not common (Kaye 1990; Channell 1994; Jucker *et al.* 2003; O'Keefe 2004; Koester 2007) and they tend to note the difficulty in investigating these items given that spellings are very variable and hence is difficult to collect a representative sample of tokens. All of them, however, recognize the need to study these words in further detail. Thus, Channell (1994: 157) claims:

The first point to make about such items is that they are of an uncertain spelling, since they are not part of the standard written language. This in itself makes them difficult to research, since it is not easy to search a corpus for them. The second point is that in the two corpus collections I have used... there were relatively few examples of any of these terms.

Moreover, placeholders as such have not received the attention they deserve in the literature on the English language, having been considered minor lexical items with what appears to be very limited pragmatic meanings. Thus, current general reference grammars, such as Biber *et al.* (1999) and Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* (2002), ignore them almost entirely.

### 3. Aims

The principal aim of this paper is to establish an inventory<sup>iii</sup> of the most common placeholders in the spoken British English of teenagers and adults, to study their frequency in each of these two varieties and to explore the conversational contexts in which these are used, including their pragmatic or discourse functions. In addition, we will consider the extent to which any of these vague reference words are characteristic of a particular group of speakers, taking as a working hypothesis that they will generally be more common in teen talk in that they are more typical of conversational and colloquial language. Furthermore, we will also contend that, contrary to what might be expected, placeholders are words multifunctional in meaning since they may perform different functions in discourse. In line with this, we postulate that these words in youth talk may play a different function and may also express a wider range of pragmatic meanings than in the language of adults. This means that if we really want to arrive at a full account of their role in the language, we have to investigate their interpersonal

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<sup>iii</sup> In this respect Crystal comes up with a collection of what he calls 'nonsense' words (1995: 17-18). He makes up five different groups: (i) a *thing* group which includes words such as *thingy*, *thingybob*, *thingamabob*, *thingamabobbit*, *thingamajig*, *thingummy*, *thingummy(bob)*; (ii) a *wh-* group with items such as *whatchacallem*, *whatchamacallit*, *whatever*, *whatsisname*, *whatsit*, *whatsits*, *whatnot*, *whosis*, *whosit* and *whosits*; (iii) a *d-* category which contains elements such as *deeleebob*, *deeleebobber*, *diddlebob*, *diddleyo*, *diddlething*, *diddlethingy*, *dingus*, *dingdong*, *dingy*, *dooda*, *doodad* and *doohickey*; (iv) a *g-* group: *gadget*, *geega*, *gewgaw*, *gimmick*, *gizno* and *goodle*; and, finally, (v) a small miscellaneous set with words such as *widget* and *lookit*.

meaning, given that in most cases their meaning goes beyond that expressed by the word or the proposition in question and has to be deduced from the context.

#### 4. Method

Two main research methods were used. We first conducted a brief survey with a small group of educated native speakers of English as a means of making up a list of placeholders that could be taken as a starting point for a subsequent corpus-based study. The list of placeholders found in Channell (1994) and Crystal (1995) was also used as a basis for this survey, together with information provided by lexicographical sources such as the *Urban Dictionary*, the OED and the *Collins English Dictionary* online.

Respondents were asked about the meaning of these lexical items and were also encouraged to provide examples of their use in modern English. We also asked them to compare their meanings and use.

For our corpus study, four corpora were selected. Two of them, COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*) and LIC (*Linguistic Innovators Corpus*), represented the language of teenagers (13 to roughly 21 years old), while DCPSE (*Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English*) and BNC (*British National Corpus*) were used for adult data. With the purpose of working with comparable samples, from LIC we used only the teenagers' data from the London counties of Hackney and Havering, disregarding the information provided by older speakers from the same two areas. From DCPSE we used only the face-to-face, informal and telephone conversations, and from BNC (spoken subcorpus) we used only the interactions of speakers over 24 years of age, to avoid any kind of overlap or repetition, since COLT, which includes conversations of speakers from 13 to 19 years old, also forms part of the BNC. The four sets of data differed in size: COLT at 431,528 words, LIC 1,223,000, the sample extracted from DCPSE 425,519 and that from BNC 2,801,159. Hence, normalised frequencies per 100,000 words were calculated in the analysis. For a sound interpretation of the results, it was also necessary to bear in mind not only the differences in size but also the dates of compilation of each of the four original corpora: whereas COLT, BNC and DCPSE date from the early 1990s, LIC was compiled between 2004-2005. In addition, the criteria followed for the compilation of the original corpora also differ, and although we restricted our analysis to spoken language, and more particularly to spoken exchanges and conversations only, the nature of the latter in DCPSE and BNC is not the same, with some of these not being so spontaneous and informal as in the case of COLT and LIC. Furthermore, the data in the original corpora were collected in different ways. In COLT students self-recorded their interactions with their peers in their everyday activities, while in the rest of the corpora the speakers were recorded by the compilers. In LIC the data collected are based on sociolinguistic interviews that the field workers carried out with teenagers.

The data were automatically retrieved using the Concapp Concordancer, and a large sample was obtained. However, all the tokens had to be carefully filtered manually several times, particularly in the case of certain placeholders. Of particular difficulty was *thing(s)*, since it does not always perform the function of a placeholder, as the following examples illustrate:

- (5) he had, you know the umbrella *things*? (COB135803/4)<sup>iv</sup>  
 (6) there's this little shop thing it's a internet *thing*. (LIHACK)  
 (7) The *things* you've been saying. (COB32601/262)  
 (8) and then they said the same *thing* to her they said come back. (COB133705/166)

While it is obvious that in (5) and (6) the speakers cannot come up with the exact term they have in mind or they are not interested in using a precise term, in (7) and (8) they know what they are talking about, and even though they use the noun “*thing(s)*”, they have no doubts concerning the referents in both cases. Thus, in (7), there is a special mention of something stated previously by the interlocutor, while in (8) *the same thing* refers forward to *come back*. However, in other cases, it was not so easy to decide whether an example met the conditions to be included in our data:

- (9) and . it's . cut off with like a cubicle *things*... you have. (LIHAV)

In (9) we learn from the preceding utterance that the speaker is alluding to a box that apparently has been transformed into the shape of a cubicle. However, the sentence that follows the interaction *you have*, and the pauses typical of speech, prevent us from knowing exactly the meaning of the utterance.

Therefore, we decided to include in our analysis only those tokens which could unequivocally be regarded as placeholders, and hence we made a further distinction between ‘general vague nouns’ and ‘prototypical placeholders’. Thus *stuff* and *thing(s)* are general vague nouns which can function at times as placeholders, whereas *thingy*, *whatsit*, *whatsisname*, *so and so* are classified as placeholders only, as they exclusively perform that role. These contrast with *thing(s)* and *stuff*, which, as explained above, are not always placeholders since they can also have specific semantic referents. When *thing(s)* and *stuff* function as placeholders rather than as general reference nouns, they tend to be associated with and modified by another noun or by a hedge or a downtoner such as *kind of*, *sort of*, which in combination with the placeholder itself adds further vagueness to the phrase.

We also excluded from the data those examples in which *things* is part of a general extender generally introduced by a conjunction (*and*, *or*), given that in this particular case we are dealing with a different category of words, in spite of the fact that these constructions may also express vagueness in addition to other discourse functions (Ward & Birner 1993; Erman 1995; Overstreet & Yule 1997; Overstreet 1999, 2005; O’Keeffe 2004; Cheshire 2007; Palacios Martínez 2011b; Aijmer 2013; Andersen 2013). We thought it was necessary to make all these distinctions and delimitations so that we could actually focus on the nature of these vague expressions used as placeholders:

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<sup>iv</sup> All the examples included in the study have been transcribed following the corresponding corpus conventions. Each example is followed by an identification code indicating the corpus or source from which it was taken (CO for *The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*, LI for *Linguistic Innovators Corpus*, DCP for *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English* and BNC for *British National Corpus*), the corresponding code number from the corpus and, where possible, the conversation turn reference given. In this case, the example provided was selected from COLT, document number B135803, and the corresponding conversation turn was 4.

(10) Mine, like, cunt *and things* like that. (COB132901/320)

(11) Are you gonna leave your jackets *and things* in the classroom. (COB40505/41)

Hence a total of 9,271 tokens of *thing(s)* were excluded from our analysis, distributed across the four corpora considered as follows: 796 from COLT; 2,115 from LIC; 1,305 from DCPSE and 5,055 from BNC. We were left with a final sample of 1,338 tokens for *thing(s)*.

Something similar applies to *stuff*, but not to such a great extent, since the total number of tokens identified was not so high. Again, we disregarded those cases in which *stuff* has a specific reference since both the speaker and interlocutor know what is meant by it (12), is used as a verb (13) or functions as a general extender (14):

(12) Thanks for giving me this *stuff*. (COB140601/328)

(13) I don't want to *stuff* myself with junk. (COB136403/61)

(14) food like Mars bars *and stuff* like that. (COB141201/47)

A total of 2,559 examples were thus discounted (189 from COLT; 1,181 from LIC, 164 from DCPSE and 1,025 from BNC), resulting in a final sample of 211 tokens. In our initial analysis we also included *whatnot* as a placeholder following Channell (1994: 140), as in *He's a whatnot worker. You know...* However, on further consideration, the 16 examples found of this item were discounted, 11 from the teentalk corpora and 5 from the BNC corpus, since they are not really placeholders but general extenders similar in nature to *and things* and *and stuff* above. They are also introduced by a conjunction (*and, or*), occupy final position and play a similar function to general extenders:

(15) Alright? I'll just do your desk top *and whatnot* and if you can ask Jess to clean the floor. (COB142701/127)

(16) when she had this before that, maybe when the scrapers *or whatnot*. I thought I would do a job there. (BNCKCS1144)

The remaining placeholders analysed raised few problems in terms of their semantics, but the fact that some of these items can have different spellings led to multiple searches, such as *thingy/thingie*, *whatsitsname/what-is-its-name*, *whatchamacallit/whatchamacallem*. When analysing the data we also noted that on some occasions automatic retrievals provided repetitions of the same examples, due to the fact that we are dealing with spoken materials where it is quite normal that a speaker repeats the same item or expression twice or even more, these being registered by the concordancer as independent occurrences:

(17) I suggest we put it once at the end as erm, item *so and so, so and so, so and so*, are two piece construction. (BNCKBK2565)

The existence of pauses, hesitations, truncated speech and incomplete sentences typical of speech led us to disregard some examples on the basis of their unclear interpretation:



(18) He's going, he's going] come quick! come quick! you know, he, he's going, he's like, kiss her, *thing* yeah, holding his hands out. (COB139604/44)

## 5. Results

We will first report the general results regarding the frequency of these vague categories in both the adult and teen data, followed by a consideration of each of these general nouns.

### 5.1. General frequency

In the corpora used we identified a total of 14 placeholders in the speech of British adults and teenagers (see Table 1 below). Our own informants, plus additional sources such as the *Urban dictionary*, the OED, and the *Collins English Dictionary*, provided further items of the same nature, although in fact none of these were found in our material.<sup>v</sup>

Table 1: General frequency of placeholders in the language of teenagers and adults

Placeholder	COLT (young, 431,528 words)		LIC (young, 1,223,000 words)		DCPSE (adult, 425,519 words)		BNC (adult, 2,801,159 words)	
	N	freq. per 100,000 words	N	freq. per 100,000 words	N	freq. per 100,000 words	N	freq. per 100,000 words
<i>thing(s)</i>	126	29.1	355	29	229	53.81	568	22.41
<i>thingy/thingie</i>	39	9.03	65	5.3	6	1.41	59	2.10
<i>stuff</i>	7	1.6	64	5.2	40	9.4	100	3.5
<i>so and so</i>	3	0.69	10	0.81	11	2.58	56	1.99
<i>whatsit</i>	4	0.92	-	-	-	-	21	0.74
<i>thingamajig</i>	7	1.6	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>thingummy (bob)</i>	1	0.23	-	-	1	0.23	2	0.07
<i>thingybob</i>	1	0.23	1	0.08	-	-	6	0.21
<i>thingythang</i>			2	0.16	-	-	-	-
<i>whatshisname</i>	1	0.23	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>whatsername</i>	-	-	1	0.08	-	-	19	0.67
<i>dooberry (wallah)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	0.03

<sup>v</sup> Such forms included: *whatsitsname*, a variant of *whatshisname* and *whatsername*, *whatchamacallit* together with its variant *whatchamacallem* (Kaye 1990), *whosit*, *wotsit* (name for a vague item, or something whose name has been forgotten, perhaps an abbreviation of “what’s it called?”), as in “Dude, pass me that wotsit, you know, that thingymajig, that doofer”, *Urban Dictionary*), *whatshisface* with the variant *whatserface* (used when someone cannot remember the name of somebody else, the name of a town, or indeed the name of anything, as in “Dude: Who was it? Friend: Whatshisface told you to remember the party on Friday; Dave: You know whatserface at that party last night who got red wine all over those cream curtains?”, *Urban Dictionary*) and *doofer* (a doofer can be anything, as in “Margret Wheres thats doofer for the wotsit?”, *Urban Dictionary*).

<i>gizmo</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	0.03
<i>gubbins</i>	-	-	4	0.32	1	0.23	1	0.03
TOTAL	189	43.63	502	40.95	288	67.66	834	31.78

Our results do not confirm the first hypothesis as placeholders in general terms are not more commonly used by teenagers than by adults. The results from the DCPSE corpus distort our findings in that the frequencies per 100,000 words for *thing(s)* and *stuff* in this corpus are very high, 53.81 and 9.4, respectively. They differ considerably from those figures obtained for the other group of adults (BNC). Both size and type of spoken data (see section 4 above) may be responsible for this discrepancy and may justify why these have not been analysed as a single adult group.

If we set aside the figures for *thing(s)* and *stuff* and focus exclusively on the remaining placeholders, we then find that teenagers tend to use them more often than adults, although the differences are not statistically significant ( $\chi^2$  1.07,  $p = <.3009$ ). The frequencies per 100,000 words are as follows: 12.93 for COLT, 6.75 for LIC, 4.45 for DCPSE and 5.87 for BNC. These results do not differ in broad terms from those in Stenström, Andersen & Hasund (2002: 88), who in their analysis of vague expressions in general (including approximators, general extenders and placeholders) find that adults use more vague language than teenagers, a general frequency of 33.1 versus 10.3 tokens per 10,000 words, although the latter show a wider range of forms to convey vague meanings in their verbal expression.

Our findings also reveal that *thingy* is much more common in the language of teenagers (statistically significant,  $\chi^2$  56.4,  $p = <.0001$ ) while the opposite is true for *so and so* and *whatsername*, which are more popular among adults. Moreover, *thingamajig* and *thingything* are only found in the expression of teenagers. However, since the number of tokens of some of these placeholders (e.g. *dooberry*, *gizmo*, *gubbins*, etc.) is quite small, our data should be interpreted with caution. We will now go on to consider each of these lexical items separately. A distinction has been made between the main group of placeholders (*thing(s)*, *thingy*, *stuff*) and those which are more secondary or less frequent (*thingamajig*, *thingybob*, *whatshisname*, etc.).

## 5.2. Major placeholders

### 5.2.1. Thing(s)

On many occasions *thing* or *things* as a placeholder can be used with a preceding modifier noun to describe phenomena or circumstances that are difficult to classify or are best depicted using vague terms. The modifier nouns can be concrete, denoting objects (19); abstract, that is, referring to conceptual entities (20), and even proper names (21):

(19) He had his other arm on the handle *thing* in the car. (LIHAV)

(20) it's a religion tradition *thing*. (LIHAV)

(21) not as big as like the bombing in London *thing*. (LIHAV)

These modifier nouns actually perform the function of an adjective, and as Leech & Li (1995: 190) claim, the head noun (*thing* in our case) is “reduced to a non-communicative dummy ‘status’” since the modified noun carries the main functional load of the phrase. At times the modified noun may not only be a single element but a coordinated complex noun phrase (*chicken and egg*) as in the following:

(22) it’s like the whole chicken and egg *thing* do you know what I mean. (LIHAV)

Cases occurring with personal reference are found only in the language of teenagers:

(23) you see that Robin Williams *thing* Acting Funny? (COB132403/519)

(24) you’re lesbian *thing* and all that. (COB142703/265)

(25) let’s have a look at that Mr. Bond *thing*. (COB136403/83)

Likewise in teen talk it is not unusual to find it together with a swear word such as *shit*, *bloody* or *damn*:

(26) I’m turning this cr= shit *thing* off. (COB137804/50)

It is also extremely common in both teenager and adult language to find *thing(s)* preceded by a hedge form such as *kind of*, *sort of*, *type of* which contributes further to the vague meaning, and even followed by *like*:

(27) Is that the telf sort of *thing*. (DCPDIA08/0013)

(28) you know I mean three months drying up kind of *thing*. (DCPDIB46/0269)

(29) it’s sort of their local type of *thing*. (BNCKB7/670)

(30) it’s mainly like snack *things* like chip burgers. (LIHAV)

The placeholder *thing(s)* normally refers to something previously mentioned in the conversation, and in this sense acts as a pro-form (Fronek 1982: 638), or represents common knowledge shared by the speaker and the interlocutor; however, an explanation at times may follow for a sound interpretation of its referent, as in (31):

(31) she is doing this *thing* tape, conversations for speech therapy. (COB140809/183)

Note also how in this particular case, which is not the only one found, *thing* precedes the modifier noun (*tape*) unlike previous examples in which the opposite was true.

### 5.2.2. *Stuff*

As a general reference noun it is quite common in spoken English, and in contrast to *thing(s)*, it is non-count. However, as a placeholder noun it is not as common as *thing(s)* (cf. Table 1), although in terms of frequency *stuff* comes right after it in all corpora analysed with the exception of COLT, where *thingy* is second. As was the case with *thing(s)*, *stuff* may be premodified by a noun denoting something inanimate (32), or by

proper names (33) and (34). It is in the adult data where we find more variation of use and a wider range of possibilities:

(32) You just, get er, er one of them, erm put some moisture *stuff* and, that'll keep you hair moist. (COB133203/210)

(33) the funny thing is that none of the sort of Nancy Mitford *stuff*. (DCPDIB19/0028)

(34) Where do you buy your Clinique *stuff*? (DCPDIB32/0265)

The use of *stuff* together with the preceding noun more effectively emphasises the vague meaning. Also, as was the case with *thing(s)*, *stuff* is very often preceded by a hedge such as *sort of*, *type of* and *kind of*:

(34) it's all that kind of *stuff*. (LIHAC)

(35) like that opera sort of *stuff*. (LIHAC)

### 5.2.3. *Thingy*

According to Carter & McCarthy (2006), it is a more colloquial alternative to *thing(s)* and is used with reference to something immediate to the speaker:

(36) That woman, you know that advert, the *thingy* she does. (COB132701/142)

(37) this is Tony Blair's last *thingy* innit. (LIHAC)

It generally functions as a noun, as in the previous two examples, but may also behave like an adjective, in most cases showing an attributive (38) rather than predicative nature, as illustrated by (39) and (40), attested in the language of teenagers:

(38) I don't want to have them bloody *thingy* cards. (LIHAC)

(39) Cos they're so, *thingy*, they're always shouting at people. (COB133202/173)

(40) He's a wank= a little bit, *thingy*, Jason's a wanker though. (COB134602/127)

As a noun *thingy* may have non-personal (41) or personal reference (42) and (43):

(41) she looks at my *thingie* and she goes ... (COB136404/198)

(42) A. Go up to Miss *thingy*. (COB132503/14)

(43) I just walked away and Achil and *thingy* were laughing at. (BNCKPH420)

When used with personal reference, the speakers either cannot remember the person they have in mind or do not want to mention them. We will return to this point below when we consider the pragmatic functions of these words.

As a noun with non-personal reference, *thingy* behaves as a prototypical member of the nominal category. Thus, it can be accompanied by a determiner, which may be the article, either definite as in (36) above or indefinite (44), a demonstrative (45) or a possessive (46):

- (44) For three year I went to a *thingy* innit. (LIHAV)  
 (45) You know I told you that *thingy*? (COB132503/32)  
 (46) like the main total of your *thingy*. (LIHAV)

It can even occur as part of a prepositional phrase modifying a noun (47) and can also take a genitive or possessive phrase as in (48):

- (47) Duke of *thingy*, it was er on at the Palace it was erm Duke of (BNCKCESCONV)  
 (48) Erm, *thingy's* chimney's on fire they said (BNCKD2SCONV)

Finally, as was the case with *thing(s)*, it may be preceded by another noun that modifies it (49), and can also be followed by *like* (50):

- (49) That one's a radio *thingy*. (BNCKCX/6002)  
 (50) that's not going to the extreme drastic *thingy* like measure way (LIHAC)

### 5.3. Minor placeholders

In this section we will look at secondary or minor placeholders, that is, *so and so*, *whatsit*, *thingamajig*, *thingummy(bob)*, *thingybob*, *thingything*. They are secondary in the sense that they occur far less frequently than *thing(s)*, *stuff* and *thingy*.

*So and so* seems to be preferred by adults. It may have personal (51) and non-personal reference (52) and may also express hypothetical numbers or figures (53):

- (51) And can you do a Christmas card for *so and so* because he's been, he's been delegated to help me with this machine. (BNCKC91164)  
 (52) I'm going to do *so and so*, or I am going to the pictures. (BNCHAC47)  
 (53) Oh don't worry. Only one in *so and so* dies. (DCPDIB380239)

In all cases the vague meaning of indefiniteness is clearly expressed. In about one third of the examples recorded, this placeholder conveys a personal reference so the speaker, instead of making the name of the person explicit, resorts to *so and so*; this trend is common to both adults and teenagers. Furthermore, when referring to non-personal entities, it is not unusual to find repetition of this expression as a way to denote an indeterminate sequence of items:

- (54) can I have *so and so*, *so and so*, *so and so*, *so and so*, I'll pay you tomorrow. (BNCKCM38)

In the case of *whatsit*, its use is clearly favoured by adults. Only one example with personal reference (55) was found, and this was in the adult data:

- (55) oh no it was the [pause] *whatsit* millionaire? Wasn't it? (BNCKBH4460)

When expressing non-personal reference, *whatsit* is very commonly found with a determiner, be this the article, either definite (56) or indefinite (57), a demonstrative (58) or a possessive (59):

- (56) It's not the dipsitck it's the *whatsit*? (BNCKB3638)  
(57) I reckon it's a [pause] be a *whatsit*. (BNCKBE5523)  
(58) You can have a lot of that *whatsit*. (BNCKCG2922)  
(59) Oh Jimmy don't chew my *whatsit*. (COB14205/524)

It is not unusual to find it as part of a question:

- (60) Yeah but did you try and undo the screw to get the bu.. the *whatsit* off?  
(BNCKDY269)

In this respect it differs from most of the words in this category in that these very rarely occur in questions. On occasions it seems that *whatsit* might be an unconventional rendering of *What's it?* or *What is it?* as in the following:

- (61) have a little, bloody thing innit? *Whatsit*? (COB139506/82)

*Thingamajig* and *thingummy(bob)* are generally interchangeable and seem to be variants of *thingy*. The first, *thingamajig*, occurs only in COLT, with a total of seven recorded examples, four with reference to an object (62) and three referring to a person (63):

- (62) A: Can I borrow your *thingamajig*?  
B: I don't know what *thingamajig* it is. (COB140708/32)  
(63) No but of course James and Danny ma= erm and *thingamajig* find it incredibly funny because they're incredibly thick and they have no sense of humour at all. (COB133905/41)

When denoting personal reference, it seems that *thingamajig* has acquired all the typical traits of this type of noun, and we even find an example in which it takes 's genitive:

- (64) What was erm *thingamajig's* feelings towards his new dad? (COB140701/111)

A total of four tokens of *thingummy(bob)* are recorded in the corpora, in which it refers mainly to an object that the speaker does not know what to call or how to describe:

- (65) What do you What is this? A *thingummybob*! (BNCKB866)

*Thingybob* is slightly more frequent, with eight occurrences, two in teentalk and six times in the BNC. It may refer to an object (66) or a place (67) and it is also found with determiners, mainly the definite article (*the thingybob*), demonstratives (*this thingybob*) and possessives (*my/your thingybob*). No examples have been recorded of this noun referring to a person:

(66) I'm gonna get I need a, I need another *thingybob*, oh sit smiling at, of four, that's how (BNCKCU8111)

(67) It's not fair! Yeah. So how you getting to *thingybob*? Yeah, my, mum taking me (COB139609/12)

*Whathisname* with a masculine referent and *whatsername* with a feminine one are also essentially interchangeable, and although we might expect that they refer only to persons, as in (68) and (69), curiously enough they can also refer to objects (70) and even to places (71):

(68) I thought it was the <??>Tyne Festival there, because you know, *whathisname*, Simon (COB134602/190)

(69) Don't pull that sweetheart. He's erm [pause] *whatsername*? How old's Mike? I think he is (BNCKBC2451)

(70) Is this one National? Yeah, we've had a *whatsername*. A sweepstake at work. (BNCKBC2719)

(71) could never understand that because [pause] I thought [pause] dad was in [pause] in the *whatsername*? I though he were, he were in (BNCKB13682)

The presence of these vague reference nouns in the language of teenagers is merely anecdotal, with only one case of each; however, in the adult data from BNC we find a total of 19 examples.

*Gizmo* and *gubbins* are very marginal indeed since only a few examples are recorded across the four corpora. They both denote an indefinite unknown item:

(72) No it's returning a [pause] a *gizmo* [pause] I'll go t [pause] [unclear] yesterday. (BNCKC96889)

(73) They've taken all the [pause] *gubbins*. (BNCKC9402)

The following tables summarise the main features of all the placeholders just described. Table 2 sets out the classification of placeholders in terms of word class and semantic reference, and Table 3 groups placeholders according to their type of premodification:

Table 2: General features of placeholders according to their word class and semantic reference

	Word class			Semantic reference			
	Noun	Adjec.	Other	Person	Object	Place	numbers
<i>thing(s)</i>	√	√	-	√	√	√	-
<i>thingy/thingie</i>	√	√	-	√	√	√	-
<i>stuff</i>	√	-	-	√	√	-	-
<i>so and so</i>	√	-	-	√	√	-	√
<i>whatsit</i>	√	-	-	√	√	-	-
<i>thingamajig</i>	√	-	-	√	√	-	-
<i>thingummy (bob)</i>	√	-	-	√	√	-	-
<i>thingybob</i>	√	-	-	√	√	√	-
<i>thingythang</i>	√	-	-	√	√	-	-
<i>whathisname</i>	√	-	√	√	√	√	-

<i>whatsername</i>	√	-	√	√	√	√	-
<i>gizmo</i>	√	-	-	-	√	-	-
<i>gubbins</i>	√	-	-	-	√	-	-

Table 3: Placeholders according to the type of premodification they can take

	Noun	Adjec.	Def. art.	Indef. art.	Demonstrative	Possessive
<i>thing(s)</i>	√	√	√	√	√	-
<i>thingy/thingie</i>	√		√	√	√	√
<i>stuff</i>	√	√	-	-	-	-
<i>so and so</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>whatsit</i>	-	-	√	√	√	√
<i>thingamajig</i>	-	-	-	-	-	√
<i>thingummy (bob)</i>	-	-	-	√	-	-
<i>thingybob</i>	-	-	√	-	√	√
<i>whatshisname</i>	-	-	√	√	-	-
<i>whatsername</i>	-	-	√	√	-	-

## 6. Semantics and pragmatics of placeholders

As described above, placeholders are semantically empty, either because they do not denote a specific object or entity referentially, or because speakers intentionally use them to sound vague and imprecise. However, their importance in speech goes beyond their vague meaning since, communicatively speaking, they may perform different discourse functions and are “heavily laden pragmatically” (Cutting 2007: 224). In fact, the expression of this vagueness may have other pragmatic meanings associated with it. Consequently, their analysis should not be restricted to their general semantics but should go beyond their role in the proposition. Thus, it will be necessary to explore how speakers use these forms within conversational interaction.

In this section we will focus on the different communicative functions that this category of words can play in everyday conversation. These pragmatic meanings should not be regarded as fully clear-cut categories, in that it will prove very difficult on occasions to differentiate them clearly; where possible, we will consider the extent to which some of these functions are directly connected with a particular group of speakers, in our case either teenagers or adults.

### 6.1. *Lack of precision and/or difficulty to come up with the right term*

It is quite common for speakers, both adults and teenagers, to use some of these vague terms because they cannot or do not want to be more precise or they simply cannot recall the name of an object, person or place. This is common without exception to all



the words of this placeholder class, and a long list of examples is recorded in our sample.

In the exchange in (74) below, it is quite evident that Stephanie cannot remember exactly the name of the park where Amber ran; she knows that it has something to do with Brentwood but since she is not sure, she simply says “some park thingy”. Something similar happens in (75), in which the speaker, Georgina, cannot remember the name of the place she is going to and refers to it as *thingybob*. Again in (76), the speaker resorts to *whatsername* as the name of the person who actually bought the present does not come to his mind:

(74) Sue: [Stephanie: yeah] where did you run when you did your cross country?

Amber: I dunno where it was

Stephanie: Brentwood . some park *thingy*. (LIHAV)

(75) It's not fair</>! Yeah. So how are you getting to *thingybob*? ...Yeah, my d=, my mum or my taking me Chris, and Vicky, they're gonna come round here, yeah (COB139609/137)

(76) Er *whatsername* bought it for her. (BNCKB13927)

At times this lack of precision and the difficulty in finding a specific term is reinforced by the fact that the speaker asks for the interlocutor's help. In such cases, as in the following example, it is clear that there is no other intention behind the utterance and the speaker is simply not able to come up with the right lexical item:

(77) that that is one music as well [Talal: yeah] cos down here I know they listen to *thingy* . what's it called? (LIHAV)

However, on other occasions (78), it may be the interlocutor who seeks clarification, when the speaker's intended meaning is not clear. Thus, contrary to the claim of O' Keefe (2004) and Koester (2007), it is not always the case that knowledge is wholly shared by participants in a conversation in the use of these vague categories:

(78) A: I'm coming. (phone rings) Transfer. Okay. Okay, got the *thingy*?

B: What the walkman? (COB139305/33)

In contrast with the preceding examples, it may be the case that the speakers mention on second thoughts the specific word they have in mind in spite of having already used a vague category. Thus in (79) *whatsit* is immediately followed by its referent to make it clear what the speaker means although the inclusion of the general extender "or something" still gives the idea of his uncertainty. Something similar happens in (80) where the speaker says first *thingy* and right after that he mentions the intended word *card*:

(79) Jason took a box in today cos they've got ta do er (pause) *whatsit*, a Christmas decoration or something. (BNCK96)

(80) A. Are you gonna change before lunch?

B: No and I wanna get erm, *thingy* a card so give me money. (COB139604/91)

## 6.2. Derogatory

At times the speakers make use of placeholders with a clear derogatory intention. Thus, in (81) Rufus refers to the school where he went to for some time as *thingy* as a means of showing his disapproval. Later on he has to clarify what he means by providing further details (it was a boarding school) as his interlocutors do not quite understand what he meant. Notice the presence of the invariant tag *innit*, the long pause and the discourse marker *well*, indications of the speaker's hesitation and reformulation of the statement:

(81) Rufus: for three year I went to a *thingy* innit . well . to a boarding school in in . (place) or something like that . called (school) think it's a military school innit (LIHAV)

Thus, teenagers very often use these placeholders to show their negative feelings towards those issues associated with their school life. This can be clearly seen in (82) where Jock shows his lack of interest and negative attitude to a French test by referring to it as *thingie*:

(82) Jock: oh.... (music on) Oi George, how do you reckon you did in that French *thingie* today?

George: Crap. (COB141906/27)

A similar meaning is perceived in an exchange between Tina and Mark who are discussing issues related to the political career of Tony Blair. They seem to be in agreement, but at one point Mark expresses his negative position through the use of a vague category of this kind, as he is not interested in Tony Blair standing as candidate at the next election:

(83) Tina: I reckon labour would stay in then/ they would just pretend people voted <Mark laughs> and then labour would be in still.

Mark: yeah but this is Tony Blair's last *thingy* innit. /if he/ (LIHAC)

Such a derogatory meaning is not exclusive to objects or actions but can also apply to people. Throughout the teenagers' interactions, in both COLT and LIC, there are examples in which speakers refer to their peers as *thingy*, mostly to express derision or a lack of appreciation. This is the case in the following example in which the speaker is criticising Danny's behaviour and at one stage refers to him as *thingy*:

(84) Yeah I know. Stupid cow. Oi did you tell Lynn about erm Danny, *thingy*, Danny <name> yesterday on the field. (COB140601/273)

## 6.3. Insult

The derogatory meaning just described may reach high proportions leading to an insult. Teenagers seem to be more fond of this use than adults, as in (85) below, where speaker

A begins by referring to one of her teachers as *Miss thingy* and ends up calling her *Miss Hitler*:

- (85) A: Go up to Miss *thingy*.  
 B: What?  
 A: Go on. Go on.  
 B: Who Miss <name>?  
 A: Missy, what d'ya call her?  
 B: <name>?  
 A: Miss, Miss Hitler. (COB132503/14-20)

Something similar is found in the following exchange, in which Anthony, talking to his friend about a person they both know, refers to him as *thingy* followed by an insult word as further emphasis:

- (86) He's a wank= a little bit, *thingy*, Jason's a wanker though. (COB124602/127)

#### 6.4. *The speaker does not want to sound pretentious*

It is possible that a speaker consciously avoids a specific term so as not to sound pretentious, pompous or too technical. In the example below, Jo, a fifteen-year-old girl, is going to spend the night at her friend's house and when she is preparing to go to bed, she says she is going to put on *these thingies*; her friend Georgie does not understand what this means, and Jo has to provide an explanation, using the word *nightie*, a term which seems to be out of place for the type of conversation and situation:

- (87) Jo: Oh go on then, oh hold on let me just, put erm these *thingies*.  
 Georgie: What's those *things*?  
 Jo: This is a nightie.  
 Georgie: Nightdress?  
 Jo: Aha.  
 Georgie: Gosh!  
 Jo: Gosh. (LIHAV)

We observe something similar in the following adult dialogue in which the speaker avoids the use of the terms *thesis* or *dissertation* to sound less informal and uses *thingy* instead, possibly to sound more colloquial and to make the exchange more familiar and intimate:

- (88) Have you given up doing your DPhil *thingy*? (DCPDIB07D014)

#### 6.5. *Euphemism*

This is quite common with some of the placeholders, particularly in the case of adults, since they are more likely to want to avoid the use of bad or swear words. *So and so*, for

example, can take the place of such taboo words. In the example below the speaker opts for *so and so* to elude an expression which could sound rude or impolite (e.g. *bastard*):

(89) No [pause] I've warned Ron [pause] he's such an obstinate *so and so*, he won't be told! (BNCKBF/1253)

### **6.6. The placeholder helps to keep the informal nature of the conversation and functions as an in-group identity marker adopting the role of a pragmatic marker**

This function is typical of teenagers. Placeholders here add informality to the interaction and at the same time help create an informal atmosphere; the use of a placeholder on such occasions serves as an in-group marker. When placeholders perform this function, they tend to occur with invariant tags such as *innit*, *ok*, *yeah*, other pragmatic markers, such as *you know*, and general extenders like *and everything* and *and things*. Thus, in (90), although the utterance is quite short, *thingy* occurs together with *innit* and *and everything*. The latter elements also make the interaction more familiar and casual, and create a feeling of comradeship and solidarity, so typical of teen talk. This is clearly in keeping with the claims of Stenström, Andersen & Hasund (2002: 88): The lack of precision is an inherent quality to the language of teenagers, who are generally unconcerned about precision because vagueness is seen as cool. This is also in line with the suggestions of Crystal & Davy (1975: 111) and Cutting (2007: 8), who note the social dimension of vague language, arguing that vagueness has an evident social function within different speaker communities, and which seems clearly to be the case here in the expression of teenagers:

(90) they said I had an offensive weapon innit I had a corkscrew *thingy* for the wine bottles and everything. (LIHAV)

(91) My bike's enough shitted up! <nv>moan</nv> I'm going I'm going, oi, you should down your bike down *thingy* yeah? They erm service your bike twenty pounds for just a service. (COB139602/11)

In these contexts it is not uncommon for the placeholder to perform the function typical of a discourse or pragmatic marker (Brinton 1996: 30), as in the following example, where the placeholder serves as a filler and as a device used by the speaker to hold the floor:

(92) cos you wanna *thingy* like maybe raise a family or anything so you want her to be a bit . (LIHAV)

This leads us to contend that some placeholders may exhibit a number of the properties of the category of pragmatic marker (Brinton 1996: 33-35). Furthermore, they are multifunctional in that they may serve different purposes at different levels (morphological, syntactic and pragmatic), they are in general short, relatively frequent in spoken English and, as noted above, they may occur with other pragmatic markers, even in the same sentence.

At the discourse level they can have different functions. We noted above their interpersonal role in fostering an in-group atmosphere, and also how they can serve to present information or even to signal markers introducing an explanation that comes immediately after. In the following example the placeholder attracts the interlocutor's attention while also preparing the ground for additional information:

(93) middle of the line and erm (pause) In the beginning when things were beginning to *whatsit* er the inspector sent two policemen down here and asked me would I ask the... (BNCHF/21)

From the above we can say that placeholders should not be analysed as simple expressions of vagueness, as they do not always denote imprecision or a limitation in the speaker's discourse. It is necessary to examine in greater detail their pragmatic meanings and functions in order to arrive at a complete picture of their grammatical relevance in the language. We believe that placeholders should be considered as having a nature close to that of pragmatic markers, since they meet many of the typical characteristics of these. They also perform pragmatic functions traditionally associated with pragmatic markers, which have to do not only with the general organisation of discourse but also with the expression of interpersonal meaning in that, especially in the case of teenagers, they also fulfill a social function promoting cooperation and creating a feeling of intimacy and comradeship among group members.

## 7. Conclusions

Prior to our analysis, we defined very narrowly the category of placeholders; our operational definition was that they were multipurpose, semantically empty words expressing no clear reference and whose meaning has to be deduced pragmatically. We refined this definition after examining our data in detail, adopting a number of criteria to classify the examples found. This led us to distinguish between general vague nouns such as *thing(s)* (i.e. *the thing is...*) and *stuff* (i.e. *give me that stuff*), and placeholders in the strict sense, namely *thingy*, *so and so*, *whatsit*, together with some uses of *thing(s)* and *stuff* when expressing total vagueness with no referents. The existing literature tends to describe all these as belonging to the same class, variously termed 'vague nouns', 'general nouns', 'nonsense words', 'empty nouns', 'dummy nouns', 'placeholders', with no clear boundaries between them. While in the case of general nouns speakers may have a referent in mind, this is not the case for placeholders. However, it is also possible for *thing(s)* and *stuff* to function as placeholders when speakers want to be intentionally vague: In the majority of such cases, the general vague nouns are modified appositively by another noun (i.e. *handle thing*, *tradition thing*, *Clinique stuff*) and by a hedge and/or an approximator (*kind of*, *sort of*).

We identified in our corpora a total of fourteen placeholders; a number of others were suggested by our informants or attested in reference sources (OED, *Urban dictionary*, *Collins English dictionary on line*), although these were not recorded in any of four corpora considered (i.e. *whatchamacallit*, *whatchamacallem*, *whosit* and *wotsit*).

According to frequency of use, we distinguished between major and minor placeholders, the former including *thing(s)*, *stuff* and *thingy* and the minor class being

reserved for all remaining forms: *So and so*, variants of *thingy* (*thingamajig*, *thingybob*, *thingummy(bob)*, *whatsit*, *whatsisname*, *whatsername*, *gizmo* and *gubbins*.

We hypothesised that placeholders were more common in the language of teenagers than adults since these words tend to be more closely associated with casual and informal expression. However, our data show that the opposite is true, although younger speakers have a larger repertoire of such words. Furthermore, there are some placeholders, including *thingy/thingie* and *thingamajig*, which are definitely more common in the language of teenagers, whereas others, such as *so and so* and *whatsit*, are clearly favoured by adults. Most of the placeholders identified are nouns, with the exception of *thing(s)* and *thingy*, which can also function as adjectives, although very sporadically in our data. In most cases they are used to refer to a person or object, although there are some (namely *thing(s)*, *thingy*, *thingybob*, *whatsisname*, *whatsername*), which may also denote places. *So and so* is quite special in that it may refer to numbers as well as persons and objects. *Thingy* is mainly used to refer to something close to the speaker and it can take as a determiner the definite or indefinite article, a demonstrative, or a possessive, and as was the case with *thing(s)* and *stuff*, it can be modified by another noun (i.e. *radio thingy*) and can be followed by *like*. *Whatsit* can take the same determiners as *thingy* (*the, a, that, my whatsit*) and may form part of questions, something which is not at all common with other placeholders. *Thingamajig* and *thingybob* are really variants of *thingy* and are interchangeable. *Thingybob* is slightly more frequent than the other two, and shows more flexibility as it can refer not only to people and objects but also to places.

As claimed in previous studies (Channell 1994; Stenström, Ansenen & Hasund 2002; Jucker *et al.* 2003; O'Keefe 2004; Koester 2007; Cutting 2007), the importance of these words lies in their pragmatic rather than in their semantic value. They are very commonly used when the speaker cannot remember the name of a particular item, or when this is not easily accessed. However, the use of placeholders may also respond to other communicative intentions. At times speakers resort to these so as not to sound pretentious or pompous, or they simply prefer to avoid a word which may be regarded as impolite or taboo and opt for a placeholder instead. On other occasions speakers may use a placeholder with a clear derogatory intention or even to insult someone. Finally, we have also observed that the use of placeholders may play a social function by creating a feeling of solidarity and comradeship between participants in the interaction and acting as an in-group identity marker. In this sense, placeholders show traits typical of discourse or pragmatic markers, since they help in the organisation of discourse by preparing the ground for what comes next in an interaction, they are sometimes used as devices to hold or cede the floor, and they also function interpersonally by promoting cooperation between speakers and hearers and by acting as an identity in-group marker. This last function is more typical of teenagers, whereas the use as a euphemism and as the expression of something imprecise is more clearly perceived in the language of adults. In general terms these words are used by teens in a wider range of contexts than adults, and it is also in teen language that they fulfill a more notable social function.

Regarding our methodology, the corpora provided a large body of examples, although there were some limitations here. For example, some of the placeholders suggested by our informants and registered in our reference sources were not found in any of the corpora, and the number of tokens retrieved for some items was very low, making their analysis more problematic. Furthermore, the transcriptions of the

conversations were not always wholly transparent, a common issue in the study of spoken language data. Further work in this area might include other sociolinguistic variables in the study of placeholders such as gender, social background and group, geographical variety, etc. Word-formation processes present in some of these words (*thingy*, *thingamajig*, *thingybob*, *whatchamacallem*) also merits closer attention.

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