

# The English general extender

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The forms and functions of a new linguistic category, *or something, and stuff*

## Introduction

In the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999), a new category is identified in the grammar of the English phrase. In conversational data, the most frequent forms cited as examples of this category are *or something, and everything, and things* and *and stuff*, which are described as ‘coordination tags’ by Biber et al. (1999: 115–16).<sup>1</sup> This label has not been widely adopted, but the linguistic category it describes has clearly become established as part of modern English. The term ‘general extender’ (Overstreet, 1999) is now commonly used to refer to this category: “‘general’ because they are nonspecific and ‘extender’ because they extend otherwise complete utterances’ (1999: 3). There are two subcategories: adjunctive general extenders, beginning with *and*, and disjunctive general extenders, beginning with *or*. In casual conversation, general extenders are typically phrase- or clause-final, consisting of *and/or* plus a vague noun (*stuff/things*) or a pronoun (*something/everything*), with an optional comparative phrase (*like that/this*). In everyday spoken British English, the phrase *and (all) that* is also extremely common. In written and formal spoken English, forms with quite different structures, such as *et cetera, and so on, and so forth*, and *or so* are more typically used to fulfill related functions. All of these forms are grammatically optional and fall within the more general category of pragmatic markers, along with *you know, I mean, like* and *sort of*, ‘expressions which may have little obvious propositional meaning but which oil the wheels of conversational social interaction’ (Beeching, 2016: 1).

Some earlier corpus-based studies documented a substantial increase in the frequency of general extenders in British English between the 1960s and the 1990s (Aijmer, 2002; Pallacios Martinez, 2011). More recent studies have reported on an increasingly wide range of forms used

throughout the English-speaking world (Aijmer, 2013). In their interviews with speakers in one small English town (Berwick-upon-Tweed), Pichler and Levey (2011) recorded 75 distinct versions of general extenders, many of them occurring only once (e.g. *or owt like that*). The focus here will be on the most frequent and widely used forms. The following examples are from (1) American, (2) Australian, (3) Canadian, (4) English, (5) Irish, (6) New Zealand, and (7) Scottish English.<sup>2</sup>

1. *at the risk of sounding like Miss America or something, I wanted to do something to help*
2. *I go out with my friends and stuff ... I'm not into ... big club things and stuff*
3. *the lyrics have more like a rock structure to them and stuff like that, whereas most electronica is just kind-of arbitrary words and stuff like that, nothing lyrical*
4. *I'd got my coat and everything caught under me and em a young postman or something got up and I thought ooh this is grand*



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5. *the development of piers, roads, et cetera and et cetera*
6. *they only rank because they grow good grass and sheep and things*
7. *people with maybe – minor civil servants and things like that you know that had been able to afford – dearer rents and that in those days you know*

It is worth noting that there is not always consistent grammatical agreement between the forms prior to the general extender and the noun or pronoun in the general extender. We might expect *and things* to attach to phrases containing inanimate count nouns, *and stuff* to go with non-count nouns and *or something* to go with non-animate nouns. While these expectations are often justified, there are exceptions, as in (7) where *and things like that* is attached to a noun phrase with human reference (*minor civil servants*), in (2) where *and stuff* follows a plural noun phrase (*big club things*) and in both (1) and (4) where *or something* follows noun phrases with human reference (*Miss America, a young postman*). We should also note that while general extenders tend to occur towards the end of utterances, they cannot be defined in that way because of examples such as (4) where *and everything* is attached to an object noun phrase that is not the end of a clause, *or something* is attached to the subject noun phrase of a clause, and neither is at the end of the utterance.

### Adjunctive general extenders

Speakers use adjunctive general extenders to indicate that ‘there is maybe more (that could be said),’ as in the following two examples.

8. *I quite like the English food actually I love roasts and things like that*
9. *She needs a table and some chairs and stuff*

In example (8), we can identify a larger conceptual category (*English food*) with an example (*roasts*) and an indication that ‘more’ examples could be listed. In this case, the general extender represents an appeal to the listener to add further examples (if necessary) based on shared knowledge. This type of example has led to the analysis of adjunctive general extenders as ‘set-marking tags’ (Dines, 1980: 22) or ‘vague category identifiers’ (Channell, 1994: 122) where a pre-existing category or set is assumed to exist and can be identified, making the general extender’s contribution part of the propositional information contained in the utterance. In example (9), where no larger conceptual

category is mentioned, we might say that the listener could identify the intended category as *furniture*, which would entail the inclusion of *table* and *chairs* among others (*and stuff*) as members. However, this analysis would predict that *bed* and *sofa* (other items of *furniture*) could equally be included in the listener’s interpretation of the speaker’s reference. In the context of (9), this would likely represent a misinterpretation of the speaker’s meaning when the intended reference was limited to ‘items needed for people to sit and have a meal together.’ This is less likely to be reference to an established conceptual category and more likely to involve what has been described as an ‘ad hoc category’ (Barsalou, 1983), something temporary and limited to the speaker’s current communicative goal. This ad hoc categorization function is reported to be quite common in conversation (Overstreet & Yule, 1997) where the appeal is to an open interpretation of locally contingent meaning rather than definitive categorical meaning.

This type of interpretation is, as Cheshire has observed, ‘heavily dependent on the linguistic and situational context’ (2007: 163) and very much tied to the speakers’ perceived relationship. It also allows us to see adjunctive general extenders as devices for indicating an adherence to the conversational maxim of Quantity that contributions should not be ‘more informative than is required’ (Grice, 1975: 45). Adjunctive general extenders can be used to limit the amount of information expressed to a particular individual based on what the participants already can assume about each other’s knowledge. Choosing to use an adjunctive general extender in this way also involves a strategy of positive politeness as the speaker signals common ground and seeks ‘to establish familiarity, similarity and solidarity’ (Aijmer, 2013: 141) with the other participant(s) in the interaction. The basic function of adjunctive general extenders is to signal that ‘there is more, but you know what I mean (because of assumed shared experience and knowledge).’

### Disjunctive general extenders

Speakers use disjunctive general extenders to indicate that ‘there may be others (that could be mentioned),’ as in the following examples.

10. *I’m afraid of like breaking an arm or a leg or something*
11. *have you ever had a job like that where people were so used to ... I don’t know ... idiots or*

*slackers or something* ... that a normal hard-working person was gold?

12. *they were always teasing me if I didn't have the right hairstyle or something or the right clothes*

In example (10), the speaker mentions two alternatives (*an arm or a leg*) and then indicates that others could be mentioned (*or something*). As with some of the adjunctive forms, the disjunctive form here could be interpreted as an appeal to a pre-existing category of which *arm* and *leg* are members (e.g., 'breakable body parts'), which the listener is assumed to be familiar with. In (11), the speaker's attempt at categorization is more tentative, with hesitations and prefaced by *I don't know*, and seems to suggest an ad hoc category of 'those workers who are very stupid and lazy.' The mismatch between the two plural nouns with human reference (*idiots or slackers*) and the singular, non-human reference in *or something* may be a clue that the speaker is not thinking of a list of people, but rather a category or type of person. In (12), the speaker first uses *or something* to point to the existence of other items in a possible ad hoc category ('aspects of her appearance that the speaker was teased about'), and then adds another item that confirms the categorization. An example like this provides support to the idea that the general extender is not just a random vague expression or performance filler, but is an indication that the speaker really does have other related items in mind.

Another function of *or something* is to suggest that an alternative may be needed because the information preceding it may not be fully accurate. This seems to be a very common use of disjunctive forms, to indicate an approximation, as in (13), or a potentially incorrect statement (14), or to hedge on the accuracy of a report of what was said (15).

13. *I think it's three weeks or a month or something of vacation every year*  
14. *I think they were waiting to sell some sheep or some cow – cattle or something*  
15. *they happened to say, that her brother Captain Wentworth, is just returned to England, or paid of, or something, and is coming to see them*

In (13), the speaker is unsure about the amount of time involved and marks the information as approximate (and hence potentially inaccurate). Note that both examples (13) and (14) begin with *I think*, an introductory expression frequently used to avoid the impression of certainty in making

assertions. The speaker in (14) doesn't seem to be sure what was going to be sold and, after offering two suggested examples, uses the general extender to cover the possibility of being mistaken. Note once again the mismatch between plural noun phrases coordinated with the singular form in *or something*. In (15), the speaker is in the process of reporting what was said, but needs to indicate that some details may not be quite correct. This example is from a novel by Jane Austen (*Persuasion*), published in 1818, providing evidence that this particular use of a general extender has an established history in the English language (cf. Carroll, 2007). Using a disjunctive general extender to indicate possible inaccuracy may signal awareness of a requirement of the conversational maxim of Quality (Grice, 1975), that is, not to 'say that for which you lack adequate evidence' as part of being a cooperative speaker in the interaction.

When *or something* is attached to an utterance that may represent an imposition, such as a proposal concerning the listener, as in (16), or an invitation that may impose on the listener's plans, as in (17), it can be interpreted as part of a strategy of negative politeness (i.e. 'don't impose') by creating other possibilities (to be decided by the listener). This analysis of positive and negative politeness is based on Brown and Levinson (1987).

16. *you should maybe consider taking some film classes or theatre or drama or something*  
17. *we could have dinner that evening or something*

In summary, we might say that the basic function of a disjunctive general extender is to signal that 'there are other possibilities, including more accurate information, but you know what I mean.'

## General extenders in International English

As documented by Aijmer (2013, 2015), general extenders are widely used in all varieties of English, though not necessarily in the same way. Both British English and Canadian English speakers seem to be adopting the American English form *and stuff*, with a decline in the use of *and things* in recent years (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010; Pichler & Levey, 2011), whereas speakers of Singapore English continue to have a strong preference for *and all that* (Aijmer, 2013: 137).

The most frequent form overall is *or something*, often used to indicate that an assertion is an

approximation or possibly inaccurate. This function seems to be particularly useful for English language learners and the form is generally used by learners from different first language backgrounds in much the same way as speakers of English as a first language (L1). A notable exception, reported by both Overstreet (2005) and Terraschke (2007), is the frequent use of *or so* as a disjunctive general extender by German L1 speakers in ways that differ from English L1 speaker uses. This appears to be a result of transfer from the German cognate *oder so*, which has a wide distribution, in contrast to the English *or so*, which has a restricted distribution, and is normally only used with number or time expressions, as in *The meeting lasted an hour or so*. German speakers use *or so* in a much wider range of contexts, as illustrated in example (18). A similar phenomenon has been reported among Dutch speakers whose L1 has *of zo* and whose English L2 speech has examples such as (19), not a typical English L1 usage. What we may be witnessing in these examples is the emergence of a new use of the general extender *or so* by European speakers of English as a lingua franca.

18. *I don't know how much the New Zealand wine is maybe it's like the Australian's just the cheapest or so*

19. *it seems like they don't have any stress or so*

Transfer from the L1 is probably also at work when speakers of German, who have an L1 adjunctive form *und, und, und*, and L1 Persian speakers, who have the translation equivalent *væ, væ, væ*, both replicate the structure when speaking English, as in expressions such as (20) from a Persian learner, not a typical English L1 usage.

20. *I have to study, I mean, memorize things and and and*

A quite different process seems to be at work in the preferred adjunctive forms of some French L1 university students compared to their British counterparts. As reported by De Cock (2004), while the British students in her study frequently used *and things* and *and stuff*, the French L1 students hardly used these forms at all. Their most common adjunctive forms were *and so on* and *et cetera* in comparable contexts. De Cock notes that these forms have probably been acquired from greater exposure to written English, with the result that the students' spoken English sounds very formal and contributes to 'the impression of detachment and formality they may well give in informal situations' (2004: 236). This impression, and the effect of transferred cognate forms, must both be very

subtle and hardly likely to interfere with informal communication. They only become relevant when there is an interest in aspects of the pragmatics of speaking one of the main varieties of English.

## Conclusion

The general consensus is that pragmatic appropriateness will probably not be acquired simply through exposure to English in use and there may need to be some form of explicit instruction, a form of 'metapragmatic treatment' (Kasper, 2001; Overstreet, 2015), that is, a discussion with illustrations of how pragmatic markers are used. One reason for this could be that general extenders and other pragmatic markers are likely to be essentially invisible (or unheard) for language learners, even in their first language. From the perspective of English language teaching, there may be a need for a direct approach to developing pragmatic awareness through explicit attention to the use of forms such as general extenders in order to help learners 'notice' them and process how they are used, at least in short-term memory (Schmidt, 1993). One way in which this has been successful is through the comparison of pragmatic markers in the L1 and the L2 in order to draw attention to similarities and differences in their uses (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; LoCastro, 2012). In order for this to happen, of course, we need to have good descriptions of those pragmatic markers such as general extenders in learners' first languages to compare with the forms in English described here.<sup>3</sup> It is a goal that should not be too hard to accomplish and I hope that this paper may provide inspiration and motivation for further studies in this area.

## Notes

1 These are described as 'short forms,' which can also be used with *like that* attached at the end to produce 'long forms' of general extenders. Only the most frequent forms are discussed in this paper, but a number of other forms such as *or anything*, *or what* and *or whatever* are also in general use. See Overstreet (1999) or Aijmer (2002) for extended coverage of all forms.

2 Sources of examples: (1) Overstreet (1999: 10), (2) Norrby and Winter (2002: 1), (3) Tagliamonte and Denis (2010: 343), (4) Aijmer (2002: 245), (5) O'Keefe (2004: 8), (6) Terraschke and Holmes (2007: 205), (7) Brown and Yule (1983: 17), (8) Cheshire (2007: 167), (9) Overstreet and Yule (1997: 85), (10) Fernandez and Yuldashev (2011: 2612), (11) Wagner, Hesson and Little (2016: 213), (12) Levey (2012: 267), (13) Craig and Tracy (1983: 306),

(14) Aijmer (2002: 215), (15) Overstreet (1999: 117), (16) Terraschke and Holmes (2007: 214), (17) Aijmer (2013: 144), (18) Terraschke and Holmes (2007: 212), (19) Buysse (2014: 233), (20) Parvaresh et al. (2012: 266).

3 Some of this work has already been undertaken, with studies focusing on general extenders in French (Secova, 2017), German (Overstreet, 2005; Terraschke, 2007), Lithuanian (Ruzaitė, 2018), Persian (Parvaresh et al., 2012), Spanish (Cortés Rodríguez, 2006; Romero-Trillo, 2002), Slovene (Verdonik, 2015) and Swedish (Aijmer, 2015; Norrby & Winter, 2002).

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