

Sort of in Australian English: The elasticity of a pragmatic marker

This study examines the pragmatic functions of *sort of* in Australian English (AuE), utilising discourse from 12 months of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's television program *Q&A*. It explores the frequency of *sort of* uses in context with a focus on multifunctionality. Uses are classified in a data-based schema which synthesises the previously described pragmatic functions of *sort of* and locates these within Zhang's (2015) Elastic Language framework. The article thus provides an understanding of the pragmatic functions of *sort of* in public discussion contexts within AuE, arguing, most notably, that *sort of* performs five of Zhang's six functions, rather than just the two previously reported, and that in accounting for the complex uses of this pragmatic marker, a wider range of subtypes needs to be distinguished within two of the functions.

Key words: *sort of*, pragmatic marker, pragmatic function, Australian English, television discourse

1 Introduction

Variously labelled as a(n) *adjustor*, *hedge*, *downtoner* (Aijmer, 2002), *de-intensifier* or *magnitude stretcher* (Zhang, 2011, 2013) amongst many other names, the pragmatic marker *sort of* has been described as introducing 'fuzziness' (Östman, 1981) and performing hedging and mitigation (Miskovic-Lukovic, 2009).¹ It further has been recognised as having interpersonal/intersubjective functions, such as supporting rapport building. This is achieved via the notion that the interactants understand one another, so there is no need to be precise, and that claims are de-intensified (Aijmer, 2002). As Zhang (2015) argues of *Elastic Language* (EL) more generally, the flexibility offered is a vital part of communicating effectively rather than in contrast to it, as is sometimes understood by the term *vague language*. Despite *sort of* performing such key interactional roles, Beeching (2016) has recently argued that in comparison to other pragmatic markers, it is "under-represented in the literature, given its frequent use" (p. 156). This article and the others in this volume aim to redress this disparity by using comparable data sources to examine how the complex and multifunctional nature of this highly frequent pragmatic marker may vary both across varieties of a language and across languages.

To better understand the complexity of *sort of* as a pragmatic marker, it is helpful to explore its development. Aijmer (2002) proposes that *sort of* has grammaticalised from its literal 'type of' meaning to a hedge, and through subjectification it has acquired affective meanings. She suggests it is a "fully fledged discourse particle" (p. 178) when the speech act is within its scope and it functions as a downtoner. Similarly, in her study of the use of *sort of* in New Zealand English (NZE), Holmes (1988) describes the uses of *sort of* as a continuum, from a phrase which indicates a hyponymous relationship ('type of') through to a pragmatic marker. While Coates (1987) proposes that *sort of* has scope over

single words or phrases and, likewise, James (1983) suggests *sort of* typically has scope at a phrasal level and occurs utterance-medially, Holmes argues that the scope of *sort of* is not restricted to the following lexical item but may extend to the entire utterance. Similarly, Fetzer (2009) suggests that *sort of* has both narrow scope over a single constituent and wide scope over more than one constituent.

To illustrate Aijmer's (2002) analysis of the rise of *sort of* as a pragmatic marker, consider (1):

(1) *A wing back is a sort of chair.*

Here, *sort of* has its original meaning of 'type of', in which the following noun or noun phrase is recognised as a hypernym for the referent. This is then extended to a pragmatic marker which alters meaning via adding evidential or epistemic modal meanings. In such uses, *sort of* signals that the words used are not wholly appropriate but should be understood vaguely as in (2).

(2) *The sculpture is sort of a chair.*

In (2) the referent is not something that is strictly a type of chair; instead it is an item that approximates a chair in some fashion, perhaps in its use or appearance, but *chair* is not quite the right word or idea (for a more complete discussion of this use see Section 4). It also has potential increased scope and is no longer restricted to preceding nouns and noun phrases. Finally, *sort of* developed to have largely affective or interpersonal meaning as in (3) via a semantic change resulting from increased subjectification (Aijmer, 2002, p. 180).

(3) *Do you want a sort of chair or something?*

In (3) the primary function of *sort of* relates to it downtoning the offer, with the general extender *or something* assisting. This functions to minimise the idea of the imposition, making it easier to accept or reject the offer. In the instance of an offer, it is argued that acceptance is the preferred response (Schegloff, 2007) but arguably a framing as in (3), by downtoning the offer, makes refusal easier. It is easy to imagine that (3) could politely be refused with a *no* and/or a gesture whereas this may be evaluated as impolite to a more direct offer and require further mitigation in the response; that is, an explanation of the refusal.

Miskovic-Lukovic (2009, p. 609) represents the full pathway of *sort of* from noun to pragmatic marker as:

(4) *of a sort > a sort of > sort of > sort o'/sort a'/sorter > sorta*

The later stages here show the phonological reduction which is often key to recognising pragmatic uses. The 'type of' meaning is said to usually not be reduced but has the final /v/ produced in addition to the form receiving stress and there being a lack of pause beforehand (Aijmer, 2002; Holmes, 1988).

While *sort of* as a pragmatic marker has been the subject of previous research in American English (AmE) (Coates, 1987; Miskovic-Lukovic, 2009), British English (BrE) (Aijmer, 1984; Lin, 2010; Miettinen & Watson, 2013; Miskovic-Lukovic, 2009), Irish English (Kirk, 2015), and NZE (Holmes, 1988; Stubbe & Holmes, 1995), its use in Australian English (AuE) has received little attention. This is particularly striking given that *sort of* has been found to occur more than three-times more often in AuE than it does in BrE or AmE (Zhang, 2015). The prevalence of this construction in AuE and the range of pragmatic functions it performs warrant further investigation of its role in discourse.

This article aims to shed light on the place of *sort of* in AuE by analysing its role within a public discussion context; namely, that of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) television program *Q&A*. This program proves to be a particularly rich source of data as the panel discussion is (largely) unscripted and frequently centres around 'touchy' topics, known to increase the use of vague language (Zhang, 2013). In addition, the discussion focuses on social issues and is often political, frequently involving politicians, and this is a further context where the use of *sort of* has been examined (Fetzer, 2009). Despite *Q&A*'s format of bringing together opposing views and allowing direct interaction with the public via audience questions, it aims for respectful discussion. This context both leads to a need to mitigate claims and the importance of rapport building. Using a data-based approach, the pragmatic functions of *sort of* are analysed and integrated into an EL framework (Zhang, 2015) in order to investigate the multifunctionality of this pragmatic marker in terms of the distribution and co-occurrence of functions and its role in the negotiation of meaning between interactants. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses the literature on pragmatic marker *sort of* before outlining the EL framework and describing the interactional context of television panel shows. Section 3 describes the methods and materials used in the study, including the creation of the corpus of data, and the coding and analysis of it. Section 4 gives the frequency, multifunctionality and clustering of the pragmatic functions of *sort of* that were found in the data, exemplifying the most common of these. Section 5 provides conclusions for the study's key findings.

2 Previous research

2.1 *Sort of* as a pragmatic marker

In discourse, the construction *sort of* can act as the head of a noun phrase, a modifier with a qualifying function and a pragmatic marker (Fetzer, 2009). Importantly, unlike many other pragmatic markers, *sort of* can also modify truth value (compare *I slept* with *I sort of slept* in which the sleep is understood to be of poor quality or disrupted, and the lack of change with *like* or *you know*: *I like slept.* and *I, you know, slept*). Pragmatic marker *sort of* has chiefly been characterised as a phrase which allows speakers to approximate and soften their utterances, and in doing so, to express their attitudes and manage

relationships with interactants. Holmes (1988) describes *sort of* as an element which helps to smooth the flow of discourse by acting as an approximator and as a signal of informality and solidarity. Fetzer (2009, 2010) ascribes this construction the role of contextualisation cue, making discourse more or less fuzzy and, like Brown and Levinson (1987) and Aijmer (2002), describes it as a *hedge*. When it has a 'more fuzzy' function, it suggests the metalinguistic comment 'what you might call', while its less-fuzzy function suggests the comment 'what is more precise' (Fetzer, 2009). Although Aijmer (1984, 2002) includes *sort of thing* in her studies, Holmes (1988) posits that *sort of thing* is a set collocation which is more restricted in meaning than the general pragmatic marker *sort of*, and so should be excluded from analysis. In the present study, the set phrases and general extender forms (e.g. *sort of thing*, *sort of stuff*) are excluded from analysis (see Section 3.2.3) and as such are not part of the discussion in this section.

Beyond the depictions of this pragmatic marker as a softener and marker of solidarity, research on *sort of* has described a variety of discourse and pragmatic functions which this construction performs in interactions. These functions can be conceptualised in different ways, with several studies classifying the functions of *sort of* into evidential and interpersonal domains. For example, Aijmer (2002) describes *sort of* as having evidential functions given that it is a phrase which denotes 'hedginess'. Miskovic-Lukovic (2009) further delineates types of hedging performed by *sort of*, which include signalling the start of something different in kind, that what is provided is less than expected and that what follows denies the interactant's expectation. Other evidential functions include to approximate (for example, when the speaker avoids being precise due to uncertainty about the correct term) and to act as a meta-level indicator which signals that the following phrase acts on a different level of talk (termed *metacommenting* by Beeching, 2016). *Sort of* can be used to denote number approximation, to act as an adjustor word and to signal self-repair. Holmes (1988) divides the epistemic modality expressed by pragmatic markers into modal or propositional meaning, which expresses speaker certainty, and evidential uses. She argues that *sort of* typically indicates uncertainty or approximation. *Sort of* has epistemic modal meaning, including lexical imprecision, semantic imprecision, self-repair, approximation and acting as a special style marker by which the speaker signals that the following lexical item is marked in some way (note also that Kirk (2015) has a category specifically for metaphor). Beeching (2016) suggests it also acts as a pause-filler but notes this function as part of her discussion of the multifunctionality of *sort of* and indicates this is performed concurrently with others. Indeed, Beeching (2016) highlights the multifunctionality of *sort of* and the difficulty of trying to categorise instances of *sort of* into a single class of function, finding that it can act within the evidential domain and have interpersonal or affective functions simultaneously.

While the role of *sort of* in performing evidential functions has been well-documented, so too has its role in the interpersonal domain. Holmes (1988) found affective or interpersonal meanings denoted by *sort of*, which express speaker attitude to the addressee in the interaction. Interpersonally, *sort of* is used to downtone, to hedge strong opinions, to express common ground and to navigate politeness (Aijmer, 2002). Similarly, both James (1983) and Lin (2010) posit that it is used to maintain social solidarity and James describes it as a *compromiser* or *hedge* which softens. Coates (1987), Holmes (1988), Aijmer (2002) and Beeching (2016) all recognise that *sort of* is used in politeness strategies to protect both positive and negative face of speakers, as well as their interactants.

Although previous studies have tended to focus on the pragmatic functions of *sort of*, the construction has also been investigated from a sociolinguistic perspective. Holmes (1988) explored the use of *sort of* in NZE and found that there were few gender-based differences in its use, but that context and discourse type were important in determining the pragmatic marker's distribution. Similarly, neither Miettinen & Watson (2013) nor Beeching (2016) found that there was a significantly higher rate of use by women. However, Miettinen & Watson (2013) did find gender-based differences in their study using the British National Corpus, in what they describe as the affective function, namely that positive affect is more common in women's speech, while negative affect is seen more in men's speech. They also argue that there can be differences when other variables, such as age and social class, are combined with gender in certain ways, but there does not appear to be a simple relationship to explain these differences.

In sum, while it may be under-researched in comparison to other pragmatic markers, given its frequency in talk (Beeching, 2016), several studies have given the functions of *sort of* thorough consideration. It remains to reconcile these accounts, with their detailed division of pragmatic function, into a framework which allows for a multifunctional analysis and accounts for the commonalities and differences in relation to other pragmatic markers.

2.2 Elastic language

While the dichotomy of evidential and interpersonal domains is a useful model for investigating the functions of *sort of*, Zhang (2011; 2013; 2015) has used the EL model to explore vague language, including the role of *sort of* in discourse, allowing for comparisons across pragmatic markers. EL is "fluid and stretchable" (Zhang, 2015, pp. 4 & 57): it is employed because "a linguistic unit has an unspecified meaning boundary [...] so that its interpretation is elastic in the sense that it can be stretched or shrunk according to the strategic needs of communication" (Zhang, 2013, p. 88). Zhang (2011) describes four vague language specific maxims which are *go just-right*, *go general*, *go hypothetical* and *go subjective*. In this study of the strategic elasticity of vague language, Zhang finds a relationship between pragmatic

functions, their linguistic realisations and the pragmatic maxims they conform to, with the communicative goal being the dominant factor which determines the language used.

Zhang (2013) furthers our understanding of vague language, arguing that there is a relationship between the sensitivity of topics and the use of vague language (especially the form and function of such language). In her study of the conversation between university students, Zhang found that vague language is used to a greater extent when the topic of conversation is considered sensitive, its use is purposeful and strategic, and its interpretation depends on the context and the interactants involved. Zhang proposes six categories of vague language. First, the *approximator and vague quantifier*, which indicates an inexact amount. Second, the *possibility and plausibility indicator*, which reflects the marking of uncertainty or doubt, and indicates something is possible or could be valid. Third, the *vague category identifier* which signals an unspecified category. This is akin to the *general extender* role in other models (e.g. Moore, 2014; Overstreet & Yule, 1997). The fourth category is that of *intensifier* which heightens the intensity of an utterance, expressing strong speaker conviction and solidarity with the interactant(s) and this aligns with the roles of *booster* and *emphasiser*. Conversely, the *de-intensifier* category lowers intensity in what has previously been described as the *downtoner*, *hedge*, *adaptor* or *compromiser* role (e.g. Aijmer, 2002). This category mitigates the force of a claim. Finally, the *subjectiviser* category mitigates the assertive tone used when speakers clearly state that what they say is a subjective opinion. This category signals epistemic vagueness or propositional attitude. Of these six categories, Zhang (2013) only classifies *sort of* into the de-intensifier category, reflecting the typical description of it as a hedge.

Building from the literature on vague language, Zhang (2015) proposes six categories of EL pragmatic function, which align with the vague language maxims described by Zhang (2011). These are 1) *just-right elastic*; 2) *rapport elastic*; 3) *mitigating elastic*; 4) *intensifying elastic*; 5) *self-protection elastic*; and 6) *evasive elastic*. *Just-right elastic* is used to provide just the right-amount of information required (cf. Grice's maxims (Grice, 1975)), and *rapport elastic* is used to establish solidarity. *Mitigating elastic* softens a claim or conveys politeness to save the face of others, while *intensifying elastic* strengthens a claim. *Self-protection elastic* expresses an uncommitted attitude to a claim or may be used for face saving of self, whereas *evasive elastic* is used to withhold information. Importantly, Zhang classifies *sort of* as having only two of these functions: mitigating elastic and self-protection elastic. However, focusing solely on *sort of* and using a data-based approach with different types of speech events than Zhang has examined to date, we find that in our data *sort of* performs pragmatic functions across five of the six categories; that is, all of the categories of pragmatic function except for evasive elastic.

Overall, the EL framework presents possibilities in terms of the need to integrate detailed accounts of *sort of* for comparison, and to further study the pragmatic functions of *sort of* both in different types of discourse and cross-linguistically.

2.3 Context of use: Television panel discussion

Guillot (2008) describes panel discussions as those which involve "a host mediating between several guests representing different viewpoints" (p. 180). The author's study comparing an English and a French television panel show found that panel discussions are characterised by their fostering of a confrontation of perspectives and heated debate, within the confines of a framework which constrains conflict and protects the face of participants and the neutral status of the host. As pragmatic markers such as *sort of* have a role in politeness strategies, this discourse genre is a fitting source of data for an investigation into the pragmatic functions of *sort of*.

Sort of has previously been examined in television discourse, specifically in political interviews. Fetzer (2009) found the use of *sort of* was much less frequent in this context than in conversation, which was partly attributed to its status as media discourse and professional communication. It is important to note however that in some panel shows, speakers, even politicians, may wish to take a different position and focus on presenting as personable. Although use is linked to informality (Aijmer, 1984), the form is still frequent even in academic discussions (Lin, 2010; Metsä-Ketelä, 2012) so it can be expected to occur in formal and public talk. In fact, there is a link between *sort of* and prestige in that Beeching (2016) found frequency of use of *sort of* was associated with education level, with low rates among less educated speakers. Aijmer has suggested that there may be differences in the qualities of *sort of* in public contexts such as television discourse in mentioning that "[w]hen *sort of* occurs in public speech, it is generally self-reflecting and metaphorical." (2002, p. 191). These issues are important to consider in analysis and future comparison given the data used here.²

3 Methods and materials

3.1 The television program Q&A

The ABC's weekly television program *Q&A* is a panel-format discussion with high profile guests. The members of the panel, who are usually selected based on their different perspectives on the topics of the week, answer questions from the audience. The discussion is mediated by a host, who ensures that turns are not too extended and that relevant panel members address the topic at hand. Figure 1 shows the typical set-up, with the host (third from right), flanked by two or three guests on each side.

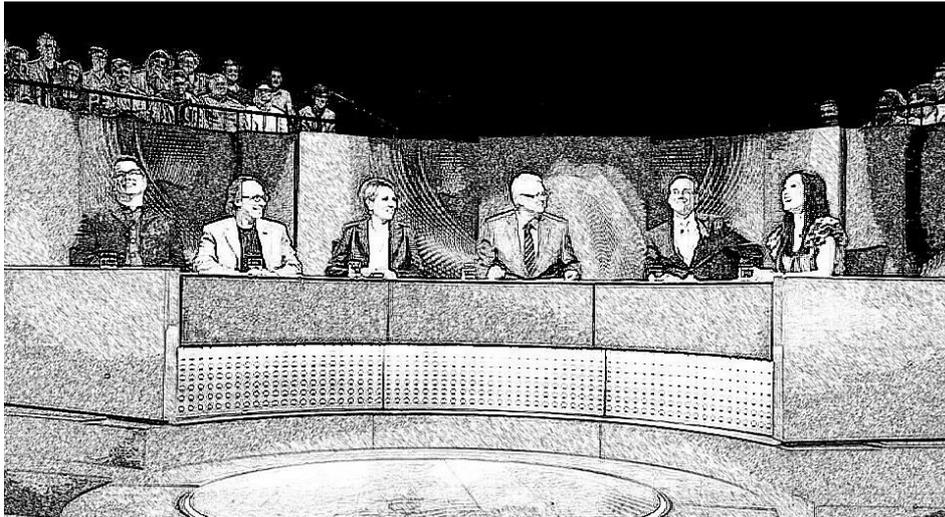


Figure 1. Set-up of Q&A

Q&A is (largely) unscripted and contains discussion of ‘touchy’ topics, known to increase the use of vague language (Zhang, 2013). The discussion focuses on social issues but when there are politicians on the panel it can be more political. Despite Q&A’s format of bringing together opposing views and allowing direct interaction with the public via audience questions, it aims for respectful discussion. The context of Q&A leads speakers to ‘make bold assertions’, but as they are ‘on the record’, they want to avoid being compromised by a statement that turns out to be indefensible or wrong. Additionally, speakers want to facilitate rapport and not appear to disagree too vehemently, which is potentially linked to the AuE desire to ‘agree to disagree’ (Wierzbicka, 1994). As noted in Section 2.3, previous research suggests television interviews with politicians might yield low counts of *sort of* as a pragmatic marker (Fetzer, 2009). However, the interactive nature and collaborative floor of Q&A in fact produce a rich source for studying this pragmatic marker.

3.2 The Q&A corpus

To develop the corpus, the ABC’s transcriptions of Q&A episodes were taken from the Q&A website, which also provides video of the program (<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/>). The hour-long episodes compiled were from February 2016 to March 2017: 50 episodes totalling close to 589,000 words.³ This amount of material was assumed to be sufficient to investigate *sort of* while maintaining the context (it is possible over a very extended period that the program may have changed in its culture). In addition, a metadata file was created detailing segments, questions, question askers and panellists.

3.2.1 Participants

As this study focuses on AuE, participants in Q&A discussions needed to be limited to those who spoke this variety of English. Exclusions were made based on the publicly available biographies of panel members and hosts and confirmed by listening in the case of audience members. All participants were

further labelled for their role in the discussion as audience member, panellist or host. The larger contribution by the primary host, Tony Jones, as present across most episodes, was unavoidable and attention was paid to potential influence on the analysis and sample. A host must fulfil a role that includes management of the talk and as such involves more metapragmatic work, for example protecting the face of participants and regulating the floor (Liu & Ran, 2016). To ensure comparable data with a focus on the discussion of social issues, instances of the hosts' use of *sort of* that were part of talk centred on show or image management were excluded from analysis.

3.2.2 Topic

As Q&A aims to cover the major issues of the week (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017), it explores both political and social topics. For both comparability with other articles in this issue and to eliminate possible effects in differences in the type of talk, occurrences of *sort of* were double-coded as *social*, *social/political*, *political* (which largely involved discussions of elections in which there was no appeal to larger social issues) or *other* (which included show or image management). Since the basic structure of the show revolves around a question being asked of the panel by an audience member followed by the host asking further questions to clarify and moderate turns to some extent to facilitate each panel member having similar opportunities to speak, the content of the audience question was taken to be the set topic for a stretch of discussion. Only *social* and *social/political* segments were included in the analysis for comparability with other contributions to this volume.

3.2.3 Instances of *sort of*

In the initial search of the corpus, there were 486 instances of <sort of>. Before analysing the form, there were exclusions based on the participants and topics discussed as outlined in the previous two sections ($n = 208$). After these exclusions were made, we concentrated on isolating uses which were pragmatic markers, excluding instances where it means 'type of', by listening to its production ($n = 78$). In cases where this was unclear, a second author confirmed.

We followed Stubbe and Holmes (1995) and Holmes (1988) in excluding uses within general extenders ($n = 7$). Although a pragmatic marker, they have a function which relates to the larger category of general extenders. To exemplify this, see (5) from our data.

(5) TONY JONES: *Very briefly, Cassandra, the questioner mentioned tax breaks, negative gearing, private school subsidies, those sort of things.* (Q&A2016-31;101–102-host)⁴

In (5) *those sort of things* could be replaced by *and stuff*, *and so on* or another general extender to suggest that these items are part of an incomplete or ad hoc category (Moore, 2014). Alternatively *sort of* alone could be removed without change to this general extender function. Both the syntactic

substitution of *those sort of things* with another general extender and removal of *sort of* from the phrase indicate that *those sort of things* is acting as a single constituent. Further, we again followed Stubbe and Holmes (1995) and Holmes (1988) in excluding instances of *sort of thing* and *sort of stuff* which functioned as a set phrase ($n = 16$), meaning that the absence of *sort of* would create a less likely utterance, as exemplified in (6).

(6) LYLE SHELTON: *by introducing this **sort of thing**, we might create even more confusion amongst young people* (Q&A2016-5;399–400-panellist)

Removing *sort of* in (6) provides a less natural and more informal utterance but it is not part of a general extender in that *this sort of thing* is not grammatically optional here (a requirement of general extenders, see Overstreet & Yule, 1997).

With a few further exclusions based on incomplete utterances ($n = 4$) and unclear audio ($n = 2$), the final number of uses of *sort of* by AuE speakers as a pragmatic marker in the discussion of social issues was 171.

3.3 Coding

Categorisation of pragmatic function began with Zhang's (2015) previous work on *sort of* and her EL framework. This was appropriate as it was the only previous work on *sort of* in AuE and EL allows for a top-down approach that recognises the larger landscape of the functions of pragmatic markers. All instances were blind-coded by two of the authors. In the initial stage of coding, the categories were supplemented by descriptions which drew on the previous studies outlined in Section 2.1. After coding was completed for 50 instances of *sort of*, these were reconciled, and a data-based schema of subtypes was compiled for further coding as well as for assigning the 50 analysed examples. Coding of the remaining instances led to further refinement but not expansion of the schema, although this was allowed for. In classifying types and subtypes, where there was disagreement the example was discussed. Due to allowing for an instance of *sort of* to be multifunctional, in most cases the resolution was to add an additional categorisation. Table 1 overviews the subtypes against Zhang's categories; in cases where there are elements marked as (a), (b) and so forth, these were coded separately to gain a fuller picture of the data but without losing the bigger picture.

EL function	Description of <i>sort of</i> use	Subtypes
1 Just right elastic	To provide the right amount of information for the interaction; precision not required, makes clear that it is not precise	-

2 Rapport elastic	To facilitate rapport management and mark in-groupness	-
3 Mitigating elastic	To 'soften' the element it has scope over or the interactional impact	3.1 Downtoning the claim of utterance 3.2 Noting lexical imprecision (neutrally) 3.3 Protecting an interactant's face against potential criticism 3.4 Hedging in relation to a taboo topic
4 Intensifying elastic	To strengthen the claim of an utterance	-
5 Self-protection elastic	Noting caution or marking distance between speaker and talk or this talk and that surrounding it	5.1 Protecting speaker's face if (a) a claim, (b) lexical choice, (c) knowledge or (d) speaker's self-evaluation may not be upheld by others 5.2. Marking figurative language use 5.3. Downplaying degree of commitment through speaker's stance 5.4. Distancing self from (a) position or (b) lexical choice
6 Evasive elastic	To withhold information or the detail of information	-

Table 1: Data-based coding schema

To show how instances of *sort of* were coded using this schema, consider (7) from our data:

- (7) EVA COX: *I've got a particular concern, because it goes back to the point that Mark was making. Australia is littered with pilot programs of similar characteristics, maybe not as finely financially done, but, I mean, you know, we've got them all along. Many of them get cut out. They get cut out because they're not **sort of** embedded into the system.* (Q&A2016-36;520–524-panellist)

Here, in addressing a question about support for young carers, Eva Cox refers to an earlier statement on a previous topic by Mark Butler, another panellist, who asserts that there had been a range of programs targeting young jobseekers, but they had all been cut. She agrees that similarly there have been programs to address the needs of young carers, but they have also been 'cut'. Cox then offers her opinion as to why this has happened, using *sort of* to both signal that 'embedded' is not quite the right word (function 3.2 in the schema) and to protect her own face in case her opinion is not upheld

by others (function 5.1a). As is clearly shown in (7), an instance of *sort of* can simultaneously perform different functions (in this case receiving a coding of 3.2 + 5.1a).

4 Results and analysis

4.1 Overview of data

The 171 uses of *sort of* as a pragmatic marker in the discussion of social issues by AuE speakers were all medial in terms of their discourse position and ranged in scope from a single word to a speech act. While these results are not directly comparable with those of previous studies as the data are from different varieties of English and different contexts of use, the result about discourse position does align with James' (1983) findings, and that of scope likewise supports Holmes' (1988) conclusions.

The 171 instances came from 75 speakers (40 women and 35 men). Excluding Tony Jones, the principal host, with 31 uses of *sort of*, 44 speakers produced only one instance and the remaining 30 speakers produced two – eight instances each, for an average of 1.9 *sort ofs* per speaker. In terms of gender, and again excluding the principal host, female speakers produced on average 2.0 uses of *sort of*, while the male speakers produced 1.7. The lack of a markedly higher rate of use by women further corroborates the findings of Holmes (1988), Miettinen & Watson (2013) and Beeching (2016). As discussed in Section 3.3, an instance of *sort of* may be multifunctional, which resulted in the 171 instances in the final corpus being coded for a total of 294 functions, with a range of one – four functions, and an average of 1.7, per instance. The exclusions from the data mean we cannot provide an accurate normalisation per 10,000 to compare with Zhang (2015). We note though that even just counting the 171, the rate of 2.9 is higher than in AmE and BrE data from the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, & Finegan, 2010), to which Zhang compares her rate (2 AmE and 2 BrE v. 6.5 AuE).

4.2 Functional frequency, distribution and co-occurrence

Across the uses there were 56 different combinations of functions. In Figure 2 below, combinations of functions with five or more occurrences are compared with the number of different speakers who produced each combination of functions:

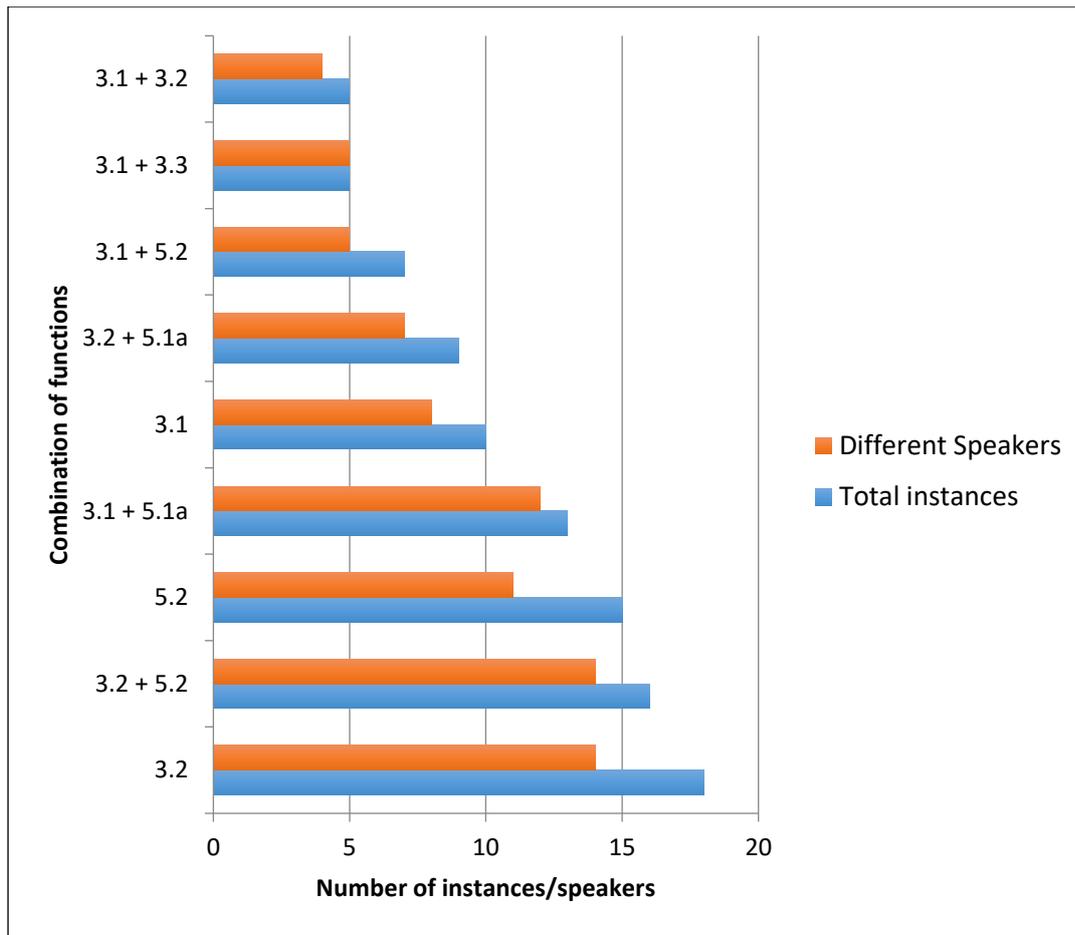


Figure 2. Number of instances and number of speakers of prevalent combinations of functions

Interestingly, Figure 2 shows that each combination was produced by a large number of speakers; in other words, no combination of functions was predominantly produced by a select set of speakers.

Each of the combinations of functions that were coded in the data is listed in Figure 3, along with total counts at both the level of EL function and subtype, where applicable.⁵ Note that combinations with less than five occurrences have been reported together; e.g., the eighteen occurrences of 3.1 + *x* include combinations with only one or two occurrences each.

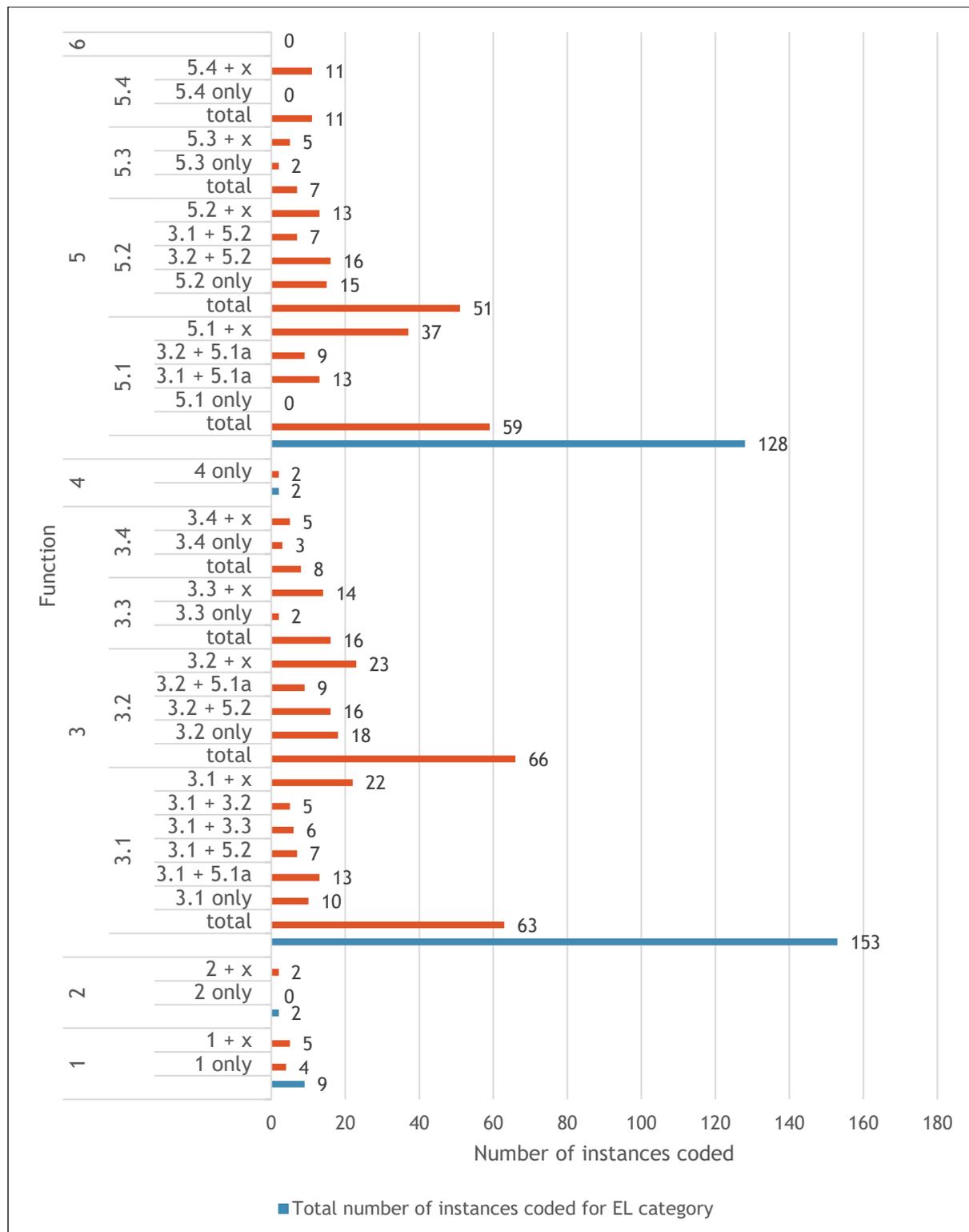


Figure 3. Frequency of functions by combination and in total

The first observation to be made is that while Zhang (2015) classifies *sort of* as having only the pragmatic functions of 3 *mitigating elastic* and 5 *self-protection elastic*, in our data there are also a small number of instances of *sort of* with the functions of 1 *Just right elastic* ($n=9$), 2 *Rapport elastic* ($n=2$) and 4 *Intensifying elastic* ($n=2$). To briefly illustrate each category, we offer the following examples which

demonstrate just how elastic *sort of* is within interactions. (Note that, where the use of *sort of* has been analysed as being multifunctional, the additional functions have been listed after the extract identifier.)

(8) *Just right elastic*

CATHERINE KING: *What's actually happened in the last part of this **sort of** decade, really, is that, ...* (Q&A2016-2;807–808-panellist) (also functions 1 + 5.1c)

(9) *Rapport elastic*

ED HUSIC: *And the other thing that both sides of politics are actually pursuing, which I **sort of** refer to as a catch and release program, is setting up these landing pads.* (Q&A2016-9;596–598-panellist) (also functions 3.1 + 5.1b + 5.2)

(10) *Intensifying elastic*

JOSH ZEPPS: *Alan, it's so disingenuous to imply that the power structures within the church are just **sort of** accidental and don't serve the people who are in power.* (Q&A2016-6;185–186-panellist)

In (8), Catherine King provides an approximate date range, indicating that a more precise fixing of dates is either not feasible or is not important to the point being made. In contrast, in (9), Ed Husic is trying to positively address a question about the issue of brain drain in the Information Communication Technology (ICT) industry raised by a member of the audience who is a programmer working in San Francisco but wanting to return home to Australia. However, the audience member fears that the only options available to people such as himself are to “leave home for opportunities” overseas or to “stunt themselves by staying in Australia”. In answering, Husic focuses on ways to encourage early stage innovation, which would support ICT professionals such as the question asker. Here *sort of* has several functions, including at the phrasal level signalling the upcoming ‘informal, non-technical’ language, which Husic uses to get across his concept of landing pads, and at the utterance level building understanding directly with the question asker, as well as more generally with the audience and other panellists. Lastly, in (10), the original question concerns whether or not “George Pell should be removed from his position in the Church because of his lack of action over the reported sexual abuse”. In the extract Josh Zepps is challenging another panellist and uses *sort of* to emphasise and to persuade the audience and other panellists as to just how non-accidental it is that there are power structures within the church.

The second observation from Figure 3 is that, in line with Zhang’s (2015) findings, there are no instances of *sort of* with the pragmatic function of 6 *Evasive elastic*. Undoubtedly this is due to the nature of Q&A,

where panellists want to present as personable and be positively evaluated, and are hence highly motivated to provide, rather than withhold, information.

The remaining two EL pragmatic functions, 3 *Mitigating elastic* and 5 *Self-protection elastic*, are quite robust, with 153 and 128 occurrences respectively. While the range of subtypes of these two functions is discussed in more detail in the next section, there are a few observations that are important to make here from Figure 3. Looking at the level of subtypes, we see first, that in our data, 3.2 *Noting lexical imprecision* is the most frequently occurring pragmatic function for *sort of*, either on its own ($n=18$) or in combination with one or more other functions. Secondly, 3.1 *Downtoning the claim of utterance* occurs frequently on its own ($n=10$) as well as in combination with two of the other mitigating functions: 3.2 *Noting lexical imprecision* ($n=5$) or 3.2 *Protecting interactant's face against potential criticism* ($n=5$). Thus, it appears that in the Q&A context, participants are not only commonly using *sort of* to moderate their utterance, but they are also simultaneously signalling that their lexical choice is not quite right, or they are wanting to protect the face of others. Furthermore, speakers were also found to regularly combine 3.1 *Downtoning the claim of utterance* with two of the 5 *Self-protection elastic* subtypes: 5.1a *Protecting speaker's face if a claim may not be upheld by others* ($n=13$) and 5.2 *Marking figurative language use* ($n=7$), and to combine 3.2 *Noting lexical imprecision* with these same two subtypes, 5.1a *Protecting speaker's face if a claim may not be upheld by others* ($n=9$) and 5.2 *Marking figurative language use* ($n=16$). Overall, these results indicate the highly co-dependent nature of *sort of* in signalling mitigation and being used either as a politeness strategy to protect one's own face or to signal a disconnect in some way with the following speech.

4.3 Exemplification of common pragmatic functions

Uses of *sort of* which mark imprecision in terms of evidentiality rely on vagueness to achieve their intended meaning. This demonstrates the importance of language forms which may be derided as *vague*, as they allow a listener to understand that the speaker is aware of a lack of precision but at the same time knows that listeners can likely understand what is being communicated. Further subjectification has led to *sort of* also having extended meanings that allow flexibility in interactions (e.g. the use of *sort of* in (3) above). The analysis confirmed the multifunctionality of uses and their co-occurrence. In this section we explore this further with a qualitative analysis of some of the forms the quantitative analysis revealed as most common.

The first example to be considered in detail shows how mitigating and self-protecting elastic functions may work together. In (11), the use of *sort of* not only has scope over the verb phrase, which is underlined, and softens the claim, but at a higher level it also has scope over the speech act and works to protect the speaker's face.

(11) GRACE COLLIER: *Well, look, I understand what you're saying and we've argued for years now about freedom of speech and, you know, hurt feelings are just that. They're just hurt feelings and there are people in our community who think, "Well, I should be able to say what I want to say and, you know, everybody else should just get over it." Then we have to draw a line between speech that incites violence and actually really hurts people. So I think somewhere in the middle we **sort of** have strayed into territory now where people are scared to say what they think and that's fairly common.* (Q&A2016-2;910–917-panellist)

In this example, the speaker is both downtoning her claim (function 3.1) to be safely vague about her own opinion so as not to be seen as too direct and strident, and simultaneously protecting her own face to shield herself from criticism if this opinion is not upheld by others (function 5.1a). Indeed, *sort of* assists with *I think* in marking this as an opinion. She is the first on the panel to respond to this audience question, so not only have the other panel members not yet established their positions but they are also quite likely to respond to and compare their positions to her view.

There were similarly examples which involved the speaker orienting more to their level of commitment than their face. Though from a traditional view analysing this as a hedge might be understandable on first glance, examination of the data shows something more complex is happening. Thus (12) was classified as 5.3 *self-protection elastic, downplaying degree of commitment through speaker's stance*.

(12) JOSH ZEPPS: *...You know, there are always reasons in retrospect why things don't work out. Maybe Credlin was one reason why Abbott didn't work out. Do we particularly care? I'm **sort of** with the Minister, I'm not really sure we should.* (Q&A2016-6;144–146-panellist)

Here the speaker does not, we argue, soften the claim of alignment with the Minister for Employment and Women Michaelia Cash, who said she did not want to comment on the topic. To understand this response, it is firstly important to note that the original question related to if there would ever be a time “where a woman will be judged solely on her performance and not subject to gossip and innuendo about who she's been sleeping with”. The question was placed in the context of a particular relationship and claims in a book, with host Tony Jones redirecting the question for the panel members later to respond on whether they were surprised regarding the media interest in the story. Jones then asks Cash how she feels about her colleagues talking about this topic with the book's author. Cash responds to the insistence on the need to talk about this by saying that it is a question of focus. Josh Zepps then argues that there is little point in conversations that explain why something has failed after it has done so, completing this with the talk shown in (12). By using *sort of* Zepps communicates that there is a partial alignment of their positions in not wanting to focus on what lead former Prime Minister Tony

Abbott to “not work out”. Zhang (2015) observes that marking a speaker’s commitment is one of the types of ‘epistemic shields’ that is widely recognised among the devices of self-protection.

One of the complexities of participating in Q&A is the multiple audiences which the panellists are addressing: first, there is the question asker in the live audience and the host in follow up questions; second, as the discussion is highly contextualised, there is interacting with what other panellists have said and might be likely to say; and finally, there is the television audience and the potential later audience via the website which may include both supporters and critics. Given this complex array of audience demands, we expected to see a lot of adjustment of style, to both more and less formal in line with the special style use of *sort of* identified by Holmes (1988). In fact, perhaps saying something about the familiarity of the panellist with such tasks, there was no marking of overly technical language or the like. There was, however, a very clear category of use similar to Kirk’s (2015) *metaphor*. The function is similar to that of 5.4b, which focuses on lexical choice, but a separate category, namely function 5.2, was justified due to the frequency of this with figurative language use ($n=51$, for 18 of which 5.2 was the sole pragmatic function (35.3%)). An example is shown in (13), which is an earlier part of the discussion described above for (12).

(13) ALAN JONES: *I was a senior advisor to a Prime Minister and people get upset with the decisions you make. Do you lose your temper at times? I suppose you do. Do you use bad language at times? I guess you do. Do you expect that all that’s going to be **sort of** repeated chapter and verse?* (Q&A2016-6;56–59-panellist)

In uses of *sort of* such as in (13), the caution and distancing relate not to the propositional content or implied stance but to form: in Aijmer (2002, p. 209) and Beeching’s (2016) terminology, *sort of* is metacommenting on the appropriateness of language use. Such uses work via a Figure-Ground switch (Beeching, 2016), indicating that the talk is undesirably less precise as analogy or metaphor thus they are understandable as stretching other meanings of *sort of*.

Although we have emphasised multifunctionality, it is equally important to not assume that all instances of *sort of* fulfil multiple pragmatic functions. As Figure 3 shows, 18 of the 66 (27.3%) uses of lexical imprecision (function 3.2) did this solely. This use aligns most closely with descriptions of *sort of* as a lexical hedge, and is exemplified in (14), which was produced by the Prime Minister of Australia.

(14) MALCOLM TURNBULL: *But the point is this: the payment system has got to be updated. It’s got to get to a **sort of**, you know, a smartphone era.* (Q&A2016-21;162–164-panellist)

In (14) the use of *sort of*, supported by *you know*, marks *a smartphone era* as approximating the speaker’s idea. Here Malcolm Turnbull was referring to the need for a payment system to deal with

contemporary payment options and current technology, and 'on the spot' the phrase which follows the pragmatic markers is suggested as imperfect but clear enough for its purpose.

In summary, the examples in this section not only demonstrate the complexity of pragmatic work completed by uses of *sort of*, but also clearly demonstrate the usefulness of the EL metaphor in that the meanings and uses have a strong relationship to one another. We argue, though, that it is still useful to separate them out and examine their co-occurrence. We hope to have illustrated the usefulness of engaging both with a larger framework such as EL and the particular categories of use within a dataset such as that of our Q&A corpus.

5 Conclusions

The analysis presented engages very strongly with previous analyses of *sort of* and it appears that the functions of this pragmatic marker in AuE parallel what has been found in other varieties of English. While the context of television panel discussion seems to have had a larger effect on the data than variety of English, this has not resulted in usages not attested in other types of talk. The context of discussion of social issues on television has been fruitful for understanding a context and examining talk from interactants from a broad range of backgrounds who might not otherwise converse with one another in public. Although the panel format is often associated with conflict (Guillot, 2008), the data and the uses of *sort of* show speakers had a desire to participate cooperatively, leading them to make bold assertions, but as they were 'on the record', to also mitigate them and protect their face from being compromised by a statement that could turn out to be difficult to defend later.

While the EL framework provided by Zhang (2015) allowed the highlighting of similarities amongst uses, including the multifunctionality and clustering of pragmatic functions, we have argued that *sort of* is more complex than has previously been recognised: here performing five of the six functions (all but evasive elastic) rather than just two, although those highlighted by Zhang were the most frequent (mitigating elastic and self-protective elastic). Further, we have explored the rigour of Zhang's six functions and argued that within *mitigating elastic* and *self-protective elastic* a wider range of subtypes needs to be distinguished, including marking *lexical imprecision* and *figurative language* respectively.

As previous studies of *sort of* from a pragmatic perspective have drawn on each other but changed categorisation to best represent their data, these sources alone were difficult to unify. In this study we have synthesised the pragmatic understandings of these previous studies within the larger approach of EL. Accordingly, our study has not only taken a bottom-up, data-based approach, following the tradition in studying *sort of*, but our findings have been interpreted top-down using the EL framework. This allows for the potential of comparing our findings regarding *sort of*'s functions to those in other contexts, varieties or languages, or indeed other pragmatic markers which may share some functions. In this

respect, Zhang's (2015) EL framework looks to provide an appropriate superstructure with potential generalisability between studies along with possibility for expanding and minimising types and subtypes to fit the data.

Notes

¹ The class of constructions referred to as *pragmatic markers* here have been termed *pragmatic particles*, *discourse markers*, *discourse particles*, *discourse connectives*, *hedges*, *interjections* and *gambits* in the literature, with each term reflecting the theoretical perspective of the study (Brinton, 1996). Amador-Moreno, McCafferty and Vaughan (2015, p. 5) note that *pragmatic marker* is the most neutral term and most apt when pragmatic function is the focus.

² It is perhaps equally important to note that the findings presented in this study cannot be taken as representative of the functions of *sort of* in AuE in general as they are drawn from a particular context of use, that of television panel discussion. However, they can be taken as indicative of spoken AuE interaction that is on record in the public domain.

³ Given that the data is in the public domain, no specific permission was obtained for use in research.

⁴ Using this first example to illustrate, the identifiers after extracts from the data show: Q&A [corpus name] 2016-31 [year-episode];101–102 [lines within episode]-host [enduring role].

⁵ Due to space limitations and the focus of this paper being the analysis of the multifunctionality and clustering of pragmatic functions of *sort of* within an EL framework, we leave reporting on the possible correlations of pragmatic function with the various linguistic contexts in which *sort of* occurs to a future paper.

References

- Aijmer, K. (1984). 'Sort of' and 'kind of' in English conversation. *Studia Linguistica*, 38(2), 118–128.
- Aijmer, K. (2002). *English discourse particles: Evidence from a corpus*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Amador-Moreno, C. P., McCafferty, K., & Vaughan, E. (2015). Introduction. In C. P. Amador-Moreno, K. McCafferty & E. Vaughan (Eds.), *Pragmatic Markers in Irish English* (pp. 1–16). Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2017). Q&A: About the show. Retrieved June 28 2017, from <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/about.htm>
- Beeching, K. (2016). *Pragmatic markers in British English: Meaning in social interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., & Finegan, E. (2010). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (8th ed.). London: Longman.
- Brinton, L. J. (1996). *Pragmatic markers in English: Grammaticalization and discourse functions*. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness. Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coates, J. (1987). Epistemic modality and spoken discourse. *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 85(1), 110–131.
- Fetzer, A. (2009). Sort of and kind of in political discourse: Hedge, head of NP or contextualization cue? In A. H. Jucker, D. Schreier & M. Hundt (Eds.), *Corpora: Pragmatics and discourse* (pp. 127-149). The Netherlands: Brill.
- Fetzer, A. (2010). Hedges in context: Form and function of sort of and kind of. In G. Kaltenböck, S. Schneider & W. Mihatsch (Eds.), *New approaches to hedging* (pp. 49-71). London: Emerald.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Volume 3 Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- Guillot, M.-N. (2008). Freedoms and constraints in semi-institutional television discussions: The case of mixed format panel discussions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(2), 179–204.

- Holmes, J. (1988). *Sort of* in New Zealand women's and men's speech. *Studia Linguistica*, 42(2), 85–121.
- James, A. R. (1983). Compromisers in English: A cross-disciplinary approach to their interpersonal significance. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 7(2), 191–206.
- Kirk, J. M. (2015). *Kind of* and *sort of*: Pragmatic discourse markers in the SPICE-Ireland corpus. In C. P. Amador-Moreno, K. McCafferty & E. Vaughan (Eds.), *Pragmatic Markers in Irish English* (pp. 89–113). Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Lin, C.-Y. (2010). '... that's actually sort of you know trying to get consultants in ...': Functions and multifunctionality of modifiers in academic lectures. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(5), 1173–1183.
- Liu, P., & Ran, Y. (2016). The role of metapragmatic expressions as pragmatic manipulation in a TV panel discussion program. *Pragmatics and Society*, 7(3), 463–481.
- Metsä-Ketelä, M. (2012). Frequencies of vague expressions in English as an academic lingua franca. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 1(2), 263–285.
- Miettinen, H., & Watson, G. (2013). “*Sort of*” in British women’s and men’s speech. *English Language Teaching*, 6(3), 108–115.
- Miskovic-Lukovic, M. (2009). *Is there a chance that I might kinda sort of take you out to dinner?: The role of the pragmatic particles kind of and sort of in utterance interpretation*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41(3), 602–625.
- Moore, E. E. F. (2014). *Anyway, what have discourse markers got to do with grammar and stuff like that?: A unified account of the discourse-pragmatic and grammatical aspects of discourse markers*. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne.
- Östman, J.-O. (1981). *You know: A discourse functional approach*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Overstreet, M., & Yule, G. (1997). On being inexplicit and stuff in contemporary American English. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 25(3), 250–258.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in Conversation Analysis* (Vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stubbe, M., & Holmes, J. (1995). *You know, eh* and other 'exasperating expressions': An analysis of social and stylistic variation in the use of pragmatic devices in a sample of New Zealand English. *Language and Communication*, 15(1), 63–88.

- Wierzbicka, A. (1994). "Cultural scripts": A new approach to the study of cross-cultural communication. In M. Pütz (Ed.), *Language contact and language conflict* (pp. 69–87). Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Zhang, G. (2011). Elasticity of vague language. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 8(4), 571–599.
- Zhang, G. (2013). The impact of touchy topics on vague language use. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 23(1), 87–118.
- Zhang, G. (2015). *Elastic language: How and why we stretch our words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.