The Use of the Discourse Markers *kind of* and *sort of* in London Teenage Conversation

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate in what functions the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* are used in teenage conversation. It is a descriptive study in the framework of Relevance Theory. The data is taken from the corpus COLT, a 500 000 word corpus of spontaneous teenage conversation, tape-recorded in London in 1993. Discourse markers are known for their multifunctionality and the purpose of this paper was to look at the main functions of *kind of* and *sort of.* Four main functions were found, i.e., as a face-threat mitigator, as a delay device, as a compromiser and as a softener. The discourse marker *sort of* was more frequently used, compared to the discourse marker *kind of.* The functions that were most frequently used for *sort of* were as a face-threat mitigator and as a delay device and the functions that were the least frequently used were as a compromiser and as a softener. The functions that were most frequently used for *kind of* were as a face-threat mitigator and as a compromiser and the least frequently used were as a delay device and as a softener. It appears that *kind of* and *sort of* play an important part in teenage conversation. They make the dialogue smooth. Without them the conversation would be acceptable, but it would be heard as unnatural, awkward and even unfriendly. For the speaker it would be difficult or even impossible to give a hint to the listener without the use of the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of,* how the discourse should be processed, and how to comprehend the shared background knowledge. By using *kind of* and *sort of* speakers show that the relevant background of an utterance needs to be renegotiated.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

> "There are few aspects of any language which reflect
> the culture of a given speech community better than
> its particles. Particles are very often highly idiosyncratic:
> 'untranslatable' in the sense that no exact equivalents
> can be found in other languages. They are ubiquitos,
> and their frequency in ordinary speech is particularly
> high. Their meaning is crucial to the interaction mediated
> by speech; they express the speaker's attitude towards
> the addressee or towards the situation spoken about,
> his assumptions, his intentions, his emotions. If learners
> of a language failed to master the meaning of its particles,
> their communicative competence would be drastically impaired".
> (Wierzbicka 1991, p.341)

There are several names proposed for the expressions found in English conversation, such as *kind of* and *sort of*. Schiffrin (1987) uses the term "discourse marker" and Brinton (1996) uses "pragmatic marker" for such words. Aijmer (2002) uses the term "discourse particle" and according to her (2002, p. 1) "discourse particles are placed with great precision at different places in the discourse and give important clues to how discourse is segmented and processed. They can be studied by means of different approaches. A top-down approach as in relevance theory implies that the focus is on discourse structures and the role of discourse particles to facilitate the processing and comprehension of the text."

This paper will be devoted to the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* and the purpose is to investigate in what functions London teenagers use these words. The data is taken from the corpus COLT, which was recorded in London in 1993. Examples 1 to 6, from COLT, show kind *of* and *sort of* as discourse markers.

1. He's gone home, ***sort of***. (COLT B132501)

2. And the other ones look at him, and they ***sort of*** look in their cups and going.(COLTB132617)

3. So can we just ***sort of*** forget it is there? (COLT B133701)

4. And then when you go through puberty you start you ***kind of*** start growing (COLTB134803)

5. Unless we were just ***kind of*** indulged in a conversation and we didn't…..(COLTB136601)

6. You ***kind of*** you had a you had a conversation with yourself. (COLTB141102)

Why are teenagers a useful focus for a study? Alex Spillius of *The Independent on Sunday* said in March 1996 of London teenage talk: "It appears that a yawning linguistic gap is opening up to separate a younger generation- brought up on a mixture of US television, films and music, Australian soap operas and rave culture – from the rest of the population."

(Stenström, Andersen, & Hasund, 2002, p.1) There has been a great amount of research on child and adult language and not so much on teenage language. This is quite surprising, "considering the significance of this transition period between childhood and adulthood in terms of its effect, not only on physical and psychological development, but also on social and linguistic behaviour" (Stenström, Andersen, & Hasund, 2002, p. 2). The reason why there has not been much focus on teenage language might be the lack of language corpora. That was why the researchers from the University of Bergen decided to collect a large corpus of teenage language and make it available for researchers worldwide.

This paper will be structured in the following way. To begin with, there will be a literature review, explaining the definition of a discourse marker. There will also be a summary of different studies of discourse markers and what functions have been found by different researchers. Furthermore, in section 2.3 the notion of context in relevance theory will be discussed. In section 3, the design of the present study will be presented, together with its aim and specific research question. In section 4, the results will be presented and further discussed in section 5. Finally, some concluding remarks will be presented in section 6.

2. *Kind of* and *sort of* as discourse markers

"Discourse marker" is the term that I have chosen to use when referring to the words *kind of* and *sort of*, because that is the most common term used among researchers (Hasund, 2003, p.56). In section 2.1, I will present what other definitions there are of these words and I will explain what a discourse marker is. In section 2.2, I will present different functions of the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of*, found in the literature. In section 2.3, I will discuss how the understanding of context can be described in relevance theory.

2.1 Definitions

These expressions have been given a great many terms by different researchers, such as, pragmatic markers (Brinton, 1996), discourse particles (Aijmer, 2002), and discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987, Stenström, 1994).

Here is a detailed review of different characteristics of discourse markers, taken from Hasund (2003, p. 56-57):

Phonological and lexical features
- They are short and often phonologically reduced.
- They may form a separate tone group or be prosodically subordinated to another word.

- They are marginal and heterogeneous forms that are difficult to place within a traditional word class.

Syntactic features
- They frequently occur in sentence-initial position, but are also found sentence medially and finally.
- They are asyntactical, existing outside the syntactic structure or loosely attached to it and have no clear grammatical function.
- They are grammatically optional.

Semantic features
- They apparently lack semantic meaning and are not part of the ideational/propositional content of the sentence.

Functional features
- They may be multifunctional, serving textual and interpersonal functions simultaneously.

Sociolinguistic and stylistic features
- They are predominantly a feature of spoken rather than written discourse and are associated with informality.
- They appear with high frequency.
- They are stylistically stigmatised and negatively evaluated.
- They are often associated with women's language and are thought to be more common in women's speech than men's.

In this paper, the functional features of the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* will be investigated. According to Jucker (1993, p. 437) "one of the problems that must be tackled by any description of discourse markers is their polyfunctionality, that is to say the range of different uses in which they can occur", that is why the relevance-theoretical framework has been added to this paper, in order to explain the uses of the discourse markers using a general theory of human communication. Relevance theory will be further discussed in section 2.3.

In Stenström (1994, p.59) the following list of "interactional signals and discourse markers" is illustrated:

actually	I think	right
ah	mhm	***sort of***
all right	no	sure
anyway	now	Q tag
God	oh	that's right
goodness	OK	yes/yeah
gosh	please	you know

I mean	quite	you see
I see	really	well

Discourse markers are associated especially with informal spoken English and they make spoken interaction easier and more relaxed. It appears that they are important elements in discourse and they contribute to a smooth conversation (Aijmer, 1984, p.127).

Jucker (1993, p.436) lists Hölker's (1991, p.78-79) four basic features that characterise discourse markers (or pragmatic markers as he calls them): (1) they do not affect the truth conditions of an utterance; (2) they do not add anything to the propositional content of an utterance; (3) they are related to the speech situation and not to the situation talked about; and (4) they have an emotive, expressive function rather than a referential, denotative, or cognitive function.

2.2 Functions of discourse markers

Kind of and *sort of* have the function of a hedge, according to Hübler (1983), i.e. they modify what is being said by reducing its force.

> 7. He was nicer when he was young but *kind of* now, he's **kind of** old…(COLT, B132901)
> 8. He's gone home, **sort of**. (COLT, B132501)

Hübler (1983) has written a book-length study about *Understatements and hedges in English.* The term hedge was introduced by G. Lakoff, to refer to words whose job it is "to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (1973). According to Hübler (1983, p.1) the word understatement has the same meaning as a hedge:

> "The word understatement, which for the moment will be used as an expression to embrace so-called hedges as well, is a metalinguistic term collecting certain verbal expressions into one class and is thus concerned with a linguistic pattern of behaviour. Anyone progressing beyond the rudiments of learning English, certainly in Germany, soon finds that understatements are said to be typically English". (Hübler 1983, p.1)

According to Stenström (1994), discourse markers are especially common when a speaker expresses an opinion or attitude to something or somebody. This example is taken from Stenström (1994, p.128).

> A: he was **sort of** incredibly mixed up **sort of**

In this example, *sort of* has the function of mitigating *incredibly mixed up,* which means that *sort of* reduces the force of the adverbial.

In informal style there are several possible constructions of *kind of* and *sort of:*

This must be……..a sort of joke

……. sort of a joke (informal)

…….a sort of a joke (more informal)

……..a joke, sort of (most informal)

(Quirk et al., 1985, p. 451)

According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 446) *kind of* and *sort of* are used as downtoners for adjectives and adverbs in informal speech. Downtoners "have a generally lowering effect on the force of the verb or predication and many of them apply a scale to gradable verbs", (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 597). Some speakers also use *kind of* and *sort of* as approximators with nongradable verbs:

He sort of smiled at us. (You could almost say he smiled at us)
He kind of grunted. (You could almost say he grunted) (Quirk et al. 1985, p. 599)

According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 597), approximators "serve to express an approximation to the force of the verb, while indicating that the verb concerned expresses more than is relevant". *Kind of* and *sort of* can also have the function of compromisers, which "have only a slight lowering effect and tend, as with approximators, to call in question the appropriateness of the verb concerned" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 597).

Aijmer's (1984) investigation of *kind of* and *sort of* is based on a selection of texts with informal conversation from the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English (Svartvik & Quirk, 1980). The speakers are mainly educated middle-class adults. Most of the texts were recorded in the 70s. Her study deals mainly with *sort of*, but she claims that *kind of* and *sort of* are used without any difference in meaning or function. According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 599) *kind of* is used more frequently in American English than in British English. I will present a number of different functions of *kind of* and *sort of*, which Aijmer (1984) has found in her investigation. Before a speaker chooses how he/she is going to introduce a subject, he/she makes a decision of what is needed for the listener to work out what he/she refers to. This means that the speaker takes into account shared background knowledge and previous context in choosing what to say. According to Aijmer (1984), the most important function of

sort of is to make it easier for the listener to pick out the specific referent the speaker has in mind if the linguistic expression is not exact. *Sort of* often collocates with other discourse markers, such as *like*, *you know*, *more or less* and *rather*. This indicates that *kind of* and *sort of* are used with a resembling function.

> but I've always believed in having a ***sort of*** *you know* 105…evenings for doing one's hobbies
>
> (Aijmer, 1984, p. 122)

Both *sort of* and *you know* communicate that the speaker believes that the listener can work out what he refers to on the basis of shared background knowledge.

Andersen (1998) has analysed the pragmatic marker *like* within a relevance-theoretical framework, where *like* is an "explicit signal of loose language, that is, a signal of a discrepancy between an utterance and the thought it represents" (Andersen, 1998, p.167). *Like* is said to be comparable to *sort of*, but according to Andersen (1998, p.164) there is "a feature which *like* does not share with the otherwise comparable pragmatic marker *sort of*":

> Peter: You were *sort of* drunk last night weren't you?
> Mary: I wasn't *sort of* drunk I was drunk.
> Peter: You were *like* drunk last night weren't you?
> Mary: * I wasn't *like drunk* I was drunk   (Andersen 1998, p. 164)

According to Andersen (1998, p.164) *like* cannot be metalinguistically negated, as shown in the examples. Andersen (1998) claims that the pragmatic marker like is particularly interesting, because of its flexibility. Like also has a high frequency in certain English varieties. Like can have many different functions, for example, indicating approximation, suggesting an alternative and marking reported speech. Andersen claims that even though like is so versatile, relevance theory can give a simple account of the marker. According to Andersen (1998, p.168) "like contributes to the relevance of utterances by indicating that the speaker aims at reducing processing effort and optimising relevance by giving a loose interpretation of the thought".

In Aijmer's study (1984), *sort of* is often followed by a noun. The most frequent one is *thing*. When a speaker uses *the sort of thing*, he/she can avoid being explicit and still give a clear idea of what he/she means. *Sort of* is frequently followed by verbs like *leap, sit, look, mutter, feel* and *try*. It indicates that the verb is close to, resembles or approximates what we want to say.

and he ***sort of*** looked at me and grasped (Aijmer, 1984, p.123)

Aijmer (1984, p.123) claims that "the function of *sort of* could be paraphrased as: I am not good at making my point. What I say is only approximate. You can probably reconstruct what I mean from this description however".

Kind of and *sort of* can also function as a "softener" (Aijmer, 1984). They soften a formulation which is too strong or categorical, as shown in this example:

can't we ***sort of*** leave Belgium and Luxembourg and the south of France to another year
(Aijmer, 1984, p.125)

Aijmer (2002, p.209) claims that "sort of has softening and polite functions; it contributes to the informality of conversation and creates a congenial atmosphere".

According to Aijmer (1984) *kind of* and *sort of* can also be used to signify that the speaker wants a conversation in which personal experiences, feelings or attitudes are more important than facts and exact descriptions. When a speaker does not want to seem as too technical or as an expert, *kind of* and *sort of* are used. Discourse markers also have a social function. They signal that the speaker wants the situation to be informal and relaxed. *Kind of* and *sort of* make it possible for the speaker to use an expression that does not belong to his/her own vocabulary. In the following example the speaker uses *sort of* before he utters an expression in French:

I mean did she ***sort of*** live en FAMILLE. (Aijmer, 1984, p.124)

By using *sort of* he signals that the words are not his own. In Aijmer's study (1984), the function of s*ort of* can be described as a filler. It is an element in the sentence with the function "to fill the silence and maintain the speaker's right to speak" (1984, p.126). During the time *kind of* and *sort of* are uttered the speaker tries to find the correct formulation. It appears from Aijmer's study that *kind of* and *sort of* are important in spoken interaction. They make the conversation more pleasant and relaxed. Aijmer has discussed the use of *kind of* and *sort of* in general terms and her data is taken from adults thirty years ago.

According to Jucker (1993, p.435), the main function of discourse markers in a relevance-theoretical framework is to serve as signposts "which constrains the interpretation process and the concomitant background selection". In his study, the discourse marker *well*

has the function of a face-threat mitigator, which "indicates a problem on the interpersonal level. Either the face of the speaker or the face of the hearer is threatened" (p. 444), as shown in these examples:

> A: can I just see them
> B: um *well* I'm not allowed to to do that
> A: what about coming here on the way or or doesn't that give you enough time
> B: *well* no I'm supervising here
>
> (Jucker, 1993, p. 444)

Another function of the discourse marker *well,* which Jucker (1993) has presented, is as a delay device, where the discourse marker is used when the speaker is searching for the right word to say or as a "delaying tactic" (p. 447), as shown in this example:

> A: …*well* never mind. It's not important.
> B: *Well,* it is important.
>
> (Jucker, 1993, p.448)

2.3 Context in Relevance theory

Relevance theory is a theory of communication based on cognitive principles, in other words what is going on in our minds when we speak. To say "that an utterance is relevant amounts to saying that it achieves some kind of contextual effects" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p.108). According to Jucker (1993, p. 438), there are "three aspects of relevance theory that are particularly important if we want to understand how the notion of context is used in relevance theory. First, every utterance comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance; second, the relevant context is established as part of the utterance interpretation, and third, discourse coherence is the outcome of negotiating backgrounds".

To begin with, "every act of communication comes with a guarantee of its own optimal relevance" (Jucker, 1993, p.438), which means that every speaker, whenever an utterance is made, claims that it will be worth processing what is being said. A speaker has always the intention to make an utterance as clear as possible in order for the listener to use a minimal effort in processing. An utterance will be more relevant the more information a listener can get out of it and if an individual needs a high level of processing effort to understand the utterance it will be less relevant.

The relationship between the amount of information and the processing effort of a certain utterance is bound to the situation. For example, when students attend lectures they are already prepared to put in a certain amount of processing effort. In addition, they

look forward to getting back a great deal of information, information that is connected in an interesting way with their specific subject matter. On the other hand, when students go to a party participating in small talk, they do not expect to receive a lot of information from the conversations and they are not prepared to put in a great deal of processing effort.

To take part in communication is the same thing as to tell the listener that what is being said is worth processing. However, utterances do not always include enough interesting information and they can be too difficult to understand. Nevertheless, the most boring person intends to be relevant.

Secondly, "the relevant context is established as part of the utterance interpretation" (Jucker, 1993, p.438), which means that "utterances are always processed on the background of a relevant context consisting of the linguistic context and the assumed background assumptions of the addressee" (Jucker, 1993, p.439).

The drill was boring. (Jucker, 1993, p.439)

Looking at this example, the sentence is unclear. It could relate to a machine boring a hole or to a language lesson where certain words have to be learnt. If we have the specific context it is not a problem, as shown in the following example:

We started the new lesson yesterday. The text was interesting but the drill was boring. (Jucker, 1993, p. 439)

The vagueness of this example is not explained by the linguistic context, but by our background knowledge of what lessons can be like. People participating in conversations do not have access to each other's knowledge or facts that are known to the speaker or to the listener. However, their cognitive environment is mutual, which means that each speaker can guess what facts are known by the listener. These guesses also depends on the relationship between the speaker and the listener, for example close friends know more about each other compared to people who have never met before.

Thirdly, "discourse coherence is the outcome of negotiating relevant backgrounds" (Jucker, 1993, p. 438), which means that throughout a conversation our common cognitive environment is continuously being checked against our common knowledge of the world. For each utterance the previous utterance is important because it is against the common cognitive environment that decides how the following utterance will be understood, as shown in these examples:

> The road was icy. She slipped.
> She slipped. The road was icy.
> (Jucker, 1993, p.440)

"The first utterance sets up a context which yields relevant information for the interpretation of the second. In the second utterance is a result of the former, in the second it is an explanation" (Jucker, 1993, p. 440). When listeners see an utterance as relevant in the context that is presented in the previous utterance, then they will recognize the discourse as coherent, i.e. the same as connected to each other. I will present this analysis of *sort of* and *kind of* within the framework of relevance theory, and in doing so I am going to study how they contribute to the relevance of an utterance.

3. Design of the present study

In this section, I will present the design of the present study. In 3.1, I will present the data that is used in this study. In 3.2, I will introduce the model of analysis that was used. The aim of this study is to analyse how the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* are used by the teenagers in the corpus COLT. My specific research question is: In what functions do the teenagers use the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* in the COLT corpus?

3.1 Corpus Data

The data used for the present study come from the Bergen Corpus of London teenage language (COLT), a 500 000 word corpus of spontaneous teenage conversation, recorded in London in 1993. The corpus represents how teenage language was used in this specific period of time. According to COLT User's manual, the purpose for compiling the corpus was due to the fact that the members of the linguistic department at the University of Bergen realised that teenage language was mainly unexplored and therefore collected a large corpus of teenage talk available for research worldwide. It was natural for the researchers from Bergen to choose teenage talk from London, because it is one of the world's most central and trendiest cities and it was assumed that its teenage vernacular must have an impact on the language of teenagers far from London's boundaries.

The conversations were recorded by 31 students, provided with a Sony Walkman, a microphone and a log book. They were also instructed to write down information about the other speakers and the surroundings where the conversations took place. Preferably,

the co-speakers were not supposed to be aware of the recording. The boys and girls were between 13 and 17 years old from five different schools located in five various school boroughs. The school boroughs where the students come from are the Inner London boroughs Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Camden, the Outer London borough Barnet, and Hertfordshire, represented by a private boarding school. There are great differences between the various boroughs in London concerning social standards.

The students were asked to fill in a personal data sheet and three pieces of information from that sheet were used as indicators of social class; residential area, parents' occupation and if the parents were unemployed. They were divided into three social groups, called high, middle and low.

There are five different types of display systems that are available for searching the corpus: Key Words In Context (KWIC), Variable Context Display, Distribution, Normalised Distribution and Word List. For more information on Colt see: http://www.hd.uib.no/colt/.

3.2 Model of analysis

When searching for the examples in COLT, the Variable Context Display was used. *Kind of* and *sort of* were written in the query form and the results were given in a context with three sentences before and three sentences after the discourse markers. All the examples where *kind of* and *sort of* were in a partitive construction with the same meaning as "a type of" as in "a delicious sort of bread" and "a new kind of computer" (Quirk et al., 1985 p. 249) were excluded from the study. All the instances where *kind of* and *sort of* were used as discourse markers were read through while having the functions in mind that different researchers had found in their studies, and four main functions of *kind of* and *sort of* were found: (1) as a face-threat mitigator; (2) as a delay device; (3) as a compromiser; and (4) as a softener. The function as face-threat mitigator was found in Jucker's (1993) study about the discourse marker *well* investigated from a relevance-theoretical perspective. "As a face-threat mitigator, *well* indicates a problem on the interpersonal level. Either the face of the speaker or the face of the hearer is threatened" (Jucker, 1993, p. 444) as shown in the following example:

A: they must worry about you though Eddie, don't they, your Mum and Dad, when you're doing all these jumps
B: er **well** they always come to all the shows

(Jucker, 1993, p. 444)

The second function as a delay device was also found in Jucker's (1993) study where the discourse marker *well* could be used "as a delaying tactic" (p.447) as shown in the following example:

> B: on the floor
> A: on, on….***well*** on…..you know on…..hatchway there
> (Jucker, 1993, p. 447)

In Jucker's (1993) analysis there were two more functions of *well,* namely as a frame and as a marker of insufficiency, but these were not to be found in my data. The third function as a compromiser was found in Quirk et al. (1985, p. 597), "compromisers have only a slight lowering effect and tend, as with approximators, to call in question the appropriateness of the verb concerned", as shown in these examples:

> I ***kind of*** like him. (informal, esp AmE)
> As he was walking along, he ***sort of*** stumbled and seemed ill. (informal)
> (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 598)

Finally, the fourth function as a softener was found in Aijmer's (1984) study, where "in many cases the primary function of *sort of* is that of a softener" (1984, p.125). For example, *sort of* can soften an utterance which is too strong or categorical, as shown in this example:

> well, it is just ***sort of*** eighteen minutes to is it…
> (Aijmer, 1984, p.125)

Jucker (1993) shows that the functions of *well* (as a face-threat mitigator, a frame, a delay device or a marker of insufficiency) can be placed under a single meaning if a relevance-theoretical approach is chosen. The same model of analysis was used in this study where four main functions of *kind of* and *sort of* were found. It was also in the scope of this study to show that all examples of *kind of* and *sort of* in the data could be included under a single meaning from a relevance-theoretical perspective.

4. Results

In this section the results of this study will be presented. Four main functions of *kind of* and *sort of* were found in the data, i.e. 1) as a face-threat mitigator, 2) as a delay device, 3) as a

compromiser, and 4) as a softener. The discourse marker *sort of* was more frequently used (162 occurrences), compared to the discourse marker *kind of* (55 occurrences). In Table 1, we see the distribution of the four functions in the data. The functions that were most frequently used for *sort of* were as a face-threat mitigator and as a delay device and the functions that were the least frequently used were as a compromiser and a softener. The most frequently used functions for *kind of* were as a face-threat mitigator and as a compromiser and the least frequently used functions were as a delay device and as a softener.

Table 1: Functions of *kind of* and *sort of*

_____

	sort of	*kind of*
Face-threat mitigator	60	19
Delay device	52	9
Compromiser	33	19
Softener	17	8
Total	162	55

4.1 Face-threat mitigator

Human communication can sometimes be a threat to a person's face. In this function the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* show a problem on the interpersonal level. In Jucker's (1993) study, the discourse marker *well* has the function of a face-threat mitigator, which was also found in my data with *kind of* and *sort of*. Either the face of the speaker or the face of the hearer is threatened. The term face can be explained in this way: "face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself"(Hübler, 1983, p.156). Every speaker is concerned with his/her own face. A speaker's face cannot be maintained by him/her alone, it requires the support of the hearer. Thus, everyone who participates in social interaction must both look after his/her own face and also take care of the face of the others. The function of *kind of* and *sort of* as a face-threat mititgator in the data,

is displayed in examples 9 to 12. In example 9, *sort of* mitigates the word *fancies*, because it could be embarrassing to say it straight, so the speaker chooses to be vague and search for common ground.

> 9. A: oh, leave her. I've never really been, like, single single cos I'm always sort of like, not actually going out with somebody but I'm always, I've always got someone who ***sort of*** fancies me or I'm flirting with. Do you know what I mean, like? Someone like James for, how long did that go on for, for about a month, when he couldn't he stop talking about me all the time it was sort of like, you know, I like this, you know what I mean, he was talking
> B: No, I, I
> A: Cos that was what … So cruel ≤unclear≥ in front of   (COLT B132901)

In example 10, *sort of* mitigates the words *hang out*, which shows that there is a problem on the interpersonal level.

> 10. A: Oh no ≤unclear≥ ever since you started hanging out with Alan and Patrick and you've become like Alan and Patrick
> B: ≤unclear≥
> A: I saw ≤unclear≥ yesterday. No, no like you, you ***sort of*** hang out with Patrick and Alan yeah for one night and you came back yeah and you ≤unclear≥ patronising ≤unclear≥ ever met.
> B: ≤unclear≥
> A: And you weren't you see you actually used to be interested when you were talking but these days ≤unclear≥ and sit and look like a complete miserable bastard like Patrick does. (COLT B133704)

In example 11, the speaker protects the hearer's face by using *kind of* and the speaker is at the same time searching for common ground.

> 11. A: Yeah, I know, I know what happened. Oh right, yeah because it goes on …. It goes this, erm Whatever is temp= phone call is temporarily engaged. And then and then okay it rang back and I thought it must be Kim because it was temporarily engaged, and then, it was my sister's godfather … and I was ≤unclear≥ … well did you did you press anything? … I don't think so. Yeah, anyway yeah, he still wants to be friends with you and all the rest of it … oh I do= you know Paul he'll change his mind tomorrow … I mean you have, ***kind of*** changed your mind… haven't you? … I mean you've changed it, you know well you dumped him for Danny… and everything…..well just don't worry about it   (COLT B140606)

In example 12, *kind of* is used to mitigate the force of the verb, in order to protect the hearer's face.

> 12. A: Yeah but she won't she won't back down from her, her side of it.
> B: It's not like she's really ***kind of*** dominated your life ≤unclear≥ it's just that, she's so, not stupid, it's just, you know ≤unclear≥, it's incredible.   (COLT B142802)

4.2 Delay device

Another function of the discourse markers*, kind of* and *sort of* which Jucker (1993) has presented, is as a delay device, where the discourse marker is used when the speaker is searching for the right word to say or as a "delaying tactic". *Kind of* and *sort of* can be used as a postponing or delaying tactic while the speaker thinks of the right word to say. To be able to

find the right word appropriate to the thought going on in the mind, the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* have the function of postponing the right thing to say. In this sense, *kind of* and *sort of* do not give any meaning to the subject matter, but they have a cognitive effect on the speech situation. They play a relevant role, in so far that it gives the listener a hint of what is coming and might make the listener more interested in what is being said. At the same time, the speaker keeps his/her right to speak. If there would just be a quiet pause, it is easier to be interrupted. The function of *kind of* and *sort of* as a delay device in the data, is displayed in examples 13 to 16. In example 13, the speaker is searching for the right word.

13. A: God lunch goes fuck so bloody quick….Thought you had some strange hard arse then Danny. Your face is so ***sort of*** erm… amazing.
(COLTB133701)

In example 14, the speaker utters *sort of* when searching for the correct word.

14. A: but erm what, what do I play? I'm the drummer … where do we usually play erm … ***sort of*** Finsbury Park (COLT B133906)

In example 15, *kind of* is used, because the speaker is unsure of how to describe the book.

15. A: And then we saw about twenty minutes of the le= the American film
B: Pretty good.You heard about that Lord of the Flies. It's like this ***kind of,*** it's a group of boys isn't it, English boys who get …
A: English boys from various schools who are going across… (COLTB132408)

In example 16, the speaker searches for the right word.

16. A: Sir, Sir, …please could you come here.
B: I know, I know, I know, ≤unclear≥ and you go, and you're, and you're ***kind of*** up, up ≤unclear≥
A: No Owen, that's how it doesn't come out, that's what's happened to you. (COLT B137104)

4.3 Compromiser

According to Quirk et al (1985, p. 597) "compromisers have only a slight lowering effect on the force of the verb and tend to call in question the appropriateness of the verb concerned". The function of *kind of* and *sort of* as compromisers in the data, is displayed in examples 17 to 20. In example 17, *sort of* was found to only have a slight lowering effect of the verb.

17 . A: Yeah, can't remember the ≤unclear≥ no more
B: I'm sorry, at start, at the beginning, right, that clock, I was told Lisa's sad, but after a while it ***sort of*** worked, but apart from, you know, it did look, erm yeh we= what's his name, did look like Wayne, but the other guy did not look like us, anything like..
A: ≤unclear≥ but Alex's friend right?

B: yeah…   (COLT B132504)

In example 18, the speaker uses *sort of* as a compromiser, so that the verb does not have to be exact.

  18. A: Ideally, when you get a pair of shoes you should be able to put them on and do that,
      B: Yeah
      A: with your feet. You don't have to **sort of** spread them out like that you should either leave your toes slightly sideways.
      B: Toes
      A: cos if you, they say the best time to buy a pair of shoes is at night when your sh= when your feet are really swollen.
                                                                      (COLT B134803)

In example 19, the speaker uses *kind of* to explain that he is not really reading his book.

  19. A: Mr. ….. in the French test. Come and sit next to me….laugh…Hang on.
      B: Come and sit next to me.
      C: It is enough Alison.
      A: I like where I sit. I, I just **kind of** read my book, and copied some of the things out of ≤unclear≥.
      B: yeah. Who's..≤unclear ≥
      A: How, how do you say would you like some cake?   (COLTB136701)

In example 20, *kind of* is used to compromise the effect of the verb.

  20. A: Jock are you gonna get anything for this Saturday, next Saturday?
      B: Dunno. It **kind of** depends who's erm, who's offering.
      A: Look face it, Jules
      B: What?
      A: if you got caught it would wreck your, probably wreck you last week of term maybe a bit of the Christmas holiday depending on what your parents do, it's not really   (COLTB141905)

4.4 Softener

Sort of and *kind of* can also have the function of a "softener" (Aijmer, 1984, p.125). In other words, they soften a formulation which is too strong or categorical. Aijmer (2002, p.209) claims that "sort of has softening and polite functions; it contributes to the informality of conversation and creates a congenial atmosphere". The function of *kind of* and *sort of* as a softener in the data is displayed in examples 21 to 24. In example 21, *sort of* is used to soften the word *thin*, because it seems to be too strong.

  21. A: Amazing
      B: **sort of** thin. ≤laugh≥
      A: ≤unclear≥
      B: You need treating, pull some weight. Oh God, come on are we going then? Come on Bon bum Oops.
                                                                      (COLT B133701)

In example 22, *sort of* is used to soften the word *detest*, which seems to be too strong.

22. A: I mean I dunno if I like her you know.
    B: I do like her, but at least she's got erm she's got two or three bad points about her which are really bad, that's what I think….But I don't completely ***sort of*** detest her or anything…..
    (COLT B133701)

In example 23, *kind of* softens the word *threatening*, because it seems to be too strong.

23. A: And listen, he goes, yeah, I've got nude men hanging up in my shower, he goes, do you wanna come? That was what he said, he said they're hanging up in my shower, do you wanna come and see them? Listen, I goes, yeah, anytime. Cos Shelley was there…… And Shelley was a joke, man. She goes in there, she's sitting looking at him … like that, she just stares at …laughing..him. Just to make sure, you know what I mean? When anyone's like that with me or with one of my friends she just sits there looking at you because, cos she's big, she's ***kind of*** threatening sometimes, you know what I mean? She's sitting there with a fag hanging out her mouth. She just sits there staring at him saying you make any funny moves you'll see what you get. Oh Shelley's ≤unclear≥ She's erm, she's on a diet.
    B: Oh really?
    A: She's lost about three stone. It's good. I mean, you probably wouldn't see it but I can see it, she's losing it.
    (COLT B132707)

In example 24, the speaker uses *kind of* to soften the word *old*, which could be seen as too categorical.

24. A: He's not exactly
    B: He was nicer when he was young but kind of now, he's ***kind of*** old, do you know what I mean.
    A: ≤unclear≥
    B: Exactly. There's no decent men in it and there's no nudity of men in it, even when he's in it all You got to see of him was waist-high, you got to see a clips of his bum. It was such a se= it was, it's, the only bit that was worth be= seeing was the beginning bit when..
    (COLT B132901)

5. Discussion

It appears that *kind of* and *sort of* play an important part in teenage conversation. They make the dialogue smooth. Without them the conversation would be acceptable, but it would be heard as unnatural, awkward and even unfriendly (Aijmer, 1984, p.127). For the speaker, it would be difficult or even impossible to give a hint to the listener without the use of the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of,* of how the discourse should be processed, and how to comprehend the shared background knowledge. Discourse markers leave room for discussions to be vague, and for the speaker to avoid precision and the commitment associated with it. As most teenagers have not fully developed their own identity, it becomes important to them to share a common code with their peers, and to have a rough agreement about the meaning of the code.

The most frequently used function found in the data was as a face-threat mitigator. According to Jucker (1993, p.435), the main function of discourse markers in a

relevance-theoretical framework is to serve as signposts "which constrains the interpretation process and the concomitant background selection". In his study, the discourse marker *well* has the function of a face-threat mitigator, which "indicates a problem on the interpersonal level. Either the face of the speaker or the face of the hearer is threatened" (p. 444). This was also found in my data.

Another function of the discourse marker *well,* which Jucker (1993) has presented, is as a delay device. The discourse marker is used when the speaker is searching for the right word to say or as a "delaying tactic" (p. 447). This function was also found in the data.

According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 597) "compromisers have only a slight lowering effect on the force of the verb and tend to call in question the appropriateness of the verb concerned". I found examples in the data where the discourse markers only had a slight lowering effect on the verb.

Sort of and *kind of* can also have the function of a "softener" (Aijmer, 1984, p.125). In other words they soften a formulation which is too strong or categorical. This function was also found in the data.

Since discourse markers are typically multifunctional, a relevance-theoretical perspective was added to this paper. All the examples from the data could be explained from a relevance-theoretical view. Discourse markers contribute to the relevance of an utterance in so far that they make the conversation more relaxed and they work as warning signals for listeners, to make it easier for the hearer to pick out the specific referent the speaker has in mind. A speaker makes an utterance in order to claim that it will be worth processing. "The more information an individual can get out of an utterance the more relevant it will be; and the higher the processing effort needed the smaller the relevance" (Jucker, 1993, p. 438). By using *kind of* and *sort of* speakers show that the relevant background of an utterance needs to be renegotiated.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to see in what functions *kind of* and *sort of* are used in teenage conversation in the COLT corpus. Four main functions were found in the data. The first function of *kind of* and *sort of* was as a face-threat mitigator, where the discourse markers show a problem on the interpersonal level. Every speaker and listener taking part in conversations is concerned with their face and they also have to take care of the face of

others, that is why *kind of* and *sort of* were used as signposts to reduce the threat to a person's face. The second function of *kind of* and *sort of* was as a delay device, where the discourse markers were used when the speaker was searching for the right word appropriate to the situation and the speaker needed time to think about a new word. The third function of *kind of* and *sort of* was as a compromiser, where the discourse markers have a slight lowering effect on the verb, where the chosen verb might not be the most relevant for the situation. Finally, the fourth function of *kind of* and *sort of* was as a softener, where the discourse markers soften words that seem too strong or categorical. The functions that were most frequently used for *sort of* were as a face-threat mitigator and as a delay device and the functions that were the least frequently used were as a compromiser and a softener. The most frequently used functions for *kind of* were as a face-threat mitigator and a compromiser and the least frequently used functions were as a delay device and a softener.

Kind of and *sort of* can be phonologically reduced, which means that *kind of* has become *kinda* and *sort of* has become *sorta*. These two forms were not searched in the corpus and this could be a limitation for this study, because there might be more examples of these words in the corpus. It was not in the scope of this study to look at the syntactic features of *kind of* and *sort of*, but it could be an idea for future research.

My data is based on teenage conversations taken from the corpus COLT, recorded in London in 1993. It would also be interesting to investigate the discourse markers *kind of* and *sort of* in another corpus, with adult recordings, somewhere else in the English speaking world, to see how they are used there.

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