

The Use of *kind of/Sort of* as a Parenthetical

WANG Haixia^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor. School of English Language, Literature and Culture, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Kind of/sort of as a parenthetical is variously used in present-day English. It may serve the function of hedging, appealing to common ground, mitigating assertive force or filling a pause. Most of the functions of the syntactically flexible *kind of/sort of* can be taken as extensions from the core meaning of metalinguistic hedge as a result of further grammaticalization and the specific interpretation of the various functions is negotiated by the context.

Key words: *Kind of/sort of*; Parenthetical; Functions; Core meaning; Extension

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INTRODUCTION

Kind of/sort of occurs frequently and is variously used in present-day English. There are a lot of systematic studies of *kind of/sort of* under a wide range of different headings, such as “compromiser” (James 1983, Quirk et al. 1985), “discourse particle” (Aijmer, 1984 & 2002), “epistemic modal form” (Coates, 1987, 2003), “hedge” (Lakoff, 1972; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kay, 1997), “pragmatic particle” (Holmes, 1988), “softener” (Crystal & Davy, 1975), etc. Definitely, there are different opinions on the functions of *kind of/sort of*, which is reflected from the different labels in previous studies, and the diversity in the discussion about the functions which *kind of/sort of* is said to fulfill is determined by the wide range of linguistic

approaches that have been employed for their study. While *sort of* as a “pragmatic particle” in Holmes (1988) is investigated from a pragmatic perspective, for instance, *kind of/sort of* as a “contextualization cue” in Fetzer (2009) is analyzed from an interactional sociolinguistic perspective. In fact, it is difficult to decide how many different functions the syntactically flexible *kind of/sort of* may have, since there is no definite upper limit to the number of possible distinctions we can recognize (Carlson, 1984, p.34).

This article draws on the previous studies on the functions of *kind of/sort of*, and special emphasis is laid on the functional extension, which is put forward tentatively to incorporate the different uses of *kind of/sort of* as a parenthetical. “Parenthetical” is chosen as a suitable and convenient term for *kind of/sort of* here, since it seems to have the least restricted range of application.

All the examples examined in this study are taken from a selection of texts representing contemporary, semiformal or informal spoken American English from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Notably, in the description of the functions of *kind of/sort of* as a parenthetical below, the instances where the item in question is used as a noun phrase meaning *a type of* or a nominal qualifier have been excluded.

1. FUNCTIONS OF KIND OF/SORT OF AS A PARENTHETICAL

The syntactically flexible *kind of/sort of* has a variety of functions in communication, which will be discussed in detail below.

1.1 Hedging

Kind of/sort of may act as a metalinguistic hedge, conveying the speaker’s comments on the form or style of his/her expression and indicates how it should be understood.

Specifically, *kind of/sort of* may serve as a lexical imprecision or lexical gap signal, indicating that the lexical term following it is not expressed as precisely as the speaker would like. It is expressed at a fuzzy level since the speaker has not got the exact words needed on a particular topic. “The speaker is being approximate perforce due to lack of vocabulary or performance pressures” (Holmes, 1988, p.95). For Coates (1987, p.119), who also refers to this function, *kind of/sort of* in some cases “encodes the speaker’s lack of confidence in the precision of the choice of the following word or phrase.”

As shown in example (1), talking about the coach of many young stars of track and field, the speaker chooses the vague *an old-school disciplinarian-type coach* rather than a more precise expression. *Kind of* here can be paraphrased as *you might call*.

(1) **DANA PREIST:** ...Her coach is a woman by the name of Pat Connelly, who coached Evelyn Ashford to a Gold Medal in 1984. Kind of an old-school disciplinarian-type coach.

The same characteristics can be observed in the following example.

(2) **COURIC:** Well, it was sort of my fault because I asked this, sort of, open-ended philosophical question at the very end about your generosity. ...

Kind of/sort of is sometimes employed to signal the following expression is not part of the speaker’s own colloquial vocabulary. The words or phrases following the item concerned may be “technical, rare, foreign, formal, vulgar, idiomatic, etc.” (Aijmer, 1984, p.124). *Kind of/sort of* in this case actually serves as a marker of a shift of style, which “enables the speaker to be creative, to use words in an innovative and humorous way, to borrow phrases belonging to library or more formal style and to use a slangy turn of speech” (Aijmer, 2002, p.195). Meanwhile, *kind of/sort of* functions as an appeal to the addressee for his/her tolerance when the shift of style occurs.

In (3) *ass* does not belong to the speaker’s normal vocabulary or is not fitted to the situation. *Sort of* and *kind of* are employed to function as a metalinguistic apology for the funny, if not inappropriate term.

(3) **Mr. PAUL OPITZ:**...The two psychics got into a sort of psychic duel, you know? They were in a -- so who could come up with a wild, most concrete predictions, and they concentrated so hard. And we had sort of, kind of, this half ass medical background for it, ...

The metalinguistic meaning of *kind of/sort of* is also reflected in the instances where it functions as a self-revision signal. The speaker’s awareness of the need for more precision or some clarification of the previous utterance leads to his more specific or clarifying expression. In example (4), the speaker talks about the side effect of the medication. He calls the vivid and often frightening dreams after taking the medicine nightmare but corrects it to hallucination kind of dreams with *kind of*.

(4) AGUEDA PENYA (voice-over): Ryann Rathbone

says almost immediately, they started having vivid, often frightening dreams, a known side effect of the medication.

AGUEDA PENYA: Nightmare kind of, hallucination kind of dreams where you don’t know if it’s real or not...

1.2 Establishing Common Ground

Similar to other parentheticals such as *you know* and *I mean*, *kind of/sort of* can function as an informality marker and an intimacy signal, “reducing formality, signaling solidarity and emphasizing the shared experience of the participants” (Holmes, 1988, p.100). The employment of *kind of/sort of* indicates the speaker’s indeterminacy and his/her avoidance of precision or explicitness, which conveys the message “we share something” (James, 1983, p.202). In other words, it indicates an assumed common ground and a basic likeness between the speaker and the addressee, which is to be drawn on extensively in the interaction.

Kind of/sort of here functions as a vehicle of positive politeness because it minimizes the potentiality of threatening the speaker’s positive face. Indicating the participants’ similarity and appealing to their shared knowledge, the item concerned makes it more likely for the speaker to get some recognition or positive or sympathetic response from the addressee.

As illustrated in (5), the speaker employs several *kind of* and *sort of* while telling about what he wore. It clearly signals the speaker’s relying on a shared knowledge and his appealing to the audience’s cooperation in imagining what he had on.

(5) **Dr. JOSHUA FURMAN:**... Not very much; a variety of very slinky things. I wore--sort of the thing that everyone saw and sort of balked at was kind of like little--if you imagine little trousers that are cut off at the knee and then kind of big boots and then that was the--that was basically it. And then kind of--I sort of--it was like, you know, suspenders that men wear on their trousers to hold them up; kind of a selection of those in--kind of around my crotch and up my back and around my tummy--no, around my chest.

The same characteristics are found in (6). Although the comments ended with *kind of* on Halle Berry are incomplete and sound vague, there is no difficulty for the addressee interpreting what is implied and continuing the conversation. *Kind of* functions to appeal to a commonly shared knowledge.

(6) **JIM WOOTEN:** Tough to work with Halle Berry when you’re supposed to find her attractive and she’s kind of, “Nah”, you know? Rev.

HYMERS: Halle Berry is beautiful. She is, take your breath away beautiful.

1.3 Attenuating Assertive Force

The scope of *kind of/sort of* in some of its uses “appears to extend beyond a particular word to a whole proposition” (Holmes, 1998, p.100). In such occasions, it is not a signal of imprecision or inappropriateness, but rather a marker

employed to weaken the assertive force of an utterance. It is used to convey either positive or negative politeness, or in some occasions both.

As shown in (7), the speaker employs *sort of* to reduce the threat to the hearer's positive face when he conveys his disagreement in the conversation.

(7) **MICHAELA WATKINS**: Man, you know, my sister and I sort of disagree on this a little bit because she feels like, she's a very smart cookie, but she says, you know,...

In (8), Harold Ramis makes comments on the original script as *very ambitious and very abstract and kind of weird* while talking about his new movie and about his work in general. *Kind of* is employed to decrease the explicitness of the lexical head *weird* and hence attenuate the force of the utterance, which enables him to avoid sounding direct and bold. His comments appear reasonable because of the use of *kind of*, which meanwhile appeals to the addressee's sympathy. Put differently, *kind of* in this example conveys both negative and positive politeness.

(8) **SEN. JOHN MCCAIN(R)**: ... Danny's script was very ambitious and very abstract and kind of weird compared to the movie that got made.

1.4 Filling a Pause

Kind of/sort of can function as a hesitation filler when planning difficulty is involved.

In (9) the speaker starts his cut-off sentence again with a preceding *sort of* and there are not any syntactic or lexical changes.

(9) **DUGAN**: That's really a difficult question. It's really a very American form of music. It's sort of, it's influenced from a lot of different angles from straight pop music. There's influences of jazz. ...

The speaker may switch to an alternative syntactic structure when he/she resumes talk at the point where *kind of /sort of* occurs with a pause. The third *sort of* in (5) above is a typical example. Clearly, the search for the appropriate expression defeats the speaker to the extent that he abandons the original syntactic structure. Observe another example.

(10) #...Gerry was the same. You know, he's kind of, I'm not used to seeing Gerry obviously that upset...

Kind of in (11) functions as a discourse link connecting syntactically and sometimes even thematically unrelated structures.

(11) **5:7118**: We're all working together to get you out. Hang in there, buddy, you know, keep breathing for me. We had the backhoe guy dig us 20 feet down, figuring we'd be well enough underneath him. And then we took this spade and kind of--I just kind of slowly turned it...

In (12), *kind of* occurs where the speaker cuts off her utterance without resuming it although she intends to do so. With *kind of*, the speaker indicates that there is something in her mind but she does not know how to present it.

(12) **WATSON**: I guess I just like--now I feel so much

more, like, confident in myself and sort of my abilities as an actress, whereas back then I just kind of was like in awe by the whole thing. Every day on set I was like am I doing the right thing? Is this OK? Like I was just kind of--I don't know. I--

2. THE CORE FUNCTION OF *KIND OF/SORT OF* AND ITS EXTENSION

As stated earlier, it is difficult to decide how many different functions *kind of/sort of* may have. Each parenthetical, however, may have a core meaning. The various functions relate to the core and the specific interpretation is negotiated by the context.

The core meaning of *kind of* as a parenthetical is metalinguistic, as exemplified in the instances in 2.1. When *kind of/sort of* is in construction with a phrase X, it serves to express "a reservation or apology on the speaker's part for attempting to denote with the linguistic object X what X is in fact being used to pick out in the utterance" (Kay, 1997, p.151). *Kind of/sort of* actually puts what follows it "in a metalinguistic focus" (Andersen, 2000, p.243). We can see what is involved is a linguistic form discrepancy between the chosen expression and potential ideal alternative expressions. The core meaning of *kind of/sort of* accounts for its various uses more or less in interaction. As a metalinguistic operator, *kind of/sort of* signals that the speaker is metalinguistically conscious and uncertain about the precision or appropriateness of the chosen expression and therefore it "serves as instructions for the loose (or strict) interpretation of designata" (Weinreich, 1966, p.163), which characterizes it as a hedge.

The metalinguistic meaning of *kind of/sort of* helps the speaker and the hearer to establish common ground. It signals that "the hearer will be able to figure out the meaning of what is said even if it is only approximate" (Aijmer, 2002, p.209). In addition, the metalinguistic use of *kind of/sort of* can be linked to politeness, which is obviously an affective effect in interaction. Employing *kind of/sort of*, the speaker to some extent distances himself/herself from the chosen expression and conveys himself/herself with a tentative attitude, which enables him/her to avoid sounding too assertive or imposing and thus increases solidarity between the participants.

The close relationship between the metalinguistic use of *kind of/sort of* and its function as a hesitation filler is obviously seen. In the former case, the speaker suggests that his/her expression may not be the most precise or most appropriate (socially or stylistically) to use or it is not fitting into his normal vocabulary. In the latter, a more general hesitational use, the speaker indicates that there is something in his/her mind but he/she does not know how to present it. The two uses of the item concerned actually can be placed on a continuum. The hesitational function can be seen as an extension of the metalinguistic use. The discrepancy between the speaker's thought and the verbal

realization of it has such a dramatic effect of the production of the utterance that it may lead to the speaker's pausing, abandoning the syntactic structure he/she has embarked on and even the failure in expressing his/her thought.

In fact, most of the functions of *kind of/sort of* as a parenthetical can be taken as extensions from its core meaning of hedging. In the process of the expansion, the degree of metalinguistic concern weakens and hearers will make the inference that the speaker is not simply conveying his/her concern for the properness of his/her expression but that there is some other message he/she may intend to communicate with *kind of/sort of*. Some of the possible inferences are presented as follows:

(a) *Kind of/sort of* is used to indicate an assumed common ground and a basic likeness between the speaker and the hearer.

(b) *Kind of/sort of* is employed to weaken the assertive force of an utterance.

(c) *Kind of/sort of* provides the speaker with verbal planning time and signals utterance continuation.

When the inferences become generalized and conventionalized in frequent use and begin to eclipse the original meaning of hedging, *kind of/sort of* can be said to acquire the extended functions. In other words, it has been further grammaticalized, no longer a hedge expressing metalinguistic concern. It should be noted that, however, the principles of grammaticalization (Hopper, 1991) apply to the case of *kind of/sort of*. According to the persistence principle, therefore, the meaning of its hedging use survives when it primarily serves other functions. When *kind of/sort of* is used as a hesitation filler, for instance, the speaker's metalinguistic concern for the appropriateness of his/her expression is observable more or less, which sets it apart from pure fillers like *um*, *uh*, *uh-huh*, etc. and other parentheticals functioning as a hesitation filler.

Finally, the exact nature of the extended functions of *kind of/sort of* is contextually determined. Out of context, the item in question may be ambiguous, but when it is used in issuing requests, suggestions, or expressing strong (negative) emotions, for instance, it can be unmistakably identified as a pragmatic softener, attenuating the assertive force of the utterance.

CONCLUSION

This article has investigated the different uses of *kind of/sort of* as a parenthetical in present-day English. Briefly speaking, it may serve the function of hedging, appealing to common ground, softening strong opinions or filling a pause in different contexts. Most of the functions of *kind of/sort of* as a parenthetical can be taken as extensions from its metalinguistic core meaning. They are the generalized and conventionalized contextual uses of its hedging use as a result of further grammaticalization. Moreover, the current study argues that its hedging meaning is still observable when it is basically used to communicate intimacy or

politeness or to fill a pause. This hypothesis may shed light on how to differentiate different parentheticals when they perform the same function, or why the speaker has chosen one instead of another within the context.

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