A Study of Pragmatic Vagueness in Diplomatic Language from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

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Abstract. Pragmatic vagueness is a universal phenomenon in diplomatic language and the study of it is also of great importance. Based on linguistic adaptation theory, this paper will focus on case study to analyze the adaptation of pragmatic vagueness in diplomatic language in order to better understanding of vagueness in discourse types and shed some light on vague language learning and research and the development of communicative skills.

Introduction

Before scholars attached great importance to the study of vagueness in language, people used to take it for granted that the words they used in daily life were completely clear and precise for they believed that precision could avoid misunderstanding. However, the reality of natural language use has proved the opposite: language is plagued by imprecision, exemplified mostly by vagueness which is ubiquitous in all language. Vagueness is an inherent property of natural language whether people are aware of it or not and the application of it is extremely crucial for people to successfully achieve different conversational purposes. Nowadays, apart from our daily communication, vagueness is widely used in many other fields, only its functions are far from being enough to be studied. In the present study, the study of pragmatic vagueness is focused on in diplomatic language. As is known to all, diplomatic language is a kind of formal language, and in most people’s mind, it should be clear, precise, logical, and even tactful. In fact, things are quite different in actual situations. As the representatives of the country, diplomats and spokespersons are supposed to have close diplomatic contacts with foreign countries, making speeches in public and answering questions raised by the journalists. Sometimes, they just find out that precise expressions are just not enough to deal with some thorny troubles or embarrassing situations. Therefore, to avoid possible conflicts and to express their stance in a polite, tactful and simultaneously informative manner, diplomats and spokespersons would resort to vague language and make well use of it. With so many factors being taken into consideration, it is believed that a relatively comprehensive study of the pragmatic vagueness in diplomatic language is of considerable significance.

Theoretical Framework

Definitions of Pragmatic Vagueness

For the definition of pragmatic vagueness, different scholars still have different ideas. Thomas defines pragmatic vagueness by saying “Pragmatic vagueness refers to the indefinite or indirect expressions, which speakers use in a particular context in order to convey certain illocutionary acts or meanings at the meantime.”[1] Chinese scholar, Yu Dongming regards pragmatic vagueness as pragmatic ambivalence, and his definition is similar to that of Thomas, “pragmatic vagueness refers to the phenomenon that the speaker makes use of indefinite, vague or indirect utterances, to express several illocutionary acts or forces simultaneously to the hearer in special context.”[2] Prof. He Ziran maintains that “pragmatic vagueness arises from the indeterminacy of an utterance.” In his book Notes on Pragmatics, he defines pragmatic vagueness like this: “vagueness in pragmatics includes the notions of fuzziness, indeterminacy, probability, ambiguity and generality manifested in
The above three are definitions given by different scholars. To take our daily communication and real situations into consideration, pragmatic vagueness can be divided into two types: non-deliberate use and deliberate use. For example, if the language user has difficulty in expressing his/her thought explicitly due to lack of sufficient knowledge or the imperfection of natural language, the pragmatic vagueness they choose to express themselves under such circumstances is regarded as non-deliberate use. On the contrary, if pragmatic vagueness is employed with the need of special situation or for the purpose of successful communication, it is considered as deliberate use. To sum up, in present study, those vague expressions employed by diplomats and spokespersons in their words all serve as an intentional communicative strategy, in that they can be adopted to realize different conversational purposes under different situations.

**Verschueren’s Linguistic Adaptation Theory**

Linguistic adaptation theory was initiated, developed, and modified by Verschueren, who proposed the embryonic form of the pragmatic adaptation theory. To deal with the question of language use, Verschueren claims that using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) and/or language-external reasons. As communication is an adaptation process and pragmatics is a general cognitive, social and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena, which is related to their usage in terms of behavior, Verschueren holds the view that the using of language lies in the continuous making of linguistic choices in terms of variability, negotiability and adaptability. In the book *Understanding Pragmatics*, Verschueren explains that in making linguistic choices, variability provides the possibilities and negotiability provides the ways. Then, on the basis of the possibilities and ways, adaptability allows language users to make those linguistic choices that satisfy communicative needs in an appropriate manner and within a possible scope, thus to conduct speech communication smoothly. Meanwhile, linguistic choices have to be inter-adaptable with the communicative context. It includes utter, interpreter, physical world, the social world and the mental world. The utterer and the interpreter are language users who are indispensable for the process of adaptation. The physical world consists of both temporal reference and spatial reference. The social world involves relationships of dependence and authority not only between utterer and interpreter but also between utterer and/or interpreter and any third party which either figures in the topic of the discourse or is otherwise involved. The mental world involves communicators’ mental propensity such as personalities, emotions, beliefs, desires or wishes, motivations or intentions.

**Adaptation Analysis of Pragmatic Vagueness in Diplomatic Language**

Verschuren’s Adaptation Theory supplies a new perspective for linguistic study. He holds the opinion that language use is the continuous making of linguistic choices. All linguistic choices are made as the result of linguistic adaptation. In the foreign affairs, the contradictions and disputes between countries arise constantly; diplomats will often use fuzzy strategy to express one’s point of view or attitude. On the one hand, they could achieve the principle of polite and not to hurt other’s feeling; on the other hand, they could protect them and make excuses for the behavior. The mutterer is driven by his communicative goals to adapt to different context factors.

**Linguistic Adaptation to the Mental World**

The mental world in the communicative process includes the personality, emotion, cognitive and emotional factors such as desire and intention on both sides. And in this process, selecting the language of one party is a dynamic process that adapts to their own mental world and to that of the other party. Mental states have always played important roles when people decide to express something. Verschuren shows clearly that cognitive element and emotive element stimulate people’s mental world in language using. The cognitive elements play the role of “provides a bridge between the mental and the social in the form of conceptualizations in terms of which social interaction is interpreted” Thus the emotive element “provide a bridge in the form of phenomena usually studied under labels such as affect and involvement, the attitude prerequisites for engaging in,
sustaining and coloring interaction”[4]. For the sake of realizing given diplomatic goals, using vague language is an efficient way to reveal the spokesman’s tact in the presence of difficult questions.

A country can be considered to be a member of the international community, the relationship between countries is quite subtle and complicated. Therefore, the diplomatic activities the diplomats conduct is particularly important to solve and deal with the relationship and the contradiction between countries. In diplomatic activities, diplomatic officials represent the country’s image, so when they are questioned, they should always safeguard the interests of the country. That is to say, on the one hand, as a diplomat, in some cases, he must express his own views and opinions; but on the other hand, he must ensure that his words will not bring troubles to his country. Therefore, fuzzy language becomes a powerful tool for diplomats.

Example 1

问: 据报道，孟加拉国选举委员会 25 日晚宣布将于 2014 年 1 月 5 日举行下届大选，孟最大反对党民族主义党对此表示强烈反对。中方对当前孟局势有何评论？

答: 我们注意到上述情况。作为孟加拉国的友好近邻，中方衷心希望孟有关各方以大局为重，通过对话解决分歧，确保选举顺利举行，共同致力于实现政治稳定、社会安定和经济发展。(2013 年 11 月 27 日，外交部发言人秦刚主持例行记者会)

(Question: It is reported that Bangladeshi electoral committee announced in the evening on Dec.25, 2013 that it would hold the next general election on Jan.5, 2014, which was strongly disapproved by the largest Bangladeshi Opposition Party. What is China’s comment on the current situation in Bangladesh?

Answer: We have noted the above situation. As Bangladeshi friendly neighbor, China sincerely hopes that the relevant parties in Bangladesh set store by overall interests and resolve the disputes though dialogue in order to ensure a smooth election and work together to achieve political stability, social security and economic development.

The spokesperson—Qin Gang of Foreign Ministry held a regular press conference on Nov.27, 2013.)

The question is about the general election in Bangladesh, which is related to Bangladesh’s domestic issue. Under this circumstance, the spokesman turned to vague expressions to weaken their true thoughts and to avoid the responsibility. As is known that sometimes vagueness can avoid the extreme opinion or prejudice towards situation and maximize the benefit of the speaker. Qin said that he hoped all relevant parties in Bangladesh work together to achieve political and social stability and economic development. By saying so, he protected both himself and China from being criticized as interfering in Bangladesh’s internal affairs. Moreover, the US constantly paid high attention to Bangladesh’s general election, for whatever reason, it is wise not to be involved. In some other speech communication, some speech acts are “Face Threatening Acts”. In order to save the opposite side’s face, maintain good social relations and successfully realize the communicative purpose, people try to use the polite language. One way is when others’ face is threatened; the opposite side uses vague language as far as possible to weaken the edge of criticism to others or to ease tensions.

Linguistic Adaptation to the Physical World

In Verschuren’s adaptation theory “spatial deixis and temporal deixis are the most studied and visible ways to anchor language choices into a physical world”[6]. There are some other elements that affect utters’ linguistic choices of adaptation to the physical world, such as physical conditions, body postures, and material conditions of remarks. But time and space are taken for two important ones. In terms of time, it includes the events of the time, talk time, and reference time. The references of space include absolutely spatial relation, the space of the speaker, and the position of both sides in the physical world. Using vague language to adapt to the physical world is to avoid the third party’s presence. The people present including listeners, spectators, bystanders, over-hearer and eavesdroppers will have impact on the speakers’ linguistic choice. Nowadays, the relationship between countries is complicated. The two countries are more than just engaged in their own things,
they would inevitably be noted by other countries, especially those countries involved. As a result, the conversation and the declaration between the two countries will be likely to be noticed by other countries. So the diplomats would choose vague languages instead of those key statements.

Example 2

问：中方对美国和日本拟于 10 日起在美加利福尼亚州举行夺岛联合军演有何看法？
答：我们希望有关方面以本地区的和平稳定为重，多做有利于增进政治安全互信、维护地区和平与稳定的事。 (2013 年 6 月 4 日，外交部发言人洪磊主持例行记者会)

(Question: What views does Chinese side have on joint military drill of Remote Island Recapture in California from the 10th day of this month between the United States and Japan?
Answer: We hope that the relevant sides will focus on peace and stability in the region and do more to enhance political security, mutual trust and safeguard regional peace and stability.

The spokesperson—Hong Lei of Foreign Ministry held a regular press conference on Jun.4, 2013.)

The journalist put forward the sensitive matter that the US and Japan are going to stage a joint military drill in California to practice recapturing a remote island. Although they don’t mention the so called ‘a remote island’ is which island, but with the context of Sino Japan relationship, people can understand it for sure. What’s more, this is not only involved the relationship between China and Japan, but also the relationship between China and the US. It is not only a joint military drill, but also a provocation. In the diplomatic occasion, people will interpret the other countries’ attitude though their spokesman’s remarks. Although they may be absent of the press, they are still the potential audience. So the spokesman has to pay attention to his remarks. Hong used 相关方面 (the relevant parties) to avoid mentioning the name directly. And he didn’t make any comment about the joint military drill, but turn to the point of regional peace and stability, hoping they will do more to promote political and security mutual trust and safeguard regional peace and stability. This is a way to adapt to the physical world because the involved countries are the eavesdropper.

Linguistic Adaptation to the Social World

Social world refers to the principles and standards stipulated by the social situation and the social environment in the speech act, that is to say, the language choice of the communicator must conform to the social situation, social environment, and social customs. Since people are always in the society, so their behavior will inevitably be affected and restricted by social conventions. Therefore, any rational person will strictly abide by the social customs and laws. In the field of diplomacy, the contradiction and conflict between countries are usually sharper and more outstanding. Diplomats usually use vague language to make their language slick and sly. The national power of current China has reached historical unprecedented heights. China’s role in the world has gradually changed from a revolutionary to a builder, transforming from the oppressed nation to the leader of the world economy. As the rapid increase of China’s status and influence, a variety of external resistance and pressure also are increasing. Other countries are more hostile to our country ever-increasing strategy, which brings our country much more troubles and disputes. So in the regular press conference, the spokesman usually makes use of the vague language to maintain good international relationship. [7]

In example 1, Bangladesh’s national election is an internal affair of Bangladesh. It is not appropriate to intervene in other country’s domestic concerns. So China shouldn’t make any comment on that issue. The spokesman firstly gave close attention to the aforementioned situation. Then, he conveyed his hope that all relevant parties in Bangladesh would set store by overall interests, and solve differences through dialogues, and make efforts to ensure the success of the election. By this way, no matter which party wins the election, the bilateral relationship between China and Bangladesh will continue to be good in the future. After all, China is still in the stage of development. A peaceful environment is helpful to our country’s development. So we’d rather make more friends than competitors.

China’s economy constitutes a decisive impact on the world, making China’s sound be heard all over the world. At the same time, strategic and diplomatic challenges are also more and more
complex. China’s current dealing with international relations is on the basis of careful balancing the interests of all aspects, without hurting the neighboring countries. To enhance its comprehensive national strength and to consolidate and enhance its international status is the goal of China. So in the press conference, when the spokesman is asked, the question that has nothing to do with China, they would try to use vague language to give tactful answers in order to create a nice international circumstance.

**Summary**

Base on linguistic adaptation theory, pragmatic vagueness in diplomatic language have been studied from the adaptation perspectives of the mental world, physical world and the social world respectively. So far as pragmatic vagueness in diplomatic language have been concerned, they can be generalized as the following: expressing a feeling of politeness, showing respect, out of self-protecting and image safe guarding, being implicit and tactful, and which also being humorous to create a relaxing and harmonious atmosphere at times.

Diplomatic language is a formal, conservative, cautious and accurate language. The application of vague language can improve the efficiency of language expression, increase the flexibility of the language and make the language more euphemistic, implicit and polite. People can also have a better understanding of the diplomatic language.

**References**


