The Pragmatic Study of Vague Language in English Political News from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

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Abstract

Vague language is regarded as a common phenomenon in language application, and it is also a basic property of human language. Lots of foreign and domestic studies on vague language have been done in various areas, for example, philosophy, pragmatics, semantics, and etc. But, these studies were done from the perspectives of Leech's Politeness Principle or Grice's Cooperative Principle. Few studies have been made from the perspective of Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, much less about vagueness in English political news. Thus, this thesis takes more than 20 political news reports collected from China Daily as the research data. This thesis aims to explore vague language in English political news discourse, discuss how to select vague language in order to effectively adapt to the mental world and physical world. In a specific sense, this study provides a brand-new perspective for vague language interpretation. The discussion and analysis of vague language in news discourse is useful to enrich the research field of vagueness and deepen the study of vagueness. It is expected that the results of the study will help reporters to balance the degree between accuracy and vagueness in order to achieve the successful communication purpose. At the same time, it is meaningful for the readers to know that the application of vague language in English news is a result of adaptation to communicative contexts. Finally, it is expected that the results of the study can guide language learners to comprehend the linguistic styles and the pragmatic functions of vagueness in news discourse as well as the way of interpreting news discourse in multiple angles.

Keywords

Vague language; Political news; Adaptation Theory.

1. Introduction

People think that language should be accurate and express the meaning clearly, so, vague language has been neglected for a long time. In fact, vague language exists broadly in our daily life and is one of the intrinsic of human language. Just as Chanell (2000:159) states "Vagueness has been observed to occur widely in languages, and we have noted some investigators wishing to maintain that all language use is vague in some way." the studies on vague language are made along with the construction of Fuzzy Theory. In 1965, L. A. Zadeh, an American scientist, proposed the Fuzzy Theory in the magazine Information and Control, which make fuzziness into a scientific term. And then, linguists try to make the study of nature, definition, and the causes of vagueness and the relationship between vagueness and accuracy and so on. In accordance with Lakoff, "Clearly any attempt to limit truth conditions for natural language sentences to true, false and 'nonsense' will distort the natural language concepts by portraying them as having sharply defined rather than fuzzily defined boundaries" (Lakoff, 1972: 183). In China, scholars didn't have interest in vague language until the end of 1970s. The first person who studies the fuzzy language is Professor Wu Tieping. In 1979, his article A Tentative

Exploration of Fuzzy Language in Journal Foreign Language was published and marked the beginning of the research on vagueness.

Verschueren's Adaptation Theory is a proper theory to interpret vague language in English news discourse for it believes that the language use process is continuous and dynamic and language users can make proper choices to adapt to mental world and physical world so as to achieve successful communications. Vagueness in English news discourse is an effective communication strategy to achieve specific purpose.

This thesis aims to study vagueness in English political news reports, to explore how vagueness flexibility is adapted to mental world and physical world and further to summarize the pragmatic functions and its theoretical and practical significance.

2. Literature Review

As a newly emerged subject, the study about vagueness at home only has the history for more than ten years. However, during this period, scholars have made great achievements on the study of language vagueness. And many masterpieces of the vagueness of nouns, objectives and numerals were published in various academic journals.

Wu Tieping, the first Chinese scholar researched vague language. His representative work A Tentative Exploration of Fuzzy Language was promulgated in 1979 in Journal of Foreign Language. Wu's concepts keep in line with Zadeh's views on vagueness and employed his fuzzy sets theory to analyze language vagueness. And then he published his book Fuzzy Linguistics in 1999. It includes 30 articles about the study of vague words and precise words, the history and development of vague theories and so on.

From pragmatic perspective, He Ziran (1985), from the point of pragmatics and combined with speech act and its conditions, indicated that the applications and pragmatic functions of hedges in communication.

Many researchers also studied vagueness from the semantic perspective, such as Zhang Qiao (1998) studied vagueness from the semantic perspective and published the book Fuzzy Semantics in which she introduced the trend of vague language abroad. Cai Longquan & Dai Weidong (2002) studied hedges from the point of meaning, syntactic structure and pragmatic functions and etc.

Recently, there are more and more scholars from different points in different fields to study vagueness. For example, Qu Ru (2013) studies the vagueness in Jane Austin's classical novel Pride and Prejudice. Zhang Xu (2016) analyzes the vagueness in legal language with Cooperative Principle. In the past 30 years, the research in China on vague language had made great achievement. The achievement has also promoted the linguistic science development. However, there are some limitations; researchers should pay more attentions to the study of vagueness on cross disciplines and multiple languages.

Although a large number of previous studies have been done, there are still research gaps in this field. Firstly, lost of researches on vagueness have been done, however, these studies mainly pay attention to literature, diplomacy and law, and few of which concerns the use of vagueness in news may be against features of news. The researches of vague language in news reports haven't drawn enough attention. Secondly, many researches have been done from the point of linguistics. But vague language is studied in these researches is always on the basis of Grice's Cooperative Principle, Relevance Theory and Leech's Politeness Principle, few studies from the perspective of Verschueren's Adaptation Theory. In addition, many studies pay attention to internal factors of language rather than external factors. Therefore, this thesis intends to do the research from the perspective of Adaptation Theory.

Many studies have been done on vagueness both at abroad and at home, no matter in the field of linguistics, pragmatics, psychology or literature, but have many shortcomings. They mainly study vagueness in literature, business and law. Few of which studies the vague language in news. And then, this thesis will discuss the vagueness in English political news under the guidance of Adaptation Theory.

3. Analysis of English Political News Reporting From the Perspective of Adaptation Theory

3.1. Vague Language in English Political News

As well acknowledged, news reporting is quite closely connected with our daily lives, especially the political news. With the increasing development of technology and the constant changing of everything, news is transmitted through many kinds of media, for example, television, radio and online newspaper. Thus, people will know about it immediately and clearly.

As mentioned above, in fact, concepts like human right, democracy, freedom, peace and so on are usually vague. The comprehension of these concepts varies greatly in the producers' political stand and view point. As a result, vague language is necessary in political news, for some political terms embody vague concepts. The examples of news reports with vague language show as follows:

Example 1. In the instruction, Xi said authorities have made great efforts in the past five years in cracking difficult issues and have managed to achieve some reforms that were long planned and talked about a great deal in the past.

(China Daily, July 11, 2017)

In this case, the vague expression "great", "in the past five years", "some", "a great deal" and "in the past", adapting to both reporters and readers acceptance. The public will only pay attention to the information they are interested in or need. Therefore, some unnecessary information should be generalized in news report. So, vague language, particularly hedges is the best choice. President Xi introduced the urgency efforts to reform judicial system. In this news, the vague word "great" generally modify the "efforts" without specifying the details they talked. Here vagueness adapts to reveal the authorities important role without telling what specific efforts they made. The hedge "in the past five years", "some" and "a great deal", subjects may involve some sensitive topics, or the crucial issues such as political and secure interest. A lot of issues are so confidential that they can not be released. This point is that accurate language can not realize, however, vague language work very well in adapting to keeping secrets of the instruction and avoiding negative influences.

Example 2. On Thursday, several Indian media cited anonymous sources as claiming that India's military had ordered immediate evacuation of an Indian village 35 kilometers from Donglang.

(China Daily, August 11, 2017)

As is well known, Indian invaded our country's border several months ago. And the Foreign Ministry has dismissed a news report that China offered to dispatch its troops to resolve the tension with India in the Donglang area. The vague word "several" especially refers to not every Indian media has kind attitude towards China. Using "several" but not specific names of those media are a kind of euphemism. Vague language can express euphemism. The "several" is used to adapt to the producer's psychology.

Taking other media which don't expect China and India will build good relationship as an example, those media don't claim that India's military had ordered immediate evacuation, which in turn surely incurred a lot resentment from our country's people. Thus, it will destroy the friendship between the two countries. However, our country always remains the great power in diplomacy policy and use the peaceful way to deal with conflicts. So, in news reports,

the pragmatic application of vague words here does well in adapting to maintain the relationship of two parties and minimizing the negative effects.

3.2. The Realization of Adaptation in the English News Reporting

A general idea has been conducted about the Adaptation Theory through the above analysis. In this part, the author will analyze the realization of adaptation with some examples.

3.2.1. Adaptation to the Mental World

In accordance with Verschueren, "verbal interaction is no doubt communication from mind to mind—though we should never forget that minds are minds in society" (Verschueren, 1999: 87). The mental world primarily includes the language user's personality traits, beliefs, emotions, desires or wishes, intention and so on, which have an effect on making choice of communicators from different degrees. So, it is so difficult to take all factors into consideration. Thus, the choice-making process of the speaker is a process of adapting to his/her own and listener's mental world.

First of all, news reports need to adapt readers' comprehensive abilities. Newspaper is a key way of getting information for the public. News language has the characteristic of exoticness which varies from literary language. It should be understood and accepted by the majority of people. Accurate language might lead to readers reading difficulties and confusion or misunderstanding in communications. Thus reporters could find a way to make readers interpret the news better. In a sense, vagueness can satisfy readers understanding abilities.

Example 3. The upgrades indicate that the DF-31AG is capable of making off-road launch in most kinds of terrain, with a very short preparation time, said Yang Chengjun, a military observer close to China's missile programs.

(China Daily, August 5-6, 2017)

Example 4. Although the introduction did not specify the anti-missile interceptor's capabilities, experts said the descriptions "tens of kilometers" and "10 times faster than a bullet" indicate its range should be from 10km to 100km and its minimum velocity around 12,000 km/h—a typical bullet used by a handgun, the slowest of all bullets, normally travels about 1,200 km/h.

(China Daily, May 27, 2017)

These two examples of news are about the rapid development of China's missile. Most common people almost know nothing about missile. In addition, information about missile is closely related to national security. So, in the Example 3, several vague words are applied instead of specific expressions, for example, "most kinds of", "very short" and "close to". However, these vague expressions make us feel the rapid development and the danger of missile. Otherwise, it will be difficult for readers to use exact language. Similarly, in the Example 4, readers are short of professional knowledge about missile and they don't know what the height or right angle is and how many meters the maximum launching depth are. Vagueness, for example, "around", "slowest", "about", can be comprehended easily by the public instead of specific numbers.

3.2.2. Adaptation to the Physical World

The physical world mainly contains temporal reference, such as event time, reference time and time of utterance, and spatial reference, such as reflective spatial relationship and absolute spatial relationship. Verschueren (2000: 95) says that "Temporal deixis and spatial deixis are the most studied and most visible ways of anchoring language choices into a physical world." What's more, clothing, gaze, illness and so on, which all belong to the physical world. In accordance with Adaptation Theory, people should make incessant choices during the process of communications. On the other hand, for news reporters, they should make linguistic choices too in order to adapt to the physical world. In addition, the world we live in is changing constantly. Thus news reporters cannot use precise expression to share what will happen. In

this part, the author will talk about how vagueness is adapted to temporal and spatial reference with several examples

In the physical world time includes "vent time, reference time, and time of utterance" (Verschueren, 2000: 96). Temporal deixis involves tense marking, for instance, the present tense, the past tense and the future tense, for example, today, yesterday, tomorrow and so on. Usually, news events are dynamic. In other words, events vary continually with the change of relative factors and are unstable. Thus, it is wise and necessary to use vague language to report the development of events in different phases.

Example 5. The one-child policy was implemented in the late 1970s to check the rise in China's population. And the decision to ease it shows the wisdom and spirit of the party with Xi Jinping as the core to overcoming the increasingly severe demographic challenge the country faces today.

(China Daily, July 25, 2017)

Example 6. Xi's speech adeptly puts forward the vision for China's future development. He said China must accomplish the national goal of building a moderately prosperous society by 2020, and strive for the great victory of socialism with Chinese characteristics as well as the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.

(China Daily, July 29-30, 2017)

"In the late 1970s" and "today" in Example 5 and "future" and "by 2020" in Example 6 are all vagueness about time. What is the exact time of "the late 1970s" and "future"? These examples reveal that when the time can not be recognized exactly, vague expressions can help reporters. Compared with precise expressions, vague language can provide enough information and can be comprehended easily by all readers.

About spatial reference, usually, some verbs, adverbs, pronouns and prepositions are also applied to encode the relations between space and spatial. In many circumstances, the place of the two parties has an essential influence on expressing ways of linguistic choices. For the purpose of adapting to space of the physical world in news, vague expressions are always used to show reporters' comprehension of the relations between space and spatial.

3.3. The Pragmatic Functions of Employment of Vague Language in English News Reporting

In the above section, the author has discussed vague expressions with some examples from China Daily political news reports in the light of Verschueren's Adaptation Theory. After the discussion, it is found that the appropriate use of vague expressions plays a necessary role in successful communications. Therefore, this section will generalize main pragmatic functions of vague expressions in English political news reports.

3.3.1. Giving the Right Amount of Information

It is known that news writing stress timeless, in other words "literature in a hurry". The development of events has the feature of randomness and the scale and influence also have uncertainty. Reporters can't make very precise judgment momentarily about the size of an event and the degree of influence. Thus, reporters usually have to use some vague expressions with high generalization, reporting roughly to readers and make the comprehensive and general analysis to reporting objects. It is determined by the features of news writing, such as conciseness, timeliness and the like.

Example 7. Mnuchin also noted that the United States has already slapped more than 450 sanctions against the DPRK, with about half of them launched in 2017.

(China Daily, Feb 24, 2018)

In this example, in order to report the news timely, the reporter uses the vague expression "more than" and "half of". May be the reporter don't make it clear about the quantity of sanctions that have slapped, so the reporter used vagueness.

3.3.2. Preventing Speaking in an Absolute Way

It is necessary for news report to be real and precise. However, it doesn't mean that the connotation and extension of a definition must be clear. The spread of news is limited by many factors, such as news law and professional ethics. In political news, many points have to use vagueness. Vague expressions have the features of flexibility and freedom. If reporters use them properly, they can avoid absoluteness.

Example 8. Yang said during the meeting that progress has been made in the bilateral relations over the past year under the guidance of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Trump.

(China Daily, Feb 11, 2018)

What is the "progress" over the past year between China and US? Because of the requirement of diplomatic strategy, the reporter make it become vagueness consciously.

Example 9. Chinese Premier Li Peng yesterday expressed that entrepreneurs of the United States will continue efforts to help bring about an all-round improvement and development.

(China Daily, Apr 2, 1993)

In order to avoid absoluteness, the best way is using vague expressions. And by this way, reporters leave enough room for themselves. The "all-round" in the above example has fully proved this point.

3.3.3. Increasing the Credibility of News Reporting

Vagueness is a very important character of language. Although news reports is about the objective facts, it is unavoidable for reporters to use vague language about the vague state of facts. Sometimes, it is necessary to use vague language in some gusty and retardant events. For instance, the relationship of two countries described by precise date is impossible. At this moment, reporters should use vague expressions like "recently". It can increase the credibility of news reports and show the matter-of-fact attitude of reporters.

Example 10. After a great of steady development in China-US ties, boosted by successful face-to-face meetings and frequent phone conversations between Xi and Trump, bilateral relations have been facing several challenges since the end of 2017 after some worrisome moves on Washington's part.

(China Daily, Feb 10, 2018)

Example 11. The issue was related to a woman who had been presented in the mortuary for over two years. She died after giving birth to a boy at the hospital in 2015, and her family sued the hospital. This July, a court ordered the hospital to compensate her family with nearly 500,000 yuan.

(China Daily, Dec 8, 2017)

In the Example 10, it is hard to know that "the end of 2017" is which day. And in the Example 11, it is hard to say when this kind of situation started. So, the reporters use the vague expression "for over two years". These vague languages all can be accepted by readers and they also won't doubt the reality of news reports because of these vague language.

3.3.4. Protecting Oneself

Because the public media can narrow the information gap between the reporters and readers, political news reports play an essential role in presenting reliable information for readers. If one wants to be a responsible and qualified reporter, he must comply with the news reporting principles. However, because of different uncertain factors, it is impossible for reporters to protect themselves from being criticized.

Example 12. More than 1.5 million people were trapped in the city roughly two million populations previously. Cold winter worsened the conditions for the displaced people who suffered severe shortages of food and water, white camps and other emergency shelters reached maximum capacity.

(China Daily, Jan 6, 2017)

Example 13. "The policy has been praised by international travelers. But based on a survey, about 40 percent of international travelers said 72 hours is insufficient for them to enjoy the city of Beijing, and they wished to extend their stay." Zhu said.

(China Daily, Dec 29, 2017)

"More than", "roughly", and "maximum" in Example 12 and "about" in Example 13 reduce the risk of providing absolute information so as to avoid unnecessary trouble and achieve the purpose of self-protection. In Example 13, by using "based on", the reporter leaves the impression to readers that the information is reliable rather than unrealistic and irrational. On the other hand, it wisely protects the reporter from being criticized when use the precise statement that later being found inappropriate.

This section can be divided into two parts. The first part studies the adaptation of vagueness to context correlates from three points. Through the thorough analysis, it can be found clearly that the use of vagueness is a common phenomenon and plays an essential and necessary role in political news reports. Thus, the second summarizes the pragmatic functions of vagueness in political news reports: giving the right amount of information, preventing speaking in an absolute way, increasing the credibility of news reporting and self-protection.

4. Summary

This thesis has analyzed the vague language under the guidance of Adaptation Theory and major pragmatic functions of vague language. Similarly, the same theory can be applied into daily communication between people. As is well known, vague language, as a strategy by which speakers reduce the force of their utterance, is a common phenomenon shared by many languages. It is true that the linguistic realizations vary from language to language, interpersonal cooperation, politeness, face-saving and many other factors may constrain the application of a language in cross-culture situations. Thus, it is better for speakers to express themselves in a vague form than in a direct form. The dominant position of English in different areas makes it necessary for non-native speakers to focus on the pragmatic functions of vagueness, though it is a challenge for foreign language learners. As for further study, there are some suggestions as follows. First of all, the study of vagueness in this thesis mainly pays attention to typical newspaper—China Daily. Other kind of newspapers should also be chosen, such as the New York Times and The Observer. Secondly, the critical discourse analysis also can be used to study other discourse, social news, economic news and so on. Thirdly, the vagueness in English political news is analyzed from the perspective of pragmatics. As is well known, vague language, particularly hedges starts from the semantic. The further study can take the semantic function of vague language into consideration.

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