

# An Analysis of Vagueness in English News from Grice's Cooperative Principles

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**Abstract**—With the rapid developments of science and technology, it appears that the best way to get much information is to appreciate some news items, because they are objectively facts and data that are easy for us to comprehend. However, if there is no vague language in newspapers, the reliability and veracity will be reduced to the degree, and the news items will not be trust-worthy at all. So this research paper aims to analyze certain samples selected from some English newspapers by means of Grice's Cooperative Principle so as to demonstrate that vague language can effectively stand out the accuracy of the English newspapers. Consequently, the paper reveals that the vague language helps and strengthens the artistic effects of the news items which cannot be expressed directly by the exact number or detailed information in the English newspapers. In addition, all the readers may benefit from this research paper and have the deep appreciations of the vagueness as well.

**Index Terms**—vagueness, cooperative principle, English news

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid developments of science and technology, we are looking forward to obtaining the lately information or news around us. And the best way to get much information is to appreciate some news items, because they are objectively facts and data which are easy for us to understand. As is known, the languages in the news reporting are supposed to be both formal and concise so as to convey directly the facts of social phenomenon to readers. However, it is self-evident that some languages that don't show their meaning exactly still make readers understand better, for example *about*, *more*, *properly*, *at least*, *many*, *nearly*, etc. And those words or phrases are usually labeled as one category, namely, vague language.

Channell (1994) proposes that an expression is vague if (a) it can be contrast with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition, (b) it is purposely and unabashedly vague or if (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty. Her analysis of vague expression reflects that "their meaning is themselves vague", that "speakers share knowledge of how to understand them" and that "it is apparently impossible to describe their meanings independently of consideration of context and inference (p.196-198). Accordingly, the function of vague language can make communication easy, lead conversation more persuasive but not rude, provide protection against uncertainty and have no limitation to time or place. Vague language is a pervasive feature not just of casual conversation.

In fact, vague language spreads through our lives so thoroughly that it has dominated our language; in particular, vague language has occurred frequently in daily communication. So far, the explorations in this regard have received much attention from philosophy, semantics and pragmatics. More and more scholars and researchers have preference of using the vague language, for by doing so, reports or news may enhance the precision of the original expression.

But from the pragmatic perspective, there seems to be a growing awareness as to the contradiction between vagueness and Grice's Cooperative Principle. Some of scholars believe that the vague language in expression is considered to be a sort of violation of the Grice's Cooperative Principles, which often leads to failure of communication; whereas others hold opposite views in this respect.

This paper is intended to introduce the news items and give the further explanation of the vague language. Besides, by descriptive methods, the present paper probes into the pragmatic analysis in news reporting based on the theoretical framework developed from Grice's Cooperative Principle. In the current paper, from many authoritative newspaper and magazines, a number of selected news materials are analyzed to help the readers gain much information and the underlying meaning. What's more, the reason why journalists prefer to use vague language in news reports frequently and what are the functions that vague language takes on in news. Based on those two principles, the paper provides much help to language learners using vague language in an appropriate and tactful way.

## II. DEFINITION AND FEATURE OF VAGUENESS

Vagueness is an inherent characteristic of natural language. It is inevitable in communication because no natural language is able to make an adequately precise statement of anything.

Peirce (1902) is generally regarded as the originator of vagueness of language, and is perhaps the first one to try to

formulate vagueness in a rigorous way. He argues that “a proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition” (Peirce, 1902, p.748).

Russell (1923) in his famous paper *Vagueness* argues that all language is more or less vague and that vagueness is a property of symbols in relation to what it represents.

Joanna Channell (2000) further explains the definition of vague language in the book *Vague Language* as the following: An expression or word is vague if: a. it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition; b. it is ‘purposely and unabashedly vague’; c. its meaning arises from the ‘intrinsic uncertainty’ referred to by Peirce. (Channell, 2000, p.20) Later she further arranges her discussion of vague language through types of vague language, namely, vague additives, vague words and vague implicature.

Since many linguists have contributed to the formation of vagueness, let’s put it in a simple way to illustrate what vagueness is like. Based on the linguistic characteristics of news, vague language can be classified into three types, namely, hedges, vague words, and vague implicature.

(1) **Hedges** are the core of vague language. The definition of hedges is that a word or phrase “whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”. (Lakoff, 1792)

For example: Police are searching for two daring bank employees who allegedly stole nearly 51 million yuan on Saturday. (From China Daily, Apr18, 2007)

It is easy for us to find out the word “nearly” and the number of stolen money seems to vagueness. Actually, it makes the meaning more clear for the reporter can’t make sure the exact and accurate number.

(2) The explanation of vague Language is that the notion of **vague words** is vague itself and generally, they are in reference to the words with meanings of imprecise or uncertain or indefinite.

For example: This year she has a newfound appreciation for the holiday, with her husband now safely back in the United States but not returning to their home until the end of July. (From CNN, July4, 2006)

The word “appreciation is abstract words which is without a exact meaning and understand it relying on the context, expressing vague meaning and belonging to vague language.

(3) **Vague implicature** is of the definition that an exact number or a plural number name or an apparently precise sentence can be used and understood to have a vague meaning. (Channell, 2000)

For example: Officials are concerned, she said, because the river, which was measured at 38 feet Wednesday afternoon, was not expected to crest until Wednesday night. (From CNN, June 28, 2006)

The phrase “38 feet” can be either precise or vague, because readers may think the practical length more or less than the number

From the above mentioned regarding definition, we can easily figure out the feature of vague languages in different kinds of channels around us. Although the vague language is one word or short phrase, it can present the readers a large number of various interpretations of that.

Firstly, vague languages largely create much room for the readers to think over. The vague language is often used as an adjective in one sentence or a phrase. For one thing, the oddity and suspense of news items may drive readers to think about what else these adjectives represent or what stance the reporters really hold. For another, time limitation of news broadcast or length of news reports plays the role as well, for reporters usually cannot tell all the things they want to convey in certain period or space. So readers are more encouraged to dwell on the news regarding vagueness employed adroitly by reporters.

Secondly, sometimes the vague languages have stronger effects than the exact and clear ones. Some special intentions or the words which are not convenient to directly state can be expressed by some vague languages. At this time, the vague languages can literally express the emotions of news, although the speaker or the writer doesn’t have detailed information, but he or she can give readers some reasonable explanations by using the vague language.

Thirdly, the vague language can objectively narrate something and protect people’s privacy from personal attack. Some English words can not be directly used because of the cultural shock, and the racial conflictions have to be carefully considered somehow. Therefore, those expressions can be made by the vague language. In that way, the writer’s purpose can be gained skillfully, especially in the news reporting.

Fourthly, the vague languages can make the English news simple and concise. For example, the writers can use adverbs or short phrases to express more things to stand out the linguistic characteristics of news. The writer uses some adverbs such as “largely” to describe the quantity instead of stating some complex sentences. And the adjectives can also play important role in the English news. Just using one word, the news can grasp the readers’ attentions and be easily understood. Furthermore, the concise news items can make themselves prominent.

In short, vague language in the news items can give readers some illustrations or hints that the writer wants them to appreciate. Although the news items are to present us some objective facts, yet they cannot avoid involving writers or reporters’ subjective attitudes. So by using vagueness, more objective accounts of facts will be encouraged, and less subjectivity arising from personal judgments will be reduced to the degree. Vagueness manifests the interpersonal function of the language as well.

### III. INTRODUCTION TO GRICE’S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

Grice's theory of Cooperative Principle is essentially the theory about how people use language to have better communication. Grice formalizes his observation in this way, say, when we talk we try to be cooperative, and he further elevates this notion into the so-called Cooperative Principle. According to his proposal, speakers try to send understandable message within the context of any particular conversation, and hearers assume that speakers are doing this. The principle involves both parties knowing and using the rules of conversation which Grice called maxims.

And the principle is embodied in the four maxims:

(1) The Maxim of Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true, specifically:

- a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(2) The Maxim of Quantity

- a. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange.
- b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(3) The Maxim of Relevance

Make your contribution relevant.

(4) The Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous and specifically;

- a. Avoid obscurity
- b. Avoid ambiguity
- c. Be brief
- d. Be orderly

(Grice, 1975, p.45-46)

The fact is that the cooperative principle is meant to describe what actually happens in conversation. That is, when we speak we generally have something like the cooperative principle and its maxims in our mind to guide us, though subconsciously. We try to say things which are true, relevant, as well as informative enough, and in a clear manner. Hearers will also try to interpret what is said to them in this way. Sometimes, a speaker will be usually aware of the possible implicatures of his speech, and if he does not want the hearer to interpret it in a particular way, then he will make it plainly clear that he does not intend that particular implicature. (Hu, 2011, p.176)

We can regard English news as a type of conversation, in which reporters are the speakers, while the readers are the addressers. Hence, to be more effective, reporters are supposed to flout the four maxims of cooperative principle. Accordingly, English news should be created more clearly (manner), truthfully (quality), give amount of information (quantity) and directly address his target consumers (Relation). That is to say, news is better dealt with precisely, say, what the real situation looks like, trying to avoid creating implicature.

However, to find out a piece of English news which follows maxims is not an easy thing. Sometimes, people do violate the maxims of cooperative principle. For instance, reporters are more used to vagueness so as to skillfully and technically present current affairs or social phenomenon in front of readers. In addition, readers are also allowed to understand or appreciate the news item freely. Hence, with the help of the vague language, news item becomes more reasonable and easier to understand.

Therefore, cooperation of speakers and addressers involved in a conversation is just the beginning to make sense of what is said. If the speaker wants to mislead the hearer, or the speaker does not have enough amount of information, or the speaker simply does not want to continue their conversation, Grice's Cooperative Principle can also serve as "an attempt to explain how communication succeeds in the face of violation of the maxims (Jiang, 2000, p.43). The following conversation exchanges illustrate the violation of the four maxims and resultant implicatures respectively.

#### IV. ANALYSIS OF VAGUENESS IN ENGLISH NEWS FROM COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

##### A. Violation of the Maxim of Quality

It's generally accepted that everything is in a changing condition, which may contribute to inexactitude, inadequacy, and incompleteness of the information; and sometimes reporters or editors could not figure out the exact word or lexicon gap to describe the events. In that case, vague language would be the best choice. As a consequence, the reporters may violate the quality maxim so as to avoid the responsibility to the accuracy of that information. By using vague language, they say something (1) for which they lack adequate evidence; (2) they do not firmly believe; (3) that is untrue or misunderstanding.

For Example:

(1) *Newsweek has learned that Pentagon analysts are still aggressively hunting for evidence that might tie Atta, or any of the other hijackers, to Saddam's agents. It may yet turn up, but for now, at least, the much touted "Prague connection" appears to be an intriguing, but embarrassing, mistake.* (From Newsweek, May6, 2002)

From the news items (1), it's easy for readers to point out the vague words "may yet", "appears to", which imply reporter's uncertainty of the fact whether the hijacking has anything to do with Saddam's agents or not. "For now" decreases the reporter's affirmative tone and his responsibility is thus weakened as well as becoming the sources of the claims. So within the framework of Grice's Cooperative Principle, although the reporter seems to violate THE MAXIM

OF QUALITY and this piece of news may be not much accurate some time in the future, yet the reporter need not take on too much responsibility for some political issues are too delicate to make clear beforehand.

#### B. Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

Based on the maxim of quantity, the news items are required to be informative on one hand, and avoiding over-informative on the other hand. In addition, by means of media, the news should be sent to the readers as fast as possible, which is their vital business intention. Thus, the reporters are required to “rob news” in the shortest time after an event happened. Nevertheless, the timeliness of news does not give reporters adequate time to make clear all the details and related numbers before reporting. Then the maxim of quantity may be violated.

For Example:

(2) *Medical officials in Gaza say dozens of Palestinians were killed in Israeli attacks Tuesday, including at least 30 in one attack when Israeli troops fired on a U.N. school. The Israeli military offensive is now in its second week and it is estimated the Palestinian death toll is more than 600.* (From VOA, Jan6, 2009)

In the above example (2), it's difficult for the reporter to count the exact number of the deaths in the attacks. The war correspondent had no time to wait for the exact figure to come out, but to use “at least” and “more than” instead so as to distribute the news as fast as possible. Sometimes, timeliness is somewhat contradictory with precision, so it's unnecessary for the reporter to make the number clear. In news report, accuracy demands the maximal precision on some occasions, while on other occasions, it admits certain fuzziness. Anyhow, their ultimate intention is to achieve accuracy. In the example, the use of vague language can make the news more accurate, more credible. Although the reporter violated the quantity maxim, he violated THE MAXIM OF QUALITY by using approximates since timeliness is somewhat contradictory with preciseness.

(3) *Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin pledged to protect the 1,000,000 Jewish settlers living alongside almost 2 million Arabs in the occupied territories and said he intended to reduce as quickly as possible the number of Palestinians working in Israeli cities.*

*The closure of the West Bank and Gaza strip will stop up to 1,000,000 Arab day laborers from working in side Israel. Their wages are vital to the economy of the territories where Palestinians have been in revolt against Israeli occupation for five years.* (From The South China Morning Post, Feb.8, 1993)

The case is the same with example (3), it's unnecessary for the reporter to make clear the number of the Jewish settlers and the Arab day laborers. In news reporting, accuracy demands the maximal precision in some occasions, while in other certain occasions, it admits certain vagueness. And no matter what, their final intention is to accuracy achievement. In the above examples, the use of vague words can make the news more accurate, creditable and executive. Although he obeyed THE MAXIM OF QUALITY, the precise information is not so important in the events.

#### C. Violation of the Maxim of Relevance

According to the maxim of relevance, the information should be relevant to the conversation or the topic. Compared with the violation of the above two maxims, the violation of relevance maxim does not so frequently occur. However, to give adequate information to obey the quantity maxim, there are still some cases of violating relevance maxim. Some phrases, which may act as vague language like “by the way”, “anyway”, “even though”, are added in the middle of the speakers' talk to connect two irrelevant issues in a conversation.

For Example

(4) *Mayor Martin Chavez has ordered the city police to keep monitoring Siebers, Even though he is no longer in their jurisdiction.* (From CNN, Jan.16, 2003)

In this news item, Siebers is a convicted sex offender and is very dangerous. We all know “whether Martin Chavez is in their jurisdiction or not” is not relevant to the topic of the news. But here, the violating of the maxim of relevance by using vague hedge language “even though” just aims to emphasize the seriousness of this event and also give a very brief account of mayor Martin Chavez since readers may intend to get something more about him.

#### D. Violation of the Maxim of Manner

The maxim of manner requires the information to be brief and orderly avoids obscurity and ambiguity as well. However, in news, hedges like *probably, sort of, might, some, nearly, around, approximately*, etc are preferred to use frequently.

For Example:

(5) *According to the Foundation, there are millions of college students in China living in poverty, accounting for 20 percent of the total. So far, about 2,000 poor college students have benefited from the giant-in-aid set up by the foundation.*

*Mobilizing more social organizations to subsidize education could be an effective way to address the needs of impoverished groups in colleges, the Foundation said.* (From CNN, Jan.23, 2003)

(6) *The warning came as Official figures showed that retail sales in June were 3.4 percent up on a year ago, slightly less than expected, adding to the case for rates to be kept on hold.* (From Times, July19, 2007)

In these above examples, although the phrases “millions of college students”, “about 2,000 poor college students” and “slightly less than expected” are employed ensure the quality maxim, yet they are lacking in adequate evidence. It's

apparent that the reporter violates the MAXIM OF MANNER. According to manner maxim, the news language is intended to avoid ambiguity and be brief. Obviously, those phrases are not fit for the manner maxim, but they adapt themselves to the nature of the news.

## V. CONCLUSION

From the above specific analysis with the help of the cooperative principle in pragmatics, we can easily find out how important the vague language takes part in the newspaper appreciations. To sum up, the major findings of the paper are revealed: for one thing, vague language in news usually violates the Quality, Quantity, Manner and Relevance Maxim of the Cooperative Principle due to different reasons like special situations. For another, the usages of the vague language promote the expressive effects of the news item and give the readers a lot of things to think and meditate. Thirdly, the paper may have some suggestions on vague language expressions, which lead students to care more about how to use vague language in appropriate ways. So vague language is intended to help speakers to manage their remarks and create a good understanding for both domestic and international development.

The present paper may also have some theoretical implications to other linguistic researches and practical values as well. First of all, this paper promotes the development of pragmatic theories. From the angle of pragmatic function, it extends the cooperative principle to cover a special sphere—the vague language used in news. Secondly, it enhances foreign language learning and educating. Frequently there is too much misunderstanding arising in the process of learning a language, which may result in the inability to include appropriate vague expressions either in spoken or written forms. The paper may have some implications on foreign language education which may lead students to pay more attention to and learn to use vague language.

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