The Vagueness in Chinese Address Terms

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Abstract—Vagueness is a ubiquitous phenomenon in language. It refers to the finite area and lack of specification of its boundary, and differs from ambiguity. All vague terms share three characteristics: indeterminacy of meaning; determinacy of meaning; and variation. Ambiguity may cause problem or misunderstanding in talking, while vagueness can solve problem and provide more choices for us. Some Chinese address terms are vague to some extent, and the extensive use of them is the most evident manifestation of vagueness. This paper illustrates the vagueness in Chinese address terms particularly with abundant examples.

Index Terms—vagueness, ambiguity, vague terms, Chinese address terms

I. Introduction

In daily communication, especially in social life other than usual scientific research, we must admit the existence of vagueness, which helps solve some language problems. So we should not avoid vagueness in communication. Not everything is so accurate as the scientific data. When we emphasize accuracy, we should also bear in mind that we can only be accurate in a comparative sense.

When studying language, people used to regard language as symbols with exact meanings referring to exact things. Some scholars have taken exactness as the principle and pointed out some models in analyzing language. However, many phenomena cannot be explained in this way. For example componential analysis cannot give clear demarcation of the words *girl* and *woman*. It is due to the ignorance of the attribute of language: vagueness. This study focuses on the vagueness in Chinese address terms.

II. Universality of Vagueness in Language

A. Universality of Vagueness

Vagueness of language is a universal phenomenon. As an attribute of natural language, vagueness is embodied in various aspects of language such as speech sounds, words meaning, syntactic rules, etc. More and more scholars have probed this field, but they still have different opinions on what vagueness refers to. In this paper, vagueness refers to the kind of attribute that the boundary of the meaning that a word denotes is not fixed. By introducing different aspects of vague terms, the most obvious embodiment of vagueness of language, this paper expounds the attribute and tries to enhance readers' understanding of vague terms from the angle of semantics to reveal the feasibility of the existence of vague terms.

Comparatively, vagueness embodied in semantic field is much clearer and vague terms are the obvious demonstration of the attribute whatever they are observed in written language or spoken language. As the linguistic form of vagueness of language, vague terms are often heard in daily life or used in kinds of styles of written language. Here is an example in daily life:

A: Which one would you like to have?
B: The *blue* one.
A: The *deep blue*?
B: Yes.

The vague word "blue" is hard to define, because in daily life, people seldom recognize the color according to spectrum except the scientists in their studying. People have no knowledge about the scientific boundary between "light blue" and "deep blue", but it does not give any difficulty to people for their understanding of each other. So we can say vague terms can transmit information and people can understand them, or there won't be such cases in the above example.

B. Vagueness and Ambiguity

We know that there is no clear-cut criteria to distinguish the boundaries of *city* and *town* or other expressions such as *mountain* and *hill*, *forest* and *wood*. Likewise we can not draw an evident demarcation line between 青年(young men) to the set 中年(middle-aged men). There is a gradual transition from 青年 to 中年. That process is not abrupt. That is to say the conversion from 青年 to 中年 can not be completed by one step. There is a fuzzy area between them. Such a phenomenon is what we called "vagueness". It refers to the finite area and lack of specification of its boundary.

Peirce is often considered as the originator of vagueness of language. He formulates the notion in this way: 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 regard them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habits of language were indeterminate; so that one day he would regard the proposition as excluding, another as admitting, those states of things. Yet this must be understood to have reference to what might be deduced from a perfect knowledge of his state of mind; for it is precisely because those questions never did, or did nor frequently, present themselves that his habit remained indeterminate. (Channell, 2000, p.7) That is to say, the language system permits speakers to produce utterances without having decided whether certain facts are "excluded or allowed by" them.

According to *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* (Hadumod Bussmann,   2000, p.510), vagueness is a "term complementary to ambiguity: whereas ambiguity refers to ambiguousness which in the framework of grammatical model is represented through multiple description, vagueness in the sense of pragmatic indeterminacy is predictable, but not the object of internal linguistic representation. An expression is pragmatically vague with respect to certain semantic features which it leaves unspecified; e.g. person is not specified with reference to the features [male] vs [female], [old] vs [young]."

Thus, we know that vagueness and ambiguity defers with each other. Hadumod Bussmann (2000, p.19) defines "ambiguity" as a "property of expressions that can be interpreted in several ways, or, rather, that can be multiply specified in linguistic description from lexical, semantic, syntactic, and other aspects." Lexical ambiguity arises from multiple meanings of a particular word. e.g.

(a) John is drawing a cart. (John is pulling a cart.)
(b) John is drawing a cart. (John is making a picture of a cart.)

The above ambiguity results from the two meanings of "draw", that is, "pull" and "make a picture". While for the syntactic ambiguity, it refers to the phenomenon that a clause or a sentence may have more than one interpretation because of potential grammatical functions of the individual words. For example:

(a) Flying planes can be dangerous. (Planes that are flying are dangerous.)
(b) Flying planes can be dangerous. (It is dangerous to make planes fly.)

"In this sense, ambiguity is different from the complementary term vagueness as a designation for pragmatic ambiguousness or indeterminacy, which cannot be systematically described."

Ambiguity can be solved or represented (a) by a competent speaker, who can clarify the different readings with the help of paraphrases, (b) by grammatical analysis, for instance, within the framework of generative syntax models, which accord each possible interpretation of ambiguous surface structures with different underlying structures."

Vagueness of language is a ubiquitous phenomenon in communication. Ambiguity can cause problem or misunderstanding in talking, while vagueness can solve problem and provide more choices for us. For that reason, ambiguity is a problem-maker, and on the contrary, vagueness can be called a problem-solver. Usually we try to make things as exact as possible, and avoid ambiguity as much as possible. But we do not avoid vagueness in communication because not everything is so accurate as the scientific data. We need vagueness to describe some vague concepts. When we do not have an accurate idea, we can turn to vagueness for help.

III.   TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF VAGUE TERMS

A.   Types of Vague Terms

Generally, there are two main types of vague terms. One is words with vague boundaries, and the other is hedge. Since hedge is usually discussed in the pragmatic phenomenon, it will not be discussed here. Words with vague boundaries are generally divided into four types: continuum, comparative type, words which express abstract concepts, and generic words.

Continuum includes words about colors, time, age, etc, which might be nouns or adjectives. And the main characteristic of them is that they are in a continuum and there is no clear cut between adjacent ones. In the previous part of this article, we mentioned the color of "blue" and "deep blue", as well as Chinese 青年 and 中年, which all belong to this type. Words about "time" are included into this type is also because they all share the obvious characteristics: continuum. During a *day, dawn, morning, noon, afternoon, dusk, evening, night* constitute a continuum. There is no sharp demarcation to divide one from an adjacent one.

The second type is comparative type. In the theory of semantic fields, words are all interdependent and interrelated. Some words get meaning only through comparison, like *big, small, fat, thin*. How big is big? And how fat is fat? There is no clear definition for it. The meanings of them vary with their collocations. Suppose *big* and *small* are collocated with *ant* and *elephant*. It's clear that *a big ant* cannot be bigger than *a small elephant*. The meanings of the two adjectives depend on the noun collocating with them. When people talk about the weight of someone, fat and thin usually have a comparatively limited field. How much weight makes a person belong to the category of "fat" on the earth? There is no clear standard for it.

The third type is about the words with abstract concepts. Different people usually perceive these words differently and it also depends on one's subjective judge. For example, the word "friend" holds an abstract concept. Its meaning usually is interpreted by comparing to others such as acquaintance, intimate, etc. and people with different experiences, backgrounds hold different understanding. Wu Tieping (1999) demonstrates many examples to show that people from

different countries give different understanding of the word *friend*: American likes to use the word *friend*, while the word is used more seriously in German. The person an American calls a *friend* might at least be a *Bekannter* (acquaintances) in a German's opinion, and *Freund* (friend) called by German usually keeps a more intimate relation than *friend* in an American's view. This also tells that those words showing abstract concepts usually are vague and the meaning of them varies to certain degree with people.

Type four is generic words. As for this type, Zadeh (1987, p.29) has made a clear explanation by talking about "animal". "More often than not, the classes of objects encountered in the real physical world do not have precisely defined criteria of membership. For example, the class of animal clearly includes dogs, horses, birds, etc. as its members, and clearly excludes such objects as rocks, fluids, plants, etc. however, such objects as starfish, bacteria, etc. have an ambiguity status with respect to the class of animals."

B.   Characteristics of Vague Terms

Words with vague boundaries share three characteristics: indeterminacy of meaning; determinacy of meaning; and variation.(Zhang Qiao, 1998) Leech has broken down "meaning" in its widest sense into seven different kinds and gives primary importance to conceptual meaning. Vagueness of word meaning discussed here is from its conceptual meaning. But the other six kinds of meaning should not be ignored, because the vagueness embodied in word meaning might be from the word connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, collocative meaning, associative meaning or thematic meaning.

(1) Indeterminacy of meaning

The meanings of some words sometimes are boundariless, as has been mentioned in the previous part of this article. It is believed that recognizing this feature is essential for a genuine understanding of vagueness and an account of its semantics. The vagueness is a degree of deviation from model language, which is the indeterminate part of meaning. The difficulty in delimitating boundary lines between *young* and *old, warm* and *cool, desk* and *table* good exemplifies the indeterminacy of the meaning of vague terms.

(2) Determinacy of meaning

Determinacy of meaning is not contradictory with the above indeterminacy of meaning. Because the determinacy of meaning refers to the core meaning, instead of the extensional meaning. No vague terms are said to be completely vague. Though different people have different opinion on how big is big, all people believe among the animals an elephant is a big one. So the core meaning of a vague term is not vague and this makes people able to understand it.

(3) Variation

This characteristic can be seen from two aspects: the variation between vagueness and exactness of meaning and the variation of word meaning itself. The first is connected with people's prescription or the linguistic habit formed by long period. Big and small is a pair of vague terms. But people don't regard *big mountain* and *small river* as words with vague meanings any more because people have such a linguistic habit. The second is influenced by kinds of subjective or objective factors. The meaning of a word can shift. Accordingly, the meaning of a vague term may vary basing on different situation. We do not call a person who is in his forties a *young man*. But if this man is a president of a country, we usually say he is young. So the word *young* is interpreted differently.

IV.   THE VAGUENESS IN CHINESE ADDRESS FORMS

A.   The Definition of Address Terms

Address terms, called "address forms" as well, are frequently used in daily interactions. To define it, however, is not an easy task because it involves many aspects. There are various definitions, which were made from different perspectives. A brief review of them may shed some light on our understanding of address terms.

(1) The word or words used to address somebody, in speech and writing. (Richard et al., 1985, p.4)

(2) An address term is a numerically and attitudinally-marked designator which (a) functions as a particle to pronominal "you" to form a notionally paradigmatic phrasal "you"; (b) consists of names, words, or a combination of both; (c) is used for the benefit of a speaker, an addressee, or a third-party hearer either optionally or necessarily for grammatical, practical, social, emotional, or externally-imposed reasons. (Dunkling, 1990, p.22)

(3) Address forms are the words speakers use to designate the person they are talking to while they are talking to them. In most languages, there are two main kinds of address forms: names and second-person pronouns. (Fasold, 2000, p.1)

(4) Forms of address are words or phrases used for addressing. They refer to the collocutor and thus contain a strong element of deixis. (Braun, 1988, p.7)

(5) A form used to refer to, or to name a person directly in speech or writing. (Wales, 1992, p.9)

(6) By "address" we mean a vocative, a direct reference to the addressee such as "Mr." or "Mrs.". "Term" is best defined by Oster as designating a value judgment that qualifies the formality of "address" according to certain invariable (social position and the like) but more often according to the situation. (Lee-Wong, 1994, p.229)

These definitions define address terms from different point of view. Fasold (2000, p.3) tells us that we must carefully distinguish "address forms" from "summonses". Address forms are used when a speaker already has the listener's attention; summonses are used to get their attention. This can be an important distinction. As a matter of fact, it is common for American English speakers to get the attention of any adult male by calling him "sir", but it would most likely sound

overly stiff to use "sir" once you have his attention. The definition of Dunkling (1990, p.22) is an all-around way, which is a little hard to understand. The definition of Richard et al and Wales are somewhat much easier to comprehend. No matter whose definition it is, it is not difficult to find that the definition of address terms covers following aspects: (a) Address terms are the words or phrases used for addressing people. They are different from address forms, which require directly addressing. (b) They can be in the form of either writing or speech. (c) They indicate the relationship between the addresser and addressee. (d) They include names, kinship terms, titles, pronouns, etc. such as 小明; 姐姐; 教授; 二位.

In the selection of materials for this study, the author found a lot of equivalents or similar expressions for "address terms", such as forms of address, address forms, terms of address, modes of address, addressing terms, etc. In this paper, "address terms" are adopted in a broad sense, for making reference to the addressee (pronouns, transferred names, titles, common nouns, offensive and endearment terms, etc.).

B. The Vagueness in Chinese Address Terms

Vague terms generally are divided into two categories. One is word with vague boundaries, and the other is hedge. As for the word with vague boundaries, we have words which express abstract concepts, such as address terms. There exist some things or some activities that human being found impossible to express. Thus they are taken as vague because there is no clear boundary to fix their meanings and the meanings might vary in certain degree because of kinds of factors. There are many address terms which are vague, such as "同志", "小姐", etc. But only "朋友" , "叔叔" and "阿姨" will be discussed here.

(1) Address Term "朋友"

Different people usually perceive these words differently and it also depends on one's subjective judge. For example, the word "朋友(friend)" holds an abstract concept. Its meaning usually is interpreted by comparing to others such as acquaintance, intimate, etc. and people with different experiences, backgrounds hold different understanding. Wu Tieping (1999) demonstrates many examples to show that people from different countries give different understanding of the word *friend*: American likes to use the word *friend*, while the word is used more seriously in German. The person an American calls a *friend* might at least be a *Bekannter* (acquaintances) in a German's opinion, and *Freund* (friend) called by German usually keeps a more intimate relation than *friend* in an American's view. This also tells that those words showing abstract concepts usually are vague and the meaning of them varies to certain degree with people.

While, this holds true for some Chinese address terms, like 熟人(acquaintance), 朋友(friend), 知己(bosom friend), which are used to describe a certain kind of relationship between people at hierarchical degrees. At first they are defined separately and clearly to show the intimacy or indifference degrees between people.

熟人(acquaintance): A person that you know but who is not a close friend.

朋友(friend):　　　A person you know well and like, and who is not usually a member of your family.

知己(bosom friend): A very close friend.

These definitions are all from *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (Sixth edition)*. However, in actual speech, for some intended purposes, we can mix up the intimacy or indifference degrees between them to show liking or disliking. In that way they overlap each other pragmatically. Therefore, some vague areas arise.

From the above definitions, we get the rough idea that both the definition of 熟人 and 知己 are based on 朋友. In fact, there is no very clear boundary line between them. A 熟人 is "a person that you know", but how much do you know him? A 知己 is "a very close friend", but how close are you? So we may call someone 朋友, when he is only a 熟人, or when he is a 知己 indeed. We often mix them up in practice no matter what they mean in original, because daily communication possesses an important feature of flexibility and it is unnecessary to make a clear-cut between them. So when we apply address terms in actual use, the denotative meaning of them will be left behind.

(2) Kinship Terms "叔叔" and "阿姨"

We have noticed another noticeable phenomenon, that is the extensive use of kinship terms, which are one of the important parts of address terms. Such extensive use, in fact, is the most evident manifestation of vagueness in Chinese.

The extensive use of kinship terms refers to use kinship terms to address those who are not the relatives of the addresser. China is a country which worships politeness, and Chinese people tend to call someone by kinship terms even if he or she is still a stranger to us. For example, when asking the way, we had better call an old woman "大娘", otherwise we are considered to be impolite. Likely, there are "叔叔(uncle)"and "阿姨(aunt)".

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (Sixth edition)*, "aunt" is originally defined as "the sister of your father or mother; the wife of your uncle". Later there is an extended usage of it, that is "aunt: used by children, with a first name, to address a woman who is a friend of their parents." Till today, we may call a female doorman "阿姨", as long as she is not too old or too young. But actually we have no kinship with her at all.

Similarly, "叔叔" has similar function. However, we all know that "叔叔" refers to "the younger brother of one's father". As for "the elder brother of one's father", we have a word "伯伯". They take the age of father as a demarcation line. But for the extensive use of them, when addressing a man, we do not think too much whether the man is younger or older than our fathers. So nowadays 叔叔 and 伯伯 are used to address any man older or younger than one's father, though not a member of one's family. They become vague in two ways: no more limitation for age; no more limitation for kinship.

V. Conclusion

In daily communication, especially in social life other than usual scientific research, we must admit the existence of vagueness. We do not avoid vagueness in communication because not everything is so accurate as the scientific data. When we emphasize accuracy, we should also bear in mind that we can only be accurate in a comparative sense. When we do not have an accurate idea, we can turn to vagueness for help. We need vagueness to describe some vague concepts.

An important concept concerned with the extended Chinese addresses is the vagueness in language since the extensive use of address forms is the most evident manifestation of vagueness in Chinese.

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