

Vague Language in Business Negotiation—From a Pragmatics Perspective

Dongmei Zhao

Yantai Automobile Engineering Professional College, China

Junling Nie

Ludong University, China

Abstract—Business negotiation is a complex process of communication. It is generally believed that, using precise language is encouraged for fear of causing misunderstanding and inconvenience in business negotiation. However, from this point of view, it ignores a fact that vagueness is an inherent property of human language. Since the fuzzy theory was put forward in the 1960s, scholars have made much systematic researches on vague language from various perspectives only to find that the initial study on semantics can not thoroughly explain the linguistic phenomenon. So they preferred to a comprehensive and profound analysis from the perspective of pragmatics. Gradually, the pragmatic value and significance has been reflected. As a matter of fact, in business negotiation, using vague language has been regarded as a kind of frequently-used and effective negotiation strategy to achieve certain communicative purpose. As one of the pragmatic strategies in business negotiation, vague language is of great importance which should be highly expected. Therefore, the author hopes that the present study may be of some significance in enriching the researches on vague language. Meanwhile, the study can draw some inspiration to negotiators and some reference to business English teaching. Because the appropriate use of vagueness can help negotiators to communicate smoothly and achieve their goals successfully.

Index Terms—business negotiations, vagueness language, pragmatics

I. INTRODUCTION

The basic criteria of traditional linguistics are clearness and correctness. However, due to the ambiguous boundaries of objective entity and incomplete understanding on the different observed perspectives, it is inevitable to use vague language when we are inconsistent in using language. Vague language has never been given necessary attention to for a long time. Fuzzy linguistics was set up after American professor Zadeh proposed the concept of vagueness and created new scientific thought way. However, the study on pragmatic significance and functions of vagueness in Business English is far from enough. The previous studies on vagueness mainly focused on the framework of Grice's Politeness Principle, Leech's Politeness Principle and Verschueren's linguistic adaptation, interpreting vagueness from the perspectives of semantics, psychology, logic and cognitive context. Less attention has been paid, however, to the pragmatic motivations, functions and vagueness in business negotiation. Therefore, in order to make up this insufficiency, this paper hopes to have a good inspiration for business negotiators and business English teaching and learning.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Abroad Pragmatic Study on Vague Language in Business Negotiation*

As we know, the correct use of polite and considerate language will greatly promote the effect of negotiations and accelerate the realization of negotiating goals. A refined and courteous speech can make a negotiator set up an honest and enthusiastic image with good artistic appreciation and professional ethics in the eyes of the counterpart. Sometimes, to convey an intended message, for some reasons, the negotiator may partially flout certain maxims by using vague language. For years, pragmatics has been viewed as a branch of linguistics. This notion is challenged by Verschueren, secretary-general of the International Pragmatics Association, who argues in his latest work *Understanding Pragmatics* (Verschueren, 1999) that pragmatics is a perspective on language, social and the investigation of language phenomena should take the cognitive, cultural forces functioning into account in the employment and interpretation of language.

B. *The Pragmatic Study of Vague Language in Business Negotiation at Home*

The first person who introduced fuzzy-set theory to China is Wu Tiejing, who published the famous article about fuzzy linguistics entitled "Discussion about Fuzzy Language". In his work *Fuzzy Linguistics*, Wu Tiejing contributes seven pages to the discussion of vagueness, which mainly focuses on the classification of vagueness. Wu Tiejing studies vagueness mainly from the perspective of semantics. Finally the author studies the psychological motivations that partly account for the adoption of vague language. It is shown that the pragmatic functions vague language has can

properly serve the negotiators' communicative purposes. As well, there are still some specific studies, for example, from the angle of classifications and features of vague language employed in business negotiation: structural vagueness, hedges, question-answer type (Gan, 2005).

In summary, most of researches on vagueness are concentrated on the politeness principle, cooperative principle, adaptation theory and related theory, at the same time in semantics, pragmatics, psychology and cognitive research context are more detailed, but they are out of touch with reality of discourse, language material. This paper mainly from the perspective of vagueness in pragmatics combined with the specific case of business negotiation, to the purpose of using vagueness in business negotiation context more scientific, reasonable and systematic.

III. BUSINESS NEGOTIATION AND LANGUAGE FEATURES

A. *Business Negotiation*

As defined in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word "negotiate" can express the following meanings: 1. to try to reach an agreement by formal discussion; 2. to arrange or agree something by formal discussion; 3. to successfully get over or past a difficult part on a path or route. And the word "negotiation" refers to a formal discussion between people who are trying to reach an agreement. Hence, in a negotiation, more than one party should be involved, and they must have both common and different interests and goals. For their final goal is to reach an agreement by discussion on their interests and goals, the negotiation should be a cooperation at the same time. In this process of cooperation, both parties should share common and open information and try to grasp the idea of each other. They are all hold equal status in negotiation and mutual benefits. This is the basic factor of business negotiation. Both parties should be sincere to each other since all parties involved are attempting for better negotiation result of win-win situation rather than a win-lose one.

Importantly, not all information and intentions should be released to other parties. Some flexibility and fluid are necessary in the process of negotiation. Also, all parties in a negotiation should be aware of their common and conflicting objectives and try to reach common and complementary goals acceptable to each of them. In business negotiation, all things are negotiable and each party in the negotiation should find a way to achieve the greatest concessions but leaving the other parties just enough to maintain them interested in the deal.

B. *Language Features in Business Negotiation*

Business negotiation is a commercial activity full of wisdom, courage, art and technique of wits. The wits are the negotiators language exchange process. The key to a successful business negotiation is to coordinate the various negotiation languages.

Business negotiation language includes audio language, paralanguage and written language. Audio language is spoken language, it is the main language of negotiation, because the negotiating table is a place where oral language highly centralized. Paralanguage refers to the nonverbal language and body language with spoken language. In addition, silence is also a kind of the language. Silence and body language constitute nonverbal language. In the process of negotiation, it sometimes can play an unexpected rule. In face-to-face negotiation, written negotiation language mainly refers to a language symbol file to formulate plans for negotiation, write negotiation scheme, record the negotiations. Sometimes, negotiation can not always reach a deal. It also needs correspondence consultations. So, correspondence is a kind of written language. Written language mainly plays the role of put down in black and white. A transaction cannot do without these three aspects' coordination. The reason why language users can make the appropriate choice in the process of using language is that language has variability, negotiability and adaptability. The three features are fundamentally linked together.

IV. VAGUENESS IN BUSINESS NEGOTIATION

This paper does detailed research and analysis in one of pragmatic strategies in business negotiations. Vagueness, as one of the pragmatic strategies plays an important role in business negotiation.

A. *Definition of Vagueness*

Qiu Tianhe (2000) pointed out that: In international business negotiations, sometimes due to inconvenience or unwilling to put their true thoughts exposed to each other, or to test each other's intentions, negotiators can use hedges to output vague information, avoid too sure, make the negotiators at ease, leave the necessary leeway.

There are two properties of vagueness, one is despite clear boundaries of the concept, but in fact it is difficult to define, the most typical example is used to describe the vocabulary of time, such as "morning", "afternoon", "evening", "night", "midday" etc. The boundaries between these words and phrases are ambiguity, there is a transition zone. This uncertainty also exists in the description of seasons. Another class of fuzzy language refers to the meaning expressed by itself is not completely determined the scope, description is actually a kind of the degree of relative concepts, understanding of its line is made according to different conditions. To understand this type of words can easily be the influenced by subjective factors. People of different age, cultural background will produce totally different understanding.

B. *The Classification of Vagueness*

According to He ziran, there are two kinds of vagueness called approximators and shields. The approximators can be divided into adaptors and rounders. Shields can be divided into direct and indirect hedges. According to the commodity exchange and business negotiation feature Gan Changyin in his paper "on fuzzy language in business negotiations" divide approximators into four types. They are commodity quality vagueness, commodity prices vagueness, time vagueness and other vagueness, on the basis of his study, the author list the number vagueness.

Commodity quality vagueness is used to describe the quality of commodity, such as good, high, superior, top excellent, reliable, acceptable, satisfactory, up to one's standard, (seriously)damaged etc. Commodity prices vagueness is used to describe the price of commodity, such as (most) favorable, (un)workable, attractive, reasonable, competitive, bottom/floor price etc.

Time vagueness is often involved in business negotiation. They refer to acceptance, delivery, shipment etc. vagueness, such as in a few days, in the near future, promptly, immediately, urgently, in recent years, as soon as possible, not later than etc. In order not to let each other know themselves, business negotiators often use number vagueness to vague supply orders sufficient or not. Such as quite, really, entirely, to some extent, a bit, a few, substantial, more or less, around, about etc. Other vagueness refers to the hedges except all above.

Direct vagueness, it mainly refers to negotiators' advice and opinions in uncertainty tone without exposing to the other. They are also called expressions of euphemism, such as I think, I believe, I assume, I suppose, I understand, as far as I know, I wonder, to tell the truth etc. Indirect vagueness involves three kinds of pronouns. The first person usually with passive tone, the second person usually express the conditions the other person has known, the third person often uses it as the subject to express the objective

For vague language, uncertainty, imprecision, relativity are its essential features. For example, the sentence "The price seems to be a little bit high" is a vague expression. In this sentence, "a little bit" and "high" can not tell the hearer how high the price is or the exact degree of "high". Also, the word "high" is being discussed corresponding to the notion of "low". Without the notion of "low", there isn't anything that we can describe it by "high".

V. PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF VAGUENESS IN BUSINESS NEGOTIATION

A. *Reasons for the Existence of Vague Language in Business Negotiation*

The human world is complex, so are the items in the objective world. Though the human language is full of content, it is limited to express all of the items all around the world. And sometimes it is hard for people to determine the boundaries or the scope of certain concepts. For example, in the sentence "I think it is a little expensive." Maybe nobody can define how much expensive and how much cheap as the boundaries of "expensive" and "cheap" is not clear. The very standard of being "expensive" and "a little" is not clear. In business negotiation, negotiators often use such kinds of vague expressions to convey their intentions without offending other parties. So in business negotiation, the speaker is sometimes unable to use precise expressions. Instead, the vague language is employed to save the negotiators from memory loss or lack of related knowledge.

But under some other circumstances, the use of vague language is owing to the speaker's unwillingness to be more precise when it is unnecessary to be precise or specific purposes must be achieved. Business negotiation is a complex activity. In business negotiation, sometimes, the negotiators have no authority or they are inconvenient to respond to some issues, then, vague language should be used. To promote business relations with other parties and realize commercial purposes, negotiators usually adopt vague language, for it enables to remove bad effects brought by being absolute, direct and open. Hence, we can see that the use of vague language is adopted mainly in the aspects of contextual influence in business negotiation and psychological factors of negotiators.

B. *The Main Factors Influencing Vagueness in Business Negotiation*

In the process of language expression, the speaker often conveys beyond the language itself, to achieve this objective, the speaker must master the vagueness language expression. In addition, the hearer must also have the ability to fully understand the significance of all speakers' expression. Besides the cognition rule, psychological factors influence people's using vagueness, there are other important factors that restrict people's speech behavior. Here are from H.P. Grice's Cooperative Principle and G. H. Leech's Politeness Principle to analysis the reasons leading to the use of vagueness in verbal communication.

In order to achieve successful communication, both conversation sides need to work together, follow certain principles. Linguist, H. P. Grice believes that both negotiation sides should abide by some principles of cooperation, in order to achieve the purpose of communication. The cooperative principle includes the following criteria: the first is maxim of quantity. The second is maxim of quality. The third is maxim of relevance. The fourth is maxim of manner. In business negotiation, people often use vagueness to violate one or more language criteria, to achieve a particular purpose.

The politeness principle can explain why people in verbal communication using hedges, euphemism, indirect and flexible expression. In terms of vagueness, if used properly, can make the word appear manners polite, make both parties get understanding and respect, which helps to achieve ideal communication. In daily communication, some speech actions threaten the other's face in essence, namely Face Threatening Acts. To have a face to each other, to

maintain good social relations, negotiations are conducted in a peaceful and friendly atmosphere, as a result, which will realize communicative purpose, then polite language play a significant role.

C. *Pragmatic Functions of Vagueness in Business Negotiation*

One of the characteristics of the application of vague language in BN is its being intentional and deliberate. If something is intentionally or purposely employed, it must have some special functions that others do not possess. The following is an analysis of these functions or effects, brought about by the application of vague language in BN. Based on the BN data so far collected, the functions brought about by the application of vague language can be condensed into five aspects, including, being flexible, giving the right amount of information, being persuasive, self-protection and being polite. And these functions are not strictly separated, sometimes they have overlapping areas.

D. *Pragmatic Motivations of Vagueness in Business Negotiation English*

The language of negotiation is full of fuzzy expressions. It is very common that vagueness may be used in the description of products or services. Theoretically speaking, vagueness can be interpreted as a source of potential deception in certain context. The following commonly used vagueness is likely to mislead the hearers in a text-based situation, such as virtually, almost, about, or so, etc. Negotiators also use vague language for self-protection, which is meant that vagueness can vague the relationship between the speaker and the audience. On the one hand, vagueness has been widely used as a way to reduce the risk of opposition and to protect the speakers. On the other hand, vagueness is used to create fuzziness or vagueness of certain statements in case being later shown to be wrong. However, to avoid taking responsibility later and for the purpose of protecting themselves, they will use vague expressions.

The previous analysis shows that negotiators use vagueness to avoid later negation and to escape from responsibility. Therefore, self-protection, as the instinct of all human beings, should be people's motivation to employ vagueness in negotiation.

VI. VAGUENESS IN BUSINESS NEGOTIATION ENGLISH TEACHING

A. *The Degree of Vagueness in Business Negotiations*

Qiu Tianhe (2000) points out that: In international business negotiations, sometimes due to some reason inconvenience or unwilling to put their true thoughts exposed to each other, or to test each other intentions, the negotiator can use vagueness to output vague information, avoid too sure, make the other feel at ease, leave the necessary leeway. Degree is decisive to the quantitative limits. The limit points to degree are called critical points. Qualitative change happens if quantitative change beyond the critical point, vice versa. (Wang, 1995) We can not only see vagueness play positive role in business negotiation but also pay attention to avoiding the negative effects. Vagueness whether used appropriate or decent depends on the vagueness degree the negotiators master. That is to say, vagueness in business must be controlled within vagueness degree, defined within the people can understand, and achieve the expected communication effect, otherwise it will cause language ambiguity.

Business English serve business activities as the goal, set practicality, professionalism and a clear purpose, and require accurate words, clear expression. Therefore, where must use the clear expression that we cannot adopt fuzzy expression, otherwise that will make incorrect judgment, restrict the right of information transmission, be easy to cause confusion and misunderstanding, result in negative effects.

Vagueness and precisions are the basic attributes of human language. Language fuzziness and accuracy were well interdependent in language system. Language communication requires both precise and vague, which is the same with business English. In different categories of business English, fuzzy language plays a variety of pragmatic functions. Vagueness pragmatic strategy has become an indispensable part of the international business negotiation. In the context of international business communications, properly using vagueness pragmatic strategy, grasping the degree of vagueness pragmatic strategy can make expression more flexible and vivid, make business English euphemism and accuracy. What is more, business English language can appear more rigorous and appropriate.

B. *Cultivate Using Vague Language in Business Negotiation*

Using vague language in business negotiation is an important ability. We favor Faerch and Kasper's point of view: teaching should be in all aspects of their consciousness of behavior, teach students the use of communication strategy, especially the use of oral English pragmatic strategies.

To better cultivate students the ability to use of vague language, first of all, we design choice task that should reflect real business negotiation activities, real communication purpose and the real role. Select tasks should not be too difficult or too easy, should according to the situation of the students, the task should let students feel the psychological pressure of real communication environment. Task design should follow the following principles: Reaction principle is that task needed to include knowledge and skills to process information, including the understanding, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, response, consultation and debate. In the process of the business mission to make the students experience how to utilize the positive pragmatic strategy.

Teaching methods from lectures or cramming education way to interactive activity pattern, let students participate in a lot of interactive language practice, to master foreign language communication skills. After determining the task and

the aim, we should create a real classroom context, stimulates the students' interest to participate in the activities. We can program the steps or phases interactive business activities in accordance with the business negotiation, provide more practice opportunities for students to better grasp the vagueness pragmatic strategy. Negotiation procedures generally include topic leads, express demand, bargaining, break the deadlock, concessions and agreement. According to the above each negotiation program or the whole negotiation program or negotiating style, social activities, the students pay attention to the negotiation process involved in the process of negotiating language features and language skills.

Vagueness pragmatics in business negotiation application enlightens our teaching. We should pay attention to the understanding of language and language expression, they are two different kinds of language information processing and their use of vagueness pragmatics are also having differences. Negotiators must pay attention to the communication object, to study the gender, age, educational level, occupation, faith, love, the pursuit, experience, personality and psychological characteristics. Negotiators pay attention to scene occasions: time, place, content, intention, and the relationship between the communicator level; pay attention to the social and cultural norms. Negotiators should according the specific situation to choosing the appropriate positive vagueness pragmatic strategy, prevent abuse vagueness strategy in all occasions, leading to a negative pragmatic failure. In foreign language teaching, we can use the explicit method of teaching, trains the student to deal with cross cultural strategy. Raise students' vagueness awareness and deal with communication difficulties in students' social language and vagueness language consciousness. Teachers at the early stage can give students knowledge of the mission and social vagueness pragmatic materials, guides the student to pay attention to the unpredictable situations. As a result, in the process of performing tasks students can experience social vagueness language, understand the intention of the speaker, and then choose the appropriate language and vagueness pragmatic strategy. After the participation and communication task, ask students to discuss and evaluate the use of vagueness pragmatic strategies, deepen the students' vagueness pragmatic consciousness.

In activities of foreign language teaching, we emphasize the independence and initiative of students. Students often observe and experience the use of vagueness pragmatic strategies actively through the independent participation in interactive activities. Students should be actively involved in the communicative classroom activities, observing others using appropriate vagueness strategies to solve problems to evaluate their different communicative effects and the advantages and disadvantages while using different vagueness strategies. The most important is that trying to communicate and contact with foreign teachers in higher English level, which uses the communication context and vagueness pragmatic strategy in practice.

VII. CONCLUSION

Vagueness is an important phenomenon of language. The present study focuses the attention on the vagueness pragmatic study in business negotiation English, which is an important yet has not pragmatic interpretation and functions been explored thoroughly. After probing several major findings are made. The pragmatic interpretation of vagueness in business negotiation English discourse and categories that appear most often discussed. The vagueness pragmatic motivations of hedging are found to be deception and self-protection. And the vagueness pragmatic functions in business negotiation English are found to be expressive, reliable and objective, flexible, efficient and polite.

There are several limitations in the present study. Firstly, it is a challenging job to collect data for a corpus analysis of a pragmatic phenomenon. Most of the reference books of the study are written by foreign researchers, and the examples in them are also from real business communication, all of which help to improve the reliability of the analysis and the result. Although much effort has been made in this respect, it still leaves much to be desired and the data collected are far from exhaustive. Secondly, similar to many linguistic studies, a major weakness is the lack of experimental support which makes the analyses more or less subjective. It would be better if the research also resorted to some experimental studies. Thirdly, the present study might also suffer from the problem of in exhaustiveness and over simplification to some degree. The analyses here are far from complete.

Further research is obviously demanded in the theoretical approach to vagueness where a number of issues remain unresolved. The most significant of these is to determine a means of more precisely distinguishing vagueness: a more principled means to differentiate examples and identity vague language uses is needed. In addition, the categories of vague language elaborated in the paper are far from inclusive. And the corpus study in a larger scale is required to make the study more objective and thorough.

In conclusion, vague language constitutes a rich and virtually valuable subject in linguistic analysis and further research of their forms, their frequencies and their functions in different contexts and cultures should be explored deeply in the future.

REFERENCES

- [1] He Zhaoxiong. (2003). *Selected Readings in Pragmatics*. Shanghai:Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [2] Gan Changyin. (2005). *Fussy Language in Business Negotiation*. *Journal of Southwest University For Nationalities*, 9,305-307.
- [3] Grice,H. Paul. (1975). *Logic and Conversation*. In P. Cole and Morgan(Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics*, Vo1.3: *Speech Acts*, New York: Academic Press.
- [4] Grice,H.Paul. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Harvard University Press.

- [5] Leech, G.N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- [6] Liu Daoying. (2008). Analysis the Fussy Strategies in International business negotiation. *Market Modernization*, 17,214-215.
- [7] Qiu Tianhe, (2000). Pragmatic Strategies Used in International Business and Trade negotiations. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 4,40-42
- [8] Tao Weihong. (2000). The Degree Category and Pragmatic Features in Language Communication. *Foreign Language Research*, 3, 17-18.
- [9] Wang Fang. (2009). The Degree to Cooperation Principle in Business English Writing. *The Literature of the Times*, 8, 115-116.
- [10] Wang Fang. (2009). The Degree to Politeness Principle in Business English Writing. *China Business & Trade*, 21, 194-195.
- [11] Wilson, D. & D. Sperber. (1981). On Grice's Theory of Conversation. In Paul Werth (ed.) *Conversation and-Discourse*: 155-78. London: Croom Helin.
- [12] Wilson, D. & D. Sperber. (1995). *Relevance: Cognition and Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [13] Wu Tiejing. (1999). *Fuzzy Linguistics*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [14] Zeng Wenxiong. (2002). Pragmatic Strategies in Business Negotiation. *Journal of Zunyi Normal College*, 3, 73-75.
- [15] Zhang Hong. (2007). The Positive Role of Fuzzy Language in Foreign Economic and Trade Negotiations. *Market Modernization*, 19, 26-27.
- [16] Zhang Qiao. (1998). *On Fuzzy Linguistics*. Dalian: Dalian Press.
- [17] Zhang Qiao. (1998). *On Fuzzy Linguistics*. Dalian: Dalian Press.
- [18] Zhang Weiwei, Zhang lixin. (2006). Hedges Strategies in Business Negotiation. *Foreign Language Research*, 33, 154.



Dongmei Zhao was born in Qinghai, China in 1977. She received her Bachelor Degree in English Education from Qinghai Normal University, Qinghai, China, in 2002, and Master degree in Education Management from Ludong University, Yantai, China in 2013.

She is currently a lecturer in Department of basic English, Yantai Automobile Engineering Professional College Yantai, China. Her research interests include English pragmatics and American literature.



Junling Nie was born in Shandong, China in 1988. She received her Bachelor Degree in English from Binzhou University, Shandong, China, in 2014. She is now a graduate student in English Department from Ludong University, Yantai, China.