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## Contents

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### REGULAR PAPERS

- A Pragmatic Analysis of Vague Language in the News Articles on the Iraqi Security Crisis 327  
*Huda H. Khalil*
- The Revival of Local Fairy Tales for Children Education 336  
*Fathu Rahman*
- Imperial Imagination in *Cymbeline* 345  
*Fangfang Zhang*
- The Effect of L1 Chinese Transfer on L2 English Learning: A Brief Review of the Research 350  
*Ming Li*
- Implementing Interest Based Instructional Materials to Minimize EFL Learners' Speaking Skills Demotivating Factors 356  
*Konder Manurung and Mashuri*
- On Development History of Australia's Language Policy and the Enlightenment to China's Foreign Language Education 366  
*Ye Zhou and Li Zou*
- An Investigation into Objective-based English Listening and Speaking Instruction 371  
*Ying Pan*
- An Analysis of Student's Ability in Writing at Riau University Pekanbaru - Indonesia 380  
*Jismulatif Hasan and Marzuki Marzuki*
- The Evolution of Concept of Popular Culture and Its Significance 389  
*Pengzhuo Deng*
- The Construction of Multi-dimensional Interaction Mode in College English Teaching 395  
*Xiaoqing Jiang*
- Critical Analysis of the Models of Language Proficiency with a Focus on Communicative Models 400  
*Seyyed Mohammad Reza Amirian, Hamid Hashemi Moqaddam, and Qotboddin Jannesar M.*
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# A Pragmatic Analysis of Vague Language in the News Articles on the Iraqi Security Crisis

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**Abstract**—There is a well-known belief among linguists and discourse analysts saying that vague language is one of the common features of political language. In order for the linguists to include vague language within the domain of linguistic analysis, they started formulating vagueness within the principles of the pragmalinguistic theory. However, the pragmatic perspective had not been paid much attention yet. With the accelerated events in the Middle East, the best way to get information is to appreciate some news items because they are objective facts that are accessible and easy to comprehend for everybody (Pan, 2012, p. 2530). Iraq has witnessed many periods of serious escalation among which is the one started in April 2014 in which, the ISIS influence started expanding suddenly and rapidly causing infrastructure damage and casualties. The present paper aims at investigating vague expressions in news articles on the security situation in Iraq in the period mentioned above by means of Grice's cooperative principle to find out the purposes vague language serves and its effects on these news articles.

**Index Terms**—vagueness, news, cooperative, maxims, articles, pragmatic

## I. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, an expression is pragmatically vague when it leaves some of the semantic features unspecified. For example, *person* is not specified concerning the features of [male] vs [female] and [old] vs [young] (Channell, 1994). An expression is vague if (a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition, (b) it is purposely vague or if (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty (Channel, 1994, cited in Wenzhong and Jingyi, 2013, p. 104). *Intrinsic uncertainty*, here, does not mean that the speaker/ writer is ignorant of certainty. Rather, vagueness carries a sense of indeterminacy in language use. This indeterminacy is the speaker's/ writer's choice; a choice to use a vague expression rather than a precise one for one purpose or another (Channell, 1994, pp. 196-198).

Speaking or writing, we rarely express ourselves very clearly, precisely, or explicitly about what we mean. In many times, we are vague, indirect, and unclear about just what we are committed to. Superficially speaking, this appears to be an inadequacy of human language (Jucker, 2003, p. 1738). Ideally, there is a common assumption that the language which is imprecise and vague should be avoided as a defect whenever possible. However, for several linguists, this notion of language is rather plain. Precise language is not necessarily more efficient than vague language and vagueness could be a positive feature of human language (Jucker, 2003, p. 1738). Moreover, too much precision can, sometimes, lead to time wasting and inflexibility since vague words are often enough to present a meaningful message and no vague language is used for delivering a negative connotation. Thus, vagueness is an important part of everyday language. There is a common knowledge that the language is supposed to be both formal and concise in order to directly convey the facts and information to readers. However, vagueness attracts more attention and raises the reader's suspicions and, therefore, the reader starts searching deep in the report to achieve a better understanding than when the language is not vague (Stubbs, 1986, p.1; Williamson, 1994, p. 4869; Van Deemter, 2010, p. 10 and Sabet and Zhang, 2015, p. 4).

In language, vagueness is neither all "bad" nor all "good" because the most important thing is that vague language is used appropriately. The appropriateness of vagueness differs from one text to the other. A medical report, a legal contract, an academic paper, a political radio interview or a casual chat all differ in their degree of vagueness. Thus, the variation in the precision of utterances in the contexts is part of the speaker's communicative competence, and interpreting such expressions is a natural part of language use (Jucker, 2003, p. 1738). Accordingly, understanding the nature and role of vagueness in language is critical to an understanding of language itself (Channell, 1994, p. 3).

From a pragmatic perspective, there is a growing awareness of the contradiction between vagueness and Grice's cooperative principle; no vague language occurs without violating the Gricean maxims. Some scholars believe that the vague language is a sort of violation of Grice's cooperative principle, which often leads to failure of communication; whereas others have opposite views in this respect (Pan, 2012, p. 2530).

The news articles, especially the ones which present hard news (spot news and breaking news), are dynamic and the situation reported is often changeable. Sometimes the reporters are unable to get all the facts immediately for one reason or another. Thus, they resort to vague language to protect them from making false statements (Wahyuningsih, 2014, p. 16).

This paper is intended to investigate and pragmatically analyze the vague language in news articles on the Iraqi security crisis in the period after April 2014 in which, the violent and chaotic Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or al-Sham (also referred to as ISIS or ISIL) seized Mosul (Iraq's second city) and started advancing rapidly towards Baghdad and other cities. This kind of corpus has been chosen for analysis for two reasons. The first reason is a socio-political one; at that time, the events took place rapidly and abruptly. Thus, such news articles are supposed to be loaded with details which people in general seemed to be raring for and eager to know since the ISIS forces, at that time, represented a serious source of threat not only for Iraq and its surrounding countries, but for other vast areas in the world. The second reason is a linguistic one; the rapidity, abruptness and importance of the events that such news articles tackle put the news agencies in a sort of race towards achieving scoops. Such an achievement could sometimes be accomplished on the expense of clarity and, thus, vagueness could easily become a feature in the language of such texts. The confusing and shocking climate at that time would so probably lead the reporters to adopt vague language in their articles.

It is worth mentioning that it is not part of the present research paper claim that news articles on the Iraqi security crisis show more or less instances of vagueness (or any of its types) than any other comparable or incomparable corpora. The aim is to find out the purposes that vague language serves and its effects on these news articles. The pragmatic analysis for the news articles is based on the theoretical framework developed from Grice's cooperative principle.

The corpus consists of eight rather long news articles on the Iraqi security crisis which belong to the period after April 2014. The articles have been chosen randomly (except the fact that they tackle the crisis mentioned earlier) and downloaded from four famous broadcasting websites (www.associatedpress.com, www.reuters.com, www.cnn.com and www.bbc.com) and subjected to careful analysis.

## II. VAGUENESS VS AMBIGUITY

It is worth clarifying the idea that vagueness and ambiguity are different concepts. In spite of being two varieties of interpretive uncertainty, ambiguity and vagueness differ both in their essential features and in their significance for the semantic theory and the philosophy of language (Kennedy, 2012, p. 508). Ambiguity is for an expression to have more than one meaning, but vagueness involves uncertainty about the meanings of particular terms. Dealing with an ambiguous expression, we have more than one meaning to assign depending on certain criteria, but it is often difficult to decide on the meaning of a vague expression since no choices are available (Gillon, 2004, p. 394 and Kennedy, 2012, p. 508).

Ambiguity is associated with bits of utterance related to any of the levels of linguistic analysis, starting from phonemes to discourses, and these written or spoken bits of utterance are characterized with more than one meaning. The following is an example from the 1980s British comedy series *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (created by Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie) (Kennedy, 2010, p. 517):

Fry: "You have a daughter, I believe."

Laurie: "Yeah, **Henrietta**."

Fry: "Did he? I'm sorry to hear that. That must've hurt."

(Kennedy, 2010, p. 517)

The example above illustrates a case of phonological ambiguity making use of the pronunciation of the name *Henrietta* and the sentence *Henry ate her* (Kennedy, 2010, p. 517).

An example of lexical ambiguity is between the name *Nancy* and the British slang term *nancy*, which means *weak* when used as an adjective:

FRY: "Something I've always been meaning to ask you: How did you manage to keep Nancy for so long?"

LAURIE: "I've never been nancy."

(Kennedy, 2010, p. 517)

## III. TYPES OF VAGUE LANGUAGE

According to Channell (2000, cited in Cai-yan and Lu-ting, 2014, p. 820- 822) vague language can be classified into three types as follows:

1. Hedges. According to research, hedges have been derived from Zadeh's "fuzzy set theory" in 1965. According to this theory, an individual is in the set to a certain degree rather than being in the set or not. Hedges have become a focal point of study since then and many scholars have tried defining them from different viewpoints (Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50). Lakoff (1973, cited in Yue and Wang, 2014) has given us the most well-known definition of hedges as being "words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50). According to Prince *et al* (1982, cited in Cai-yan and Lu-ting, 2014, p. 821), hedges consist of two categories as follows:

A. Approximators. They are words or phrases that can affect the truth value of the proposition by changing, rectifying the original meaning or, sometimes, setting a range for changes. They are used to vaguely refer to amounts, times, dates and refer, also vaguely, to factual information, such as quantities and times (Cai-yan and Lu-ting, 2014, p. 821). Approximators, on their turn, are sub-classified into:

- **Adapters.** They are the words or phrases that speakers or writers can use to help them express some uncertain meanings and then make their utterance more close to reality. The expressions in this category can modify the language which is close to the truth value of the proposition. It includes words and phrases such as *almost, a little bit, sort of, kind of, somewhat, really, to some extent*, etc. (Cai-yan and Lu-ting, 2014, p. 821 and Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50).

- **Rounders.** They are words or phrases used to make a range for adjustments in language mostly being the modifiers of numbers and figures. These expressions help the hearer to get a range of information instead of the precise definite information. Such words and phrases are *around, nearly, about, between, approximately, roughly*, etc. (Cai-yan and Lu-ting, 2014, p. 821 and Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50)

**B. Shields.** They “are fuzzy words or phrases that affect the degree of the speaker’s commitment to the true condition of Proposition” (Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50). Rather than changing the original meaning of language, shields can make the tone more indirect (Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50). They are also sub-classified into two categories:

- **Plausibility shields.** They are the hedges which people use to indicate that the information they provided is not absolutely true. They can easily be “achieved with modal verbs which can soften the tone and hesitation words which can express a reserved and prudent attitude” (Yue and Wang, 2014, p. 50). Such shields include *I think, I suppose, I am afraid, probably, as far as I can tell, seem, I’m afraid* etc. (Cai-yan and Lu-ting, 2014, p. 821).

- **Attribution shields.** They are expressions, such as according to, it is said that, it seems to, presumably, ...says that..., as is well known, the possibility would be...etc., which people use to indicate that they are not sure about the accuracy of information they provided and then achieve the goal to save their face. They are mostly manifested in third person viewpoint expressions leading opinions to be expressed through a third person.

Generally speaking, hedges are the words or phrases which have the job of making things fuzzier or less fuzzy and they represent the core of vague language. The effect of hedging exists in the interpretation of the utterance rather than in the semantic meaning of the utterance itself. The interpretation of the utterance depends on the context, the semantic meaning of the sentence uttered, the particular hedges used and the belief system of the receiver (hearer/ reader). Moreover, hedging could sometimes give an indication of the speaker/ writer’s intentions (Fraser, 2010, p. 25).

2. **Vague words.** In the explanation of vague language, there is the notion that vague words are vague themselves. In reference, they are the words whose meanings are imprecise, uncertain or indefinite (Pan, 2012, p. 2531). Vague words are the ones that are unable to refer to accurate information and their main characteristic is the uncertain boundaries of the word itself. Williamson (1994) states that “vague words often suffice for the purpose in hand, and too much precision can lead to time wasting and inflexibility” (p. 4869). As for Wahyuningsih (2014), vagueness, this way, can be a vague noun or reference used to refer to entities. Examples are *and things, something, such, anything, thing, what is name, stuff, like, whatever, sort of*, or any word in the language that creates inquiry and elicits questions for further information (p. 8).

3. **Vague implication.** Vagueness by implication refers to those utterances which have accurate expressions but are often misunderstood. In this kind of vagueness, there is an exact number or a plural number name with vague meaning or it can be round number used without strict accuracy (Wahyuningsih, 2014, p. 9). Thus, the vague implicature is vague not because of lack of information or unclarity; it is vague because its meaning is unspecified or underspecified in the context which might very probably lead to misunderstanding or even wondering about something. An exact number or a plural number name or an apparently precise sentence can be used and understood to have a vague meaning (Wahyuningsih, 2014, p. 9). 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, cited in Pan, 2012, p. 253).

The phrase **38 feet** can be either precise or vague, depending on how readers think the practical length; whether more or less than the number (Pan, 2012, p. 253).

#### IV. THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

Grice (1975) has come with the theory of conversational implicature describing how people interact with each other in conversation by working out the implied meaning behind utterances (pp. 41- 58). He proposed the concept of implicature to indicate the inferred nonliteral meaning distinguishing between what is said and what is meant, implied, suggested, etc. Moreover, he proposed the cooperative principle which is essentially the theory about how people use language to have better communication. The statement of the principle is “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1975, p. 45). To further illustrate the cooperative principle, Grice (1975) puts forward four categories of maxims and the relevant sub-maxims:

##### 1. The maxim of quality

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

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

##### 2. The maxim of quantity

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

































































































































































