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Exploring the Communicative Functions of Pragmatic Vagueness as a Discursive Strategy

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Abstract

The acts of human beings are usually guided by our purposes. To meet our purposes, we deliberately take different strategies. It is the same case in verbal communication. In communication, vague language has been widely applied as a discursive strategy to achieve speaker's communicative purpose. We usually adopt different vague languages in order to achieve different communicative purposes. We call this discursive strategy pragmatic vagueness, which is different from the vagueness of language. The latter is an intrinsic feature of some languages themselves while the former is used as a strategy in communication and heavily influenced by our communicative purposes, therefore, to some degree, indicating the language using ability of the speaker. Thus it is necessary to explore the communicative functions of pragmatic vagueness for achieving communicative purpose. By examining the examples mainly in daily usage, this thesis intends to explore what communicative functions pragmatic vagueness has, how its functions are achieved and why people tend to do it in this way, and to analyze how speakers' goals are accomplished by making use of vague languages.

1. Introduction

Vagueness is a very common phenomenon and has drawn a lot of attention from researchers of linguistics and of other related fields. Zhang (1999) pointed out that lingual vagueness cannot be fully understood only from the semantic perspective and pragmatic factors shall bear the fair share of attention.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the communicative functions of pragmatic vagueness, as a discursive strategy, for achieving communicative purpose. Therefore, we adopt He Ziran's pragmatic vagueness.

When we are going to do something, we usually bear our purpose in our mind. And we always try to do it in the most proper way we can ever think of and we will change our strategy if it is needed. In daily communication, purpose is the essential factor that influences what we say and how we say it. We adopt various discursive strategies in order to accomplish our communicative purpose, and pragmatic vagueness is a very commonly used one.

The question we are interested in is how pragmatic vagueness functions in verbal communication and what the function of pragmatic vagueness is when it is used as a discursive strategy to achieve communicative purpose.

This thesis attempts to make a general survey into why we use pragmatic vagueness, how we use it and what function it can generate in communication by using examples from daily communication to illustrate these questions. By doing so, we hope we can make a humble contribution to the awareness of language use and trigger more and more attention into this field.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Vagueness VS Semantic Vagueness

Pragmatic vagueness is a key concept in question in this thesis, therefore, we find it necessary to distinguish pragmatic vagueness and one of its closest term, semantic vagueness. He Ziran concluded that "Pragmatic vagueness is a general term for meaning indeterminacy of language in its production and interpretation, and it exists in loose talks" (He, 1990). We adopt He Ziran's pragmatic vagueness in this paper. In this part, we focus on semantic vagueness.

Semantic vagueness can fall into three categories, namely, semantic vagueness caused by pronunciation, semantic vagueness caused by polysemants and semantic vagueness caused by syntax structure. Let's list some examples to illustrate them respectively.

Semantic vagueness caused by pronunciation:

1) The dividing line between syllables is vague, for example, grade A (g' rei' dei) → grey day, great ape (g' reit' eip) → grey tape.

2) The stress change leads to meaning change, for example, 'refuse (rubbish) → re' fuse (decline).

3) Intonation and pauses in sentences influencing meaning, for example, "he hit/the man with a stick" → "he hit the man/with a stick".

Semantic vagueness caused by polysemants:

1) The bank was the scene of the crime.

2) They beat their opponents.

In the first sentence, "bank" can be (a) a place for depositing money and also can be (b) a side of a river. In the second one, "beat" can mean (a) "hit" and also can mean (b) "defeat".

3) I bought an animal from the zoo yesterday.

In this sentence, "an animal" is vague. It can mean a dog, a cat or any other kind of animals.

Semantic vagueness caused by syntax structure:

One classic example is: very old men and women are fond of children. It has two meanings: very old men/and women are fond of children; very old men and women/are fond of children.

2.2. Previous Studies on Communicative Purpose

In 1989, Gu Yueguo used the purpose of speakers' as a researching perspective for discourse analysis. He pointed out, in What Is Discourse Rhetoric, the speech acts contained purpose and he further divided this purpose into two categories: rhetorical purpose and purpose beyond words (Gu, 1989). Later in 1996, Gu Yueguo analyzed the purpose in communicative discourse using the communicative materials between doctors and patients. In the same year, Purpose & Intention Theory emerged, and Hu (2005) came up with a similar idea "Any speech act is somewhat purposeful".

"Both philosophers and anthologists think the most basic difference between human beings and animals is that any act of human beings contains purpose. Therefore, to study human's activity and its productions, we cannot overlook its purpose." said Liao (2003). "Any normal people's normal speech act is purposeful. In other

words, any normal people's normal act is guarded by its purpose-communicative purpose" (Liao, 2005). Tao (1993) also said "During human's communicative process, any act of communication contains purpose and intention. Speaker has his purpose when he does the act of communication, no matter in verbal communication or in non-verbal communication."

What is worth more words is that Liao Meizhen explicitly explained the basic framework of Purpose Theory in his theses and applied Purpose Theory to court language study and language coherence research. He further expounded the communicative model under Purpose Theory and thus laid the foundation for discourse analysis under Purpose Theory.

3. Communicative Purpose and Pragmatic Vagueness

3.1. Ways of Adopting Vague Strategies

Discursive strategy means "how to choose and exploit language resources to achieve our communicative purposes in the most efficient way" (Liao, 2003). In many cases, speaker cannot simply express his idea explicitly. In order to achieve his communicative purpose, he needs to adopt some vague strategies. To a large degree, the influences of communicative purpose even determine what discursive strategy is applied and how it is applied. Vague strategy is one of the most commonly used strategies, whose forms are rich and variant. In this session, we are going to explore how pragmatic vagueness is applied in daily communication.

3.1.1. Indirectness and Objectiveness

In some cases, putting it directly is improper because it may cause embarrassment or trouble. Thus the speaker deliberately uses some indirect or objective words to avoid personal interference and commentary or subjective remarks. In this way, speaker can reduce or avoid some possible conflicts and embarrassment. For example:

(In last exam, Tom got 60 scores.)

A: How many scores did Tom get in his last exam?

B: I heard he passed the exam.

In this conversation, B does not answer A directly. Instead, he takes advantage of indirectness and objectiveness to avoid answer A directly. The reason may be that B wants to save Tom's face or he simply does not want to remark on Tom's scores.

3.1.2. Elliptical Sentence

Elliptical sentence is also widely used in verbal communication. The speaker deliberately uses elliptical sentence, leaving space for hearer to imagine and detect, to achieve certain communicative purpose. This kind of incomplete sentence does not prevent the hearer to land the intended place. Instead, it can make the utterance more implicit. For example:

A: How do you like the movie?

B: Oh, I've seen worse.

In this case, B deliberately dropped what he really felt about the movie, leaving A to detect by himself. B used vague strategy because he did not know how A felt about the movie or because A invited him to see the movie and he did not want to hurt A's face.

3.1.3. Violation of Cooperative Principle

According to Grice, an American philosopher, in communication, between the speaker and the hearer, in order to achieve some specific purposes, there exists a potential rule, that is, a principle both the speaker and the hearer should observe. And he called this principle Cooperative Principle, CP in short. Theoretically, we should obey the CP in order to make the conversation smooth and achieve the communicative purpose. However, in Thomas' (1995) opinion, instead of following the CP, non-observance of the CP does exist, such as flouting, violating, infringing, suspending and so on. In real communication, that people make use of vague language, instead of following CP, to achieve communicative purpose is very common. For example:

A: Where is my tie?

B: Somewhere in this room.

It is likely a conversation between a husband and a wife. The husband is forgetful and always leaves things around. Now he cannot find his tie and ask his wife. His wife deliberately violates CP and does not provide suf-

ficient quantity of information. She wants to remind her husband to be careful next time or she just does not know the exact place and she does not want to violate the Quality Maxim.

3.1.4. Rhetorical Devices

Vague strategy is also applied by means of rhetorical devices. The speaker makes use of rhetorical devices, such as irony, hyperbole, euphemism and so on, to convey what is beyond words. For example:

Patient: I must see the dentist now, nurse.

Nurse: The dentist is very busy at the moment. Can you wait till this afternoon?

Patient: I can wait, but my toothache can't wait.

The patient actually meant that his teeth were too painful to wait till afternoon and he wanted to see the dentist right now. Obviously, the purposes of the patient and the nurse were in conflict. To avoid conflict, the patient used enantiosis to express his request.

3.1.5. Hedges

According to Lakoff (1982), hedges are words that make things vague. According to their semantic feature, hedges can fall into five categories: hedges in degree (kind of, almost), hedges in range (in most respects, loosely speaking), hedges in number (more or less, around), hedges in quality (as far as I know, it is said), and hedges in manner maxim. In verbal communication, pragmatic vagueness is also often achieved by using hedges. There are two cases. A language has limitations. There are more concepts which are constituents of human thoughts than there are words in a language. When a speaker cannot find the exact words to express his thoughts, he will resort to hedges. The other case is the speaker is able to find words to express his thoughts exactly, but he uses hedges to make his utterance vague due to certain communicative purposes. For example:

A: What do you think of Tom?

B: Well, he's not exactly thrifty, if you know what I mean.

B used "if" to suggest Tom is not thrifty but mean or something else, but he does not want to give his remark directly.

3.2. Factors Influencing the Choice of Vague Language

"Speaking is expressing purpose; speaking is conducting purpose; and speaking is realizing purpose" (Liao, 2005). Purpose is the essential reason for people to communicate. Whereas, apart from communicative purpose, there are also other factors that influence our choice of vague language.

3.2.1. Economical Principle

In verbal communication, we are inclined to choose the simplest way to exchange information on the hope of investing as little as possible and gaining as much as possible. Therefore, we usually obey the Economical Principle in communication. Leech (1983: p. 21) pointed out, in Principle of Pragmatics, Economical Principle means "coding and decoding will be time-and-effort efficient when the conveyed message is of brevity and conciseness while its meaning is complete." Levinson (2001) also said speaker should speak as little as possible, providing the very least information required for communicative purpose. However, it is the hearer to interpret, to try his best to land the intended place.

3.2.2. Gender Difference

Due to many factors, such as psychology, conventions, cultures and so on, women are likely to pay more attention to word choice and the way of speaking in communication. They tend to be politer and more implicit; therefore, women are more likely to use pragmatic vagueness. Women are more psychologically vulnerable, sensitive and they care more about social relationships, so they are very sensitive to improper and face-threatening words. They want to maintain a harmonious relationship when communicating with others and thus they usually adopt a polite, mild, implicit and vague communicative strategy in communication. Vague language, uncertain and implicit in its own right, satisfies this psychological demand. Generally speaking, different communicative strategies are adopted because of gender difference and a wide application of vague language is a prominent feature of women's verbal communication.

3.2.3. Cultural Difference

Xia (1994) once claimed that when we observed the objective world through the perspective of our mother lan-

guage, the matters within it were classified conforming to the mechanism and value system of our mother language. Because of this, the understanding of one language cannot be reduced to just a tool, instead, society and culture are also needed to be taken into consideration in order to get a full understanding. The language of one person can mirror its people's cultural characteristics; in turn, different peoples' cultural characteristics influence the usage of vague language differently. As a result, the choices of vague language and communicative strategy are different in different peoples' cultures. The way of thinking, the moral system, the cultural convention and the common psychological state are all influencing vague language's application in different degrees respectively.

3.2.4. Politeness Principle

Although Cooperative Principle enables the hearer to arrive at what the speaker really means or implies, "CP itself cannot explain why people are often so indirect in conveying what they mean; and what is the relation between sense and force when non-declarative types of the sentence are being considered" (Leech, 1983: p. 80). In view of this, Leech put forward Politeness Principle. And he subdivided it into six maxims: Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim and Sympathy Maxim (Leech, 1983). In daily communication, people tend to follow politeness principle to avoid certain improper or impolite topic. Under this circumstance, people usually choose vague language.

4. Specific Analysis on How Pragmatic Vagueness Functions

In verbal communication, the participants have different purposes and they will adopt different communicative strategies to achieve their purposes. Pragmatic vagueness is a very important and efficient communicative strategy. Therefore, we usually adopt different vague strategies by the ways we just mentioned above. Next, we are going to analyze specific examples from daily life to see how pragmatic vagueness functions to achieve communicative purpose strategically.

4.1. When the Purposes of the Speaker's and the Hearer's Are in Accordance

4.1.1. Purpose Accepted

When the purposes of participants' are in accordance with each other's, the hearer will accept the speaker's intended purpose and carry it out.

1) A: The bell is ringing.

B said nothing and went to open the door.

In this case, A does not ask or order B to open the door directly and just tells B that the door bell is ringing. It is obvious that A wants B to open the door and B understands A and fulfills A's purpose.

2) (A couple went back home from work)

A: I'm exhausted.

B: Well, I'll do the cooking tonight.

A: Thank you then.

In this example, A's first utterance is vague. It can be a request. It can be a statement. But B thinks A is implicitly asking him to do the cooking and he accepts this request. Form the second utterance of A's we can see B is right.

4.1.2. Purpose Discussed

Under this circumstance, the speaker's purpose is either understood by or unclear to the hearer. In either case, the hearer will not turn down the speaker immediately. Instead, he usually adopts pragmatic vagueness to open a further discussion.

3) (B paid a visit to A's house.)

A: It's almost midnight now.

B: It's raining heavily outside.

In this case, A and B both use vague strategies. A's utterance means it is very late and B should leave now. B does not accept A's purpose yet he does not reject it either. B instead describes the outside environment, giving his answer in a round-about way. His implicature is that he wants to stay for a while till the rain stops or becomes less heavy. Both A and B, by using pragmatic vagueness, save each other's face and achieve their com-

municative purposes in an acceptable way.

4) (A conversation between boss A and employee B.)

A: I think you need a long rest.

B: Boss…

In this conversation, A's implicature is uncertain. On one hand, it could be interpreted that A thinks B works too hard and B needs to have a good rest. On the other hand, A can also mean that B is not competent and he wants to fire B. However, B neither accepts nor rejects A's intention. He makes use of elliptical sentence to wait for A's further explanation.

4.2. When the Purposes of the Speaker's and the Hearer's Are in Conflict.

4.2.1. Purpose Suspended

In this case, the speaker's purpose is understood by the hearer. However, the hearer, due to many reasons, suspends or drops aside the speaker's purpose deliberately and strategically.

5) A: Will you marry me?

B: It's an important decision.

In this conversation, B does not give her answer directly and her implicature needs to be interpreted under specific circumstances. If B in fact has no feeling for A at all and it is obviously this is a refusal. Another possibility is B understands A's purpose and B really thinks it is an important decision and she needs time to consider it before she makes a decision. In any case, B does not hurts A and saves A's face.

6) A: Where were you? Why do come you home so late?

B: I was out.

Here it is obviously that B understands A's purpose and he does not reject it directly. He ignores A's purpose and thus violates the Maxim of Quantity by giving insufficient information. The reason may be that B does not want to tell A where he was or he did not care A's question.

4.2.2. Purpose Refused

This case is slightly different from the last one. The hearer understands the speaker. Whereas, he refuses to carry out the speaker's purpose.

7) (A conversation took place in SARS period in 2003.)

A: How about having a lunch with Wang Bing today?

B: Didn't he just come back from Beijing yesterday?

From the given background we know that B does not want to take A's advice because SARS at that time was a serious disease and Beijing was severely stricken. But out of politeness and respect, B uses pragmatic vagueness to turn A down and also reminds A that SARS is striking Beijing where Wang Bing just came back from, so it is not wise to have lunch with him now.

8) A: I can't hear a word.

B: it's none of your business.

The background of the conversation is both A and B are watching a movie in a theater and B keeps talking with his girlfriend. A does not want to blame B directly and uses pragmatic vagueness. His "I can't hear a word" means he cannot hear what the actors say and his intention is to remind B that he should not influence others. However, B did not get A and thought A was listening to the chatting between him and his girlfriend. So B replied "It's none of your business". This case shows that pragmatic vagueness is in one way a good communicative strategy to achieve communicative purpose and in another way, it may causes misunderstanding. So when we use pragmatic vagueness, we should be very careful. Otherwise, we are likely to experience communicative failure.

5. Conclusions

There is a wide consensus that man's acts are in the guidance of our purpose, so are our verbal acts. In verbal communication, we are constantly influenced by our communicative purpose. So the word choice, the way of speaking and what to say or what not to say are all serving our communicative purpose. Therefore, in order to achieve our communicative purposes, we usually adopt many communicative strategies, of which pragmatic vagueness is the most frequently used one. On the basis of previous studies on vague languages, we adopt He's

idea that it is meaningful to study vagueness only through the pragmatic perspective. Thus we adopted his term "pragmatic vagueness" and we did't try to distinguish pragmatic vagueness, pragmatic ambiguity and the like.

By discussing, we find out, besides purpose, there are other factors why people use pragmatic vagueness, such as economical principle, gender difference, cultural difference and politeness principle. In addition, pragmatic vagueness can take various forms in daily communication. For instance, deliberately using indirect or objective words, using elliptical sentences, violating the Maxims of Cooperative Principle and making use of rhetorical devices are commonly used forms of pragmatic vagueness in communication.

In order to get a clearer understanding of the communicative functions of pragmatic vagueness in communication, we divide the case into two categories: the purposes of the participants' are in accordance and the purposes in conflicts. Pragmatic vagueness well used can produce unpredictably nice communicative results: save each other's face, maintain a harmonious relationship, create a humorous atmosphere and so on. However, it is not applicable in any case. Without mutual understanding, it is also likely to lead to communicative failures. The importance of the topic in question lies in this. It helps us to pay more attention to our language habits and will, to some degree, trigger more interest in researching in this topic.

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