

Research on Fuzziness in English Language Use

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Abstract: Fuzziness has been observed to occur widely in English language use. Fuzziness as an objective property of human language is shown in English in various ways. Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle are the two important factors that result in fuzziness.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, fuzziness has become a common phenomenon in the process of language communication with the increasing daily communication of people. Maybe we are not realized the important of fuzziness, but we use it frequently. The use of fuzziness can produce unexpected effects, so we can say that fuzziness plays an important role in language communication. This paper will analyze and discuss fuzziness from two aspects: The types and main factors which affect the use of fuzziness.

2. The Fuzziness of Language

The fuzziness of language mainly refers to the indefiniteness of language. That is the phenomenon of denotation, connotation, uncertainty of expression (which expressing the similar meanings at the same time), unspecific (which expressing the specific meaning of language in a general from) and indeterminacy. When we talking about the fuzziness of language, we know that “fuzziness” is a term from the introduction of philosophy and mathematics to linguistics, which was traced to the German scholar Anton Marty who made a scientific interpretation in the 1908. Then the famous British philosopher Black (Max Black) and other scholars have studied fussiness language successively in 1923. Chad (L. Zadeh) published the *Fuzzy Sets* in the Journal of Information and Control. And he proposed a famous fuzzy theory in 1965 successfully. L. Zadeh believed that most categories we encountered in the real word are vague—some of them are slightly, while others are obscure. The thinking of human is determined by existence. And the fuzziness of objective existence determines the ambiguity of the brain's thinking, which determines the lingual vagueness. We can find a large number of vague language in human natural language, such as: big, small, good, bad, light, heavy, fast, slow, daytime, night and so on. There is no obvious boundary between these opposing categories.

3. The Linguistic Form of Vague Language

Sometimes, speakers deliberately choose vague words to produce special expression effects in communication. Vague language has the function of providing appropriate information, and it can be understood as fuzzy accuracy. Vague expressions are mainly manifested in the following three aspects:

1) Fuzzy Quantifier: Using specific numbers to represent quantities is common in English. Such as some, several, a lot of, masses of, etc. The meaning of these classifiers is vague and it just only provides a general quantity concept. For example, using lots of to express the concept of multiple; using a touch of and seldom to express the concept of “less”; using some to express the concept of medium.

Fuzzy quantifier mainly includes: ① A quantifier which represents an approximate meaning + of, such as some of, all of, most of, etc. ② a + singular form of quantifier, such as a bit of, a load

of, a lot of. ③ plural form of quantifier + of, such as lots of, loads of, masses of , etc. ④fuzzy quantifier + countable noun, such as some, a few, several, etc.

2) Using some adjectives and adverbs as hedges, such as maybe, often, very, almost, some, recently, somewhere, somewhat, approximately, usually, etc. The speaker doesn't want to make things too precise, so speaker just tells listener a range for them to understand. For example:

① They live somewhere near the station.

② Probably it will rain.

③ He almost missed the train.

④ We have seldom met him recently.

3) A pronoun or deixis with a fuzzy meaning, such as “them, these, we, this, that”. Please see the example: Two old men are talking about the days gone by.

——The beer's just like water. They don't make it as strong as they used to.

——No things are not what they used to be , are they?

——The pubs are not any good nowadays.

——No, but they used to be good when we were young.

The demonstrative pronoun of “them” appeared many times in dialogue. While the person or object indicated is different each time and the scope of reference isn't precise and specific.

I think the purpose of school is to make students inquisitive, broad - minded and things like that.

4) Additional Word to Expresses Vague Meaning

In order to make the sentence more accurate, speaker always attaches a number of prepositions or quantities before an exact message (it usually has an exact number) in some cases. Such as the word of *around, about, maybe* which make the information has a vague meaning. We can use the example which there are around four hundred people in the hall to explain it. The exact number of “four hundred” is blurred by the adjunct “around” in this sentence.

5) It's difficult to assign the application of the concepts expressed in some English words, which the words are ambiguous. Such as the concept of *color, time, age*, etc. Take the “senior” as an example the explanation is “old, of high rank” in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. So how can we define the range of “senior official” and “the seniors of a profession” ? In practical pragmatics, it's hard for us to define the specific duties of senior officials, intermediate officials and lower officials by a unified standard. People whose working time is more than 10 years or 20 years are called “senior” in most cases. While the title of “junior”, “intermediate”, “senior” just express fuzzy concepts and they only can be a general form of address in the process of pragmatic.

6) Some phrases are also fuzzy when they are used. Such as *in a way, or so, to put it bluntly*, etc. For example:

What you said is true, in a way.

She is thirty years old or so.

Your answer is right to some extent.

1) The fuzziness of a sentence is expressed by the direct guessing of the speaker's topic, or the hesitant attitude of the speaker to something. Such as I think; I am afraid; I believe; I suppose ; I assume ; seem;wonder; probably ; as far as I can see ; as far as I know ; as far as I can tell; hard to say ; perhaps ; may, might . For example:

I guess they are disappointed at our performance.

2) In addition, there are some sentences which indicate the confident or uncertain about the truth of matter with speaker. This kind of sentence doesn't express the speaker's speculation or doubt about something, which they cite the view from the point of the third people, then express the speaker's attitude indirectly. Such as is well known; as is known to all ; presumably ; It is said that ; someone says that ; according to one's estimates ; the possibility would be; the possibility is .

3) Some sentences look accurate which can be used or understood as vague expressions. Such as: Tom is six feet tall. This sentence can be accurate (Tom may be exactly six feet tall). It also can be vague (Tom is actually six feet and a quarter of an inch.) The same is true that Peter has 100 ,000 in his savings account. The actual deposit figures of Peter maybe 100, 000, maybe 100, 019 or 99, 998 in this sentence.

Pragmatic vagueness usually occurs in the case of polysemy. It always relies on the context to grasp exact meaning when a word with many side meanings is in its use. But if the set of contexts is not proper or the understanding of context is wrong with two sides, we should judge the sentences according to the specific context. It may have different meanings from an independent perspective, which leads to the ambiguity of sentence. For example:

I did not go because I am afraid.

We should understand the meaning of sentence based on context rather than judging it subjectively.

4. The Main Factors Affecting the Use of Vague Language

The meaning expressed by speaker is always more complex than the language itself in the process of language expression actually. In order to achieve this goal, the speaker must have the ability to correspond to language expression. Besides the recognizing rules and psychological factors which affect people's use of vague words, there still exist other important factors that restrict people's speech acts. Then we will analyze the use of vague words in verbal communication from the perspective of "Cooperative Principle" proposed by H. P. Grice and Politeness Principle proposed by G. H. Leech and other scholars.

Both sides of conversation need to cooperate with each other and follow certain conversational principles in order to achieve a successful communicative goal. Linguist H. P. Grice believed that both parties should obey the principles of cooperation so that they could achieve communicative goals. The principle of cooperative includes the following guidelines: ① maxim of quantity: The parties don't provide enough information according to the topic in conversation; ② maxim of quality: The information provided must be true and reliable; ③ maxim of relevance: The information provided must be relevant to the topic which they talk about; ④ maxim of manner: The information provided should be concise, organized, unambiguous and clear. In communication, the speaker uses some vague words to convey some information while listener can deduce the pragmatic meaning from it. In order to achieve the purpose of conversation, speaker always provides the appropriate information through vague language. And in our daily life, we can find that people always use vague language to violate one or several criteria in order to achieve some purpose in English.

E.g. A: How many students are there in your school?

B: About 3000, I think.

The use of "About 3000" in the example sentence mentioned above doesn't violate the guidelines of cooperative principle, but we cannot say B is unwilling to cooperate. B does not know the exact number of students, so he uses vague language in order to ensure the accuracy of his words. Though his answer looks vague, but it is more accurate actually.

Another important factor which affects people's use of fuzzy words is "Politeness Principle". Politeness plays an important role in verbal communication, and it is also a significant principle that people must observe in certain occasions. The scope of politeness in pragmatic sense is broad and is closely related to the politeness principle proposed by the famous British scholar Ricci (Leech). Politeness principle consists of six principles: Tact Maxim: Reducing the view which is detrimental to others; Generosity Maxim: Reducing the idea which express yourself; Approbation Maxim: Reducing dispraise expression to others; Modesty Maxim: Reducing the praise to ourselves; Agreement Maxim: Reducing the disagreement between yourself and others; Sympathy Maxim: Reducing the emotional opposition of yourself to others. Politeness principle can be used to explain why people use vague, euphemistic, indirect and flexible expressions in verbal communication. As for vague language, it can win the understanding and respect of each other, and then we can achieve the ideal communicative if vague languages used properly. In daily communication, some linguistic behavior is contradicting to others' face in essence. Politeness language should be used in order to retain face and maintain good social relations, then we can make the communication in a peaceful and friendly atmosphere. So that we can complete the communication smoothly. One of the

methods is to use some vague words as much as possible when others' face is threatened, so that we can weaken the criticism or conflict and ease the tension. That is, the "Politeness Principle". For example: United States says China has made substantial progress in curbing exports of nuclear technology to non- nuclear states. The word of "substantial" is a vague language. The function of vague language in this sentence is to show respect for the government and diplomatic etiquette and avoid offending each other as far as possible.

5. Conclusion

In a conclusion, the fuzziness is flexible and common in English usage, and its frequency varies from context to context. Fuzziness in English language is the objective attribute of human natural language. Its manifestations are various, and there are many factors which affect the vagueness of English language. When people use language to communicate, it sometimes needs to be precise and sometimes blurred. Fuzzy language has a unique and irreplaceable function, which deserves deep research.

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