

Vague Language in English Talk Show

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English talk show is one of the important TV programs in Western countries, in which vague language is widely used to fulfill the speaker's communicative intention and help to establish a harmonious relationship between the host and guest. On the basis of previous research results, this paper analyzes the classifications of vague language in English talk show and explores its pragmatic functions with the help of some real examples from the perspective of Grice's Cooperative Principles and Leech's Politeness Principles. Such an analysis will reinforce the English learner's understanding of the implied meaning of the utterances spoken by guests and hosts in English talk show and help to grasp the speakers' communicative intention in spite of its limitations.

Keywords: English talk show, vague language, classification, function

Introduction

The study of vague language started from the publication of "Fuzzy Sets", in which Zadeh (1965) put forward the concept of vagueness. Since then, many scholars began to explore it from different points. So far, in terms of definition of vague language, researchers hold different views and there is no consensus about the definition of vague language because of the vagueness of the word itself. However, vague language can be generally understood to refer to expressions or words which have more than one possible interpretation and lack precise boundaries.

As vague language can extend the meaning of a simple word to an infinitely implication, it has acted as an important role in daily communication. In the past, people widely kept the opinion that conveying precise information is the speaker's ultimate goal in communication. However, people find that holding tenaciously to the accuracy of words fails to bring them the expected result in concrete communication; instead, it seriously minimizes the scope of their communication. This finding just shows the importance of vague language and then motivates the scholars' research on it. Such as Channell (2000), WEN Xu (1996), Peirce (1902), and some other scholars started exploring the definition of vague language from different respects; Kempson (1977), Channell (2000), and ZHANG Qiao (1998) also began to analyze the classification of vague language. However, the research about vague language mainly focuses on the definition, classification, and so on, while the application of theory is still relatively limited.

As the major trend of TV program, English talk show widely adopts vague language to fulfill the speaker's communicative intention. However, the corresponding research on vague language in English talk

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show is few. This situation just shows the great practical significance to do the relative research. Based on the previous research results, this paper will make a study on the classifications and functions of vague language in English talk show combined with the examples from a book named *A Collection of Classic Talk Shows* (2002).

Classifications of Vague Language in English Talk Show

In terms of the classifications of vague language, many scholars have proposed their own opinions from different perspectives. While in the aspect of pragmatics, the classification proposed by Channell (2000) is considered to be more influential. Channell (2000) distinguishes three types of vague language in her book: (1) vague additives, (2) vagueness by choice of vague words, and (3) vagueness by implication. This paper mainly adopts her way and classifies the vague language in English talk show into three types: vague words, hedges, and vagueness by implication.

Vague Words

Vague words are the words that fail to give the hearer accurate information and its typical characteristic is the uncertain boundaries of the word itself. However, Williamson (1994) stated that “vague words often suffice for the purpose in hand, and too much precision can lead to time wasting and inflexibility” (p. 4869). In English talk show, the highest frequencies of occurrence are mainly two types: comparative and continuum. Comparative type describes those words which do not have the certain boundaries, so they need to be connected with other words to help hearer understand speaker’s utterance. Vague words of this type in English talk show are mainly adjectives, such as *small*, *tall*, and so on. For example:

Example (1) Ross: And yet your face-you look so great. Do you put any creams, astringents, lotions, preparations?

Jackson: My makeup artist insists that I use hot towels after I’ve worked all day so I get all the makeup out of my face, and I generally, you know, stay out of the sun. I swear hats, *big* hats when I’m on the golf course.

This conversation happened when Jonathan. S. Ross interviewed Samuel L. Jackson (see Example (1)). In Jackson’s words, “big” functions as a vague word. Because when Jackson used the word “big” to describe his hats, the hearer would still be confused about the size of his hats.

The other type is called continuum which includes a group of other words and the meaning it conveys is always vague. As to this type, hearer needs to judge the meaning that speaker conveys by his existing knowledge. This type includes the words about *color*, *season*, *age*, etc.

Example (2) Barbara: OK, look ahead, where you’re gonna be? Ordinarily, I would say 10 years, but where are you going to be 5 years from now, what’s the dream?

Drew: Same one I’ve since I was little: to be on a farm, to be with lots of *animals*, to be with someone I love, and one night it will rain, and I’ll know that I finally got there.

In Example (2), “animal” is a general word, which includes various living things. It does not stand for any certain words. It may refer to a dog or a cat, so it needs hearer to form a concrete image of “animal” by her existing knowledge.

Hedges

According to Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982), hedges can be divided into two categories: approximators and shields. Approximators include adapters and rounders. Adapters are the words that speakers can use to help them express some uncertain meanings and then make their utterance more close to the reality. It contains the words and phrases such as *almost*, *a little bit*, *really*, etc.. Rounders then can be the words or phrases: *about*, *approximately*, *roughly*, etc.. When hearers hear these words, they can get the range of information instead of the precise information. For example:

Example (3) Larry King: You did?

Barbara Bush: I love people. I *really* loved living in the White House, but I don't miss it at all.
I miss the people...

In Example (3), “really” functions as the adapters. According to Barbara Bush, we can find she wanted to show the fact that she loved to live in the White House, but she failed to find a certain word to express her strong emotion, so she could only choose the hedge “really” to help her words more close to the degree she wanted to express.

As to the rounders, the other sub-category of approximators, one example is given below:

Example (4) Ellen DeGeneres: Yes, well he's on the show in *about a week or so*, so I have to give him something.

Robin Williams: Yes, well I think you have to. An appliance of some sort.

In Example (4), Ellen DeGeneres used the rounder “about a week or so” to show his uncertainty on the information he had given. According to his words, the hearer can have a range to speculate the time he is on the show, maybe it will be just a week or less than a week. So the information the speaker sending is vague.

As to shields, the other category of hedges, according to Prince et al.'s (1982) classification, it also can be classified into two sub-categories: plausibility shields and attribution shields. People use plausibility shields to indicate that the information they provided is not absolutely true. Such shields contain *I think*, *I suppose*, *I am afraid*, etc.. For example:

Example (5) Ellen Degeneres: Are you really going to get them something.

Robin Williams: Now I have to! *I think* I'm gonna get them something wonderful. But you can get them clothes, something very special for her...

This conversation happened in the talk show when Ellen Degeneres interviewed Robin Williams (see Example (5)). The expression “I think” functioned as the plausibility, which helped the speaker avoid being too arbitrary.

Besides, in the communication, people always use some expressions, such as *according to*, *it is said that*, *it seems to*, etc. to make them absent about the accuracy of information they provided and then achieve the goal to save their face. All these expressions are so-called attribution shields. The example is given as follow:

Example (6) Ross: They kind of wanted it to be trashy?

Jackson: They wanted it to be a trashy, cheesy kind of movie and *it actually turns out to be* a fun kind of ride.

In Example (6), Jackson tried to show the fact that the film was a fun kind of ride. But he worried about the fact that it would be under question, so in order to improve the credibility of the fact, he used the attribution shields “it actually turns out to be” to prove his words were widely believed rather than his own boast.

Vagueness by Implication

Compared with vague words and hedges, the appearance of vagueness by implication is relatively infrequent in English talk show. Vagueness by implication refers to those utterances which have accurate expressions but are often misunderstood. The example is as follow:

Example (7) Ross: But not many actors, not many performers.

Jackson: I know, but they make \$20 million a movie so...

Example (7) is a conversation happening when Ross interviewed Jackson. In their utterance, Jackson's words have vagueness by implication. Although his words of "\$20 million" show the accurate information, it also can be vague. This is because of the consideration that it is impossible for a movie to make just \$20 million without any errors. Hence, "\$20 million" can be regarded as vagueness by implication.

Functions of Vague Language in English Talk Show

When referring to the functions of vague language, two mainly pragmatic theories are inevitably to be mentioned, which are closely related to the understanding of vague language. The first one is Cooperative Principle. As stated by Grice (1975), people in communication are always cooperative to each other so as to reach the goal of communication. According to this phenomenon, Grice puts forward the Cooperative Principle which speakers are supposed to maintain this principle in order to have successful communication. Moreover, he points out that the Cooperative Principle mainly includes four sub-principles, so-called maxims, as follows:

(1) The maxim of quantity: (a) Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange) and (b) do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(2) The maxim of quality: (a) Do not say what you believe to be false and (b) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

(3) The maxim of relation: Be relevant.

(4) The maxim of manner: (a) Avoid obscurity, (b) avoid ambiguity, (c) be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and (d) be orderly. (Grice, 1975, pp. 41-58)

Cooperative Principle is an important principle in our communication. However, it is not the only one. The Politeness Principle proposed by Leech (1983) also plays a crucial role to guide people to have a successful conversation. What is more, Politeness Principle is treated as the complement to the Cooperative Principle. When using vague language in communication, the obedience of the Politeness Principle will maintain parties' equal status and their friendly relations. Leech suggests that the Politeness Principle consist of six maxims and each maxim contains two sub-maxims:

(1) Tact Maxim: (a) Minimize cost to other and (b) maximize benefit to other;

(2) Generosity Maxim: (a) Minimize benefit to self and (b) maximize cost to self;

(3) Approbation Maxim: (a) Minimize dispraise of other and (b) maximize praise of other;

(4) Modesty Maxim: (a) Minimize praise of self and (b) maximize dispraise of self;

(5) Agreement Maxim: (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other and (b) maximize agreement between self and other;

(6) Sympathy Maxim: (a) Minimize antipathy between self and other and (b) maximize sympathy between self and other. (Leech, 1983, p. 132)

Through the obedience of the above two principles, there are mainly three functions showed in English talk show.

Giving Right Amount of Information

Sometimes, due to the limitation of cognitive ability, speaker cannot give the exact information about the things happening in future. Nevertheless, giving the right amount of information is necessary.

Example (8) Ross: Now, can I ask you something? You must be one of the hardest, if not the hardest working actors in Hollywood.

Jackson: I don't know. I do maybe *four, three, four, five* movies a year.

Example (8) shows that Jackson's words violated the maxim of quantity, because he failed to give the exact information what the hearer expected. However, it also just showed the obedience of maxim of quality, which requires that one should not say what he lacks adequate evidence. As Jackson really cannot evaluate his future life, he had no choice but to give vague information to express himself. Hence, Jackson's words can be seemed to function as giving the right amount of information.

Example (9) Barbara Bush: More people benefited. Now like 40 million people suddenly can join the mainstream and George would say-put a little thing in it, he'd say, with the help of Boyd (ph) and Gray (ph) *and so, so and so, so and so, and so and so...*

In Example (9), Barbara Bush wanted to thank a lot of people who had helped her. But if she listed all names she wanted to thank, it certainly would waste a lot of time. So she used vague language to help her avoid being verbose. What is more, her words also followed the tact maxim, which help her minimize cost to other.

Being Polite

Many times, in order to maintain good relations with others, speakers often choose to use vague language to save hearer's face as well as show respect to hearers. For instance:

Example (10) Jones: And what about this jealousy? The word is you're *a bit of* jealous of Edna Everidge, because she's an important, Dame Edna Everidge. What's all that about? Are you a jealous sort of person?

These words are given by the host Jones when he interviewed Sir Les Patterson (see Example (10)). In his utterances, for the sake of minimizing the degree of the negative word, he chose "a bit of" to modify the negative word "jealous" so as not to offend the hearer and show his politeness to him. Moreover, Jones's words also obeyed the tact maxims of polite principle, which requires minimizing cost to other as well as maximizing benefit to other.

Example (11) King: Did it come-almost think of that? *I mean*, was it...

Hillary Rodham Clinton: Well, I certainly entertained it. I think anybody in my position had to or would have. But, you know, as I write in the book, we've been together now more than 30 years, started dating in law school, started working together. We're very proud of the daughter we raised. We've been through a lot with our families. We've done so much for each other. And we decided that, you know, we really wanted to grow old together. So...

In Example (11), the host King firstly wanted to ask Hillary whether she ever thought that her marriage should end in divorce. But after all, it was a sensitive question and if he asked directly, it might make the atmosphere embarrassing. So in order to keep a harmonious atmosphere as well as show his politeness to hearer, the host used vague language “I mean” and left some certain words out to avoid being offensive. Actually Hillary’s answer proved that his vague language reached the goal of being polite.

Protecting Oneself

Vague language can be regarded as a protection for the speakers’ utterances. By using vague language, it can give speaker the room for manoeuvre rather than being regarded as arbitrary. In other words, if the opinions are expressed in a dogmatic way and later proved to be wrong, the speaker’s credibility will be put on the line. In English talk show, this function of vague language can be widely realized. The examples are given as follows:

Example (12) David P. Frost: In terms of Iraq, Prime Minister, *in the light of* the latest figures, not just in terms of lawlessness and so on, the latest figures from the Iraqi health ministry, the number of Iraqis who have died is between 100,000 and 150,000 and so on, with those scale of figures, if you had known that was the scale of bloodshed, would you have still gone to war?

The utterances in Example (12) are given by David P. Frost when he interviewed Tony Blair. This expression is a typical example. Here, the host uses “in the light of” to show the information which he has given is not his pure conjecture, so if the figures are proved wrong finally, he has no responsibility to take the blame for the mistake. His words help him avoid any potential consequences and then help him achieve the aim of self-protection.

Example (13) Ross: Well, how much do you make a movie?

Jackson: I’m not going to tell you that.

Ross: Why not?

Jackson: Well, *it all depends*, you know. Small movies I make a tenth of my fee, and big studio movies I go full freight.

In Example (13), by using the hedge “it all depends”, the guest showed the host that everything is changing, so he cannot give a certain answer to the host’s question. Moreover, the good use of vague language by Jackson not only obeys the maxim of quality which makes the conversation be more cooperative, but also protects himself from being too arbitrary.

Conclusion

According to the above study, there are mainly three types of vague language in English talk show, namely vague words, hedges, and vagueness by implication. As to these three types, each of them has been proved to function well. On the basis of Cooperative Principles and Politeness Principles, the present study summarizes three main functions of vague language: giving the right amount of information, being polite, protecting oneself. Through the study of vague language in English talk show, the significances of this essay are obvious: First of all, it can give the study of vague language in other fields some theory references; secondly, English learners could have a better understanding of the implied meaning of the utterances spoken by guests and hosts. However, the limitations are inevitable: First, although some kind of efforts has been made in the paper to collect as many data

as possible from the English talk show, it still leaves much room to do the collection of data; secondly, the concrete functions given in this paper are relatively insufficient. In a word, the study of vague language in English talk show is just a beginning, which still deserves scholars' attention and improvement.

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