A Study of Pragmatic Vagueness in Chinese Spokespersons’ Remarks

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Pragmatic vagueness is not only a universal phenomenon in daily life, but also an indispensable communicative strategy, especially in press conferences. This article analyzes pragmatic vagueness in Chinese Spokespersons’ four remarks from the perspective of Grice’s Cooperative Principle. The purpose of the article is to analyze the application of pragmatic vagueness in the remarks of Chinese spokespersons from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle and its pragmatic functions. The results show that pragmatic vagueness was an international communicative strategy in the remarks of Chinese spokespersons and through the use of pragmatic vagueness, the spokespersons violated the maxims of the Cooperative Principle, especially quantity maxim and manner maxim, in order to achieve different pragmatic functions: withholding information, being flexible, avoiding conflicts and safeguarding national interests. These findings have some implications for people to understand the application and functions of pragmatic vagueness in the remarks of Chinese spokespersons.

Keywords: pragmatic vagueness, cooperative principle, pragmatic function, Chinese spokespersons’ remarks

Introduction

Pragmatic vagueness refers to “the same discourse conveys more than one illocutionary force to the listeners in some contexts in order to make the intentions of the speakers uncertain” (Li, 2015, p. 46). Although communicators need precise language to express their intentions exactly, only by the usage of vague language can they achieve some specific communicative needs in some situations. In press conferences, diplomats must make the most appropriate language choices in complex situations in order to publicize foreign policies and safeguard national interests (Guan, 2010). Pragmatic vagueness is one of their appropriate language choices when they cannot employ exact language to achieve diplomatic purposes. Pragmatic vagueness is gaining increasing attention in academic research, but the study of vague language in the context of press conferences is sparse. Therefore, the paper will focus on pragmatic vagueness in Chinese press conferences. Through the analysis of pragmatic vagueness in Chinese press conferences from the perspective of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, the functions of pragmatic vagueness in press conferences and the motivations of spokespersons to apply vague language will be revealed.

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Theoretical Framework

Grice’s Cooperative Principle

The definition of Cooperative Principle (CP) in Grice’s words 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 (Hu, 2017). According to the principle, participants should cooperate in a conversation to make the conversation continue successfully. Under the CP, there are four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Quantity refers to the amount of information expected by the speaker. Quality looks at the efforts of the speaker to make his contribution a truthful one. Relation refers to relevance, and manner ensures the clarity of one’s utterances (Ephratt, 2012).

Violation of the Maxims

Based on these maxims, people can communicate with each other efficiently. However, in reality, it is hard for people to observe all the maxims in a conversation. According to Nemesi (2015), speakers do not observe a maxim and the CP itself, hiding this fact from the hearer (e.g., through lying or withholding information, pretending in a covert manner). When speakers flout a certain maxim, the Conversational Implicature which is used to indicate the implied meaning would occur. In press conferences, since spokespersons often use some vague expressions to generate some implied meaning, these maxims, especially the maxims of quantity and manner, are inevitably flouted.

Analysis of Vagueness from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

From the perspective of the CP, the use of pragmatic vagueness is the process of cooperative communication, which can lead to achieving the communicative purposes of spokespersons in press conferences. This part analyzes in detail the vagueness of spokespersons’ remarks from the perspective of the CP.

Violating the Four Maxims of Cooperative Principle

Violation of Quality Maxim

Quality’s maxims only require that one not disbelieve, and have adequate evidence for, what one asserts (Benton, 2016). Nevertheless, in press conferences, spokespersons sometimes have no choice but to violate the maxim of quality by offering false information or using inaccurate wording for different diplomatic goals. Pragmatic vagueness is a good tool to achieve their diplomatic goals. By using vague language, they say something for which they lack adequate evidence or that they do not firmly believe. Spokespersons often adopt some vague expressions on some unpleasant topics such as “war” and “conflict”.

Example (1)

Q: Reuters spoke to the overseas family members of six people detained in Xinjiang who said they have been unable to learn basic information on their relatives’ cases for years. The people say their efforts include requests to Chinese embassies abroad which they say go unanswered. Is there any reason that China would decline to give this information? What does the foreign ministry recommend these people to do?
A: With regard to the cases you mentioned, I’m not sure who the six people Reuters reported on are. I suggest you send your question to the spokesperson of the government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where you can get more detailed information. China’s position on issues relating to Xinjiang is consistent and clear. I won’t repeat it here. We do hope that news agencies will be objective and impartial in their reporting on Xinjiang-related issues, especially individual cases.

(Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on September 22, 2021)

Regarding the questions Reuters mentions, the Chinese spokesperson Zhao Lijian uses the vague expression “I’m not sure” to avoid revealing specific information. Meanwhile, he suggests the journalist consult the spokesperson of the government of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region for more detailed information and shows China’s position on issues relating to Xinjiang. Without any investigation and verification, the spokesperson employs vague expressions to indirectly deny the report quoted by the journalist. Therefore, his remarks show that in order to protect the image of China, he may deliberately conceal some negative facts, which clearly violate the quality maxim.

Violation of Quantity Maxim

The maxim of quantity requires speakers to provide sufficient information as is required. Violations of this maxim are made either by saying too much or too little information. In press conferences, spokespersons tend to provide excessive or insufficient information as they seek to achieve diplomatic purposes, thus flouting the quantity maxim. They usually adopt pragmatic vagueness to make their remarks excessive or insufficient, which avoids damaging national interests.

Example (2)

Q: On Saturday, Lithuania said it was quitting China’s cooperation forum with the Central and Eastern European Countries, calling the Chinese initiative divisive. Does China have a comment on this? Should we expect a retaliation from China?

A: China-CEEC cooperation is a trans-regional cooperation mechanism established at the joint initiative of China and countries in central and eastern Europe. It embodies our aspiration for win-win cooperation and shared development. Nine years since its launch, China-CEEC cooperation has yielded fruitful outcomes and delivered tangible benefits to the people of participating countries. In advancing cooperation, the principle of voluntary consultation, joint contribution, openness and inclusiveness is always upheld by all parties. We always see this mechanism as a useful and important supplement to China-Europe relations and welcome its cooperation with other countries and international organizations. Steady progress has been made in implementing the outcomes reached at the China-CEEC summit. Going forward, China stands ready to continue sharing development opportunities and cooperation outcomes with relevant parties to realize steady and sustained growth in China-CEEC cooperation. China-CEEC cooperation serves the shared interests of all parties. The mechanism has yielded fruitful results nine years since its launch. It will not be affected by sporadic incidents. With
the concerted efforts of all member states, China-CEEC cooperation will surely deliver greater benefits to people in all participating countries.

(Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on May 24, 2021)

In Example (2), the journalist wonders how China comments on Lithuania’s speech and whether China will take its revenge on this affair. Faced with these questions, the spokesperson Zhao Lijian does not give a direct answer. Instead, he provides excessive information to reveal the importance of China’s cooperation forum with the Central and Eastern European Countries, which flouts the quantity maxim. At the same time, he uses the vague expression “sporadic incidents” to indicate Lithuania’s quitting, which implies that China will not take measures to retaliate against this incident.

Violation of Relevance Maxim

According to the maxim of relevance, speakers should convey relevant information to hearers in a conversation. Sometimes, speakers deliberately provide hearers with irrelevant information for their own communicative goals, thus flouting the maxim of relevance. In press conferences, spokespersons generally offer the information relevant to the topics, but on some occasions, they intentionally employ vague expressions to flout the relevance maxim in order to achieve their diplomatic goals.

Example (3)

Q: There was a Bloomberg report citing sources saying that China will consider further retaliatory measures against Australia, including limiting extra products including dairy. Is there any truth to this report?
A: Like we stressed repeatedly, China always adheres to mutual respect and equal-footed treatment while developing friendly relations with other countries. China champions seeking common ground while shelving differences and advocates win-win cooperation. We have never sought selfish gains at the expense of others. We hope Australia will work with us to create favorable conditions for practical cooperation with actions that are conducive to bilateral relations and mutual trust.

(Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on May 20, 2020)

In Example (3), the journalist raises the question of whether China will consider further retaliatory measures against Australia, including limiting additional products, including dairy. Obviously, the journalist attempts to provoke conflicts between China and Australia. The veteran spokesperson Zhao Lijian penetrates his intentions and does not provide relevant information to verify the truth of this report. Instead, he applies some vague expressions, such as “equality” and “respect”, to show the attitude of China towards the problem. Therefore, he flouts the relevance maxim and implicates that the report is not completely true.

Violation of Manner Maxim

The maxim of manner requests that speakers avoid obscurity of expression. Without a doubt, the use of pragmatic vagueness flouts manner maxim. Under some circumstances, it is unavoidable for spokespersons to apply pragmatic vague to protect China’s interests, thus violating the maxim of manner.

Example (4):

Q: US President Trump in his televised speech today said that the virus started in China and spread to other places. What’s China’s comment?
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A: China has been acting in an open, transparent and highly responsible way since the outbreak of the epidemic. United as one, we have taken the most comprehensive, rigorous and thorough measures in this all-out, people’s war against the epidemic. Such extraordinary efforts have resulted in a growing positive momentum in epidemic control across the country with important outcomes achieved for the current stage, making important contributions to the global response. China’s efforts and achievements have received wide support and acclaim from the international community.

At present, the virus has taken footholds in many places around the world and is still spreading. China will strengthen cooperation with the international community to secure an early victory against the epidemic.

(Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on March 12, 2020)

In Example (4), when asked the matter about whether the origin of the virus is China or not, the Chinese spokesman Geng Shuang does not directly refute the journalist’s problem. Instead, he uses some vague adjectives such as “open”, “transparent” and “highly responsible” to express China’s firm attitude towards the epidemic. He violates the manner maxim through the use of vague expressions, implicating that whether the origin of the virus is China or not, China will spare no effort to control the epidemic.

**The Functions of Pragmatic Vagueness in Chinese Spokespersons’ Remarks**

Joanna Channell (2000) concludes the functions of vagueness from the pragmatic perspective, including “giving the right amount of information”; “withholding information deliberately”; “using language persuasively”; “lexical gaps”; “lacking specific information”; “displacement”; “self-protection”; “power and politeness”; “informality and atmosphere”; and “women’s language”. Based on the functions of vagueness, the article analyzes four pragmatic functions of vagueness frequently applied in the remarks of Chinese spokespersons: withholding information, being flexible, avoiding conflicts and safeguarding national interests. The four pragmatic functions will be analyzed in detail as follows.

**Witholding Information**

In press conferences, confronted with some thorny and sensitive questions on commercial secrets, military secrets, or political secrets, spokespersons can turn to the help of pragmatic vagueness to withhold information so that it is difficult for journalists to receive valid information. In Example (1), the journalist asks the spokesperson Zhao Lijian about the reason that China declines to give this information to family members of six people detained in Xinjiang. Faced with the question involved in China’s political secrets, Zhao Lijian may realize the information in detail, but he uses the vague expression “I’m not sure” and requires the journalist to consult other spokespersons, which implies that he is not authorized to provide specific information for the journalist. At the same time, he deliberately employs the vague expression “individual cases” to indicate that six people are detained in Xinjiang, which implicates that some news agencies exaggerate the Xinjiang-related issues. Through the use of pragmatic vagueness, the journalist in Reuters cannot excavate exact information from Zhao Lijian’s remarks. Therefore, the use of pragmatic vagueness fulfills the function of withholding information.
Being Flexible

In the field of diplomacy, the application of pragmatic vagueness can enhance the flexibility of discourse, which achieves unexpected effects. It not only allows speakers to retain some necessary information, but also shows their communicative skills (Qin, 2010). In Example (2), the journalist posed some sharp questions in terms of Lithuania’s speech. As a foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian could have dealt with the journalist with these answers, such as “it’s a secret” or “no comment”, which are ordinary and unskillful. In contrast, he adopts the vague expression “sporadic incidents”, a simple and skillful phrase, to answer whether China will take its revenge on this affair. His answer implies that China will not be affected by Lithuania’s speech. Therefore, the use of pragmatic vagueness allows spokespersons to avert some tough questions raised by journalists in a flexible way.

Avoiding Conflicts

The press conferences aim to boost international cooperation and exchange. Under the prerequisite, spokespersons are under obligation to create a friendly atmosphere when answering various questions. Some questions put forward by journalists may lead to severe conflicts and clashes, which destroy friendly relationships among countries. To avoid direct and undue contradictions with other countries, spokespersons are inclined to implement agreeable communication with pragmatic vagueness, which can help them to create a harmonious atmosphere among countries. In Example (3), the journalist asks the spokesperson Zhao Lijian about the veracity of the Bloomberg report. His intention blatantly aims to instigate conflicts between China and Australia. Zhao Lijian does not fulfill his intention. Instead, he provides many vague expressions, such as “respect” and “equality”, to reaffirm China’s stand towards the problem. Particularly, he adopts the vague expression “to seek selfish gains at the expense of others” to implicate that China will not consider further retaliatory measures against Australia. Through the use of pragmatic vagueness, the spokesperson Zhao Lijian tactfully bypasses conflicts with the third-party country, Australia. Therefore, the use of pragmatic vagueness plays a significant role in avoiding conflicts.

Safeguarding National Interests

As the international environment has become more complicated and every country strives for its own interests, spokespersons take responsibility for safeguarding their own national interests in press conferences. They usually employ pragmatic vagueness to safeguard their own state interests. When spokespersons encounter some sharp problems that are unfavorable for their own country, the use of pragmatic vagueness can succeed in protecting national interests. In Example (4), the journalist inquires about China’s comment on Trump’s speech. When the Chinese spokesman Geng Shuang is confronted with Trump’s speech which attempts to smear China on the origin of COVID-19, it is impossible for him to affirm Trump’s speech, but he also does not directly refute the speech. In contrast, he uses a series of vague words to express the attitude and determination of China against the epidemic. In particular, the emphasis on the vague word “contribution” in his remarks turns the negative topic into the positive one, which protects state interests. Therefore, pragmatic vagueness in spokespersons’ remarks realizes the function of safeguarding national interests.
Conclusion

This article mainly analyzes the pragmatic vagueness in Chinese spokespersons’ remarks from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle. After analyzing spokespersons’ remarks, it can be found that pragmatic vagueness is an international communicative strategy in Chinese spokespersons’ remarks. Spokespersons make use of pragmatic vagueness which violates some maxims in CP to realize different pragmatic functions: withholding information, being flexible, avoiding conflicts, and safeguarding national interests. This article pinpoints the importance of pragmatic vagueness in Chinese spokespersons’ remarks. The present study collects its materials from the People’s Republic of China Foreign Ministry press conference, so the conclusion is just for the actual conditions of China rather than for every country. Therefore, further study can compare pragmatic vagueness in English and Chinese in order to investigate similarities and differences in its linguistic means.

References
