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# The Application of Vague Language in International Business Negotiations from a Cross-cultural Perspective

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**Abstract**—in the environment of economic globalization, business negotiation becomes more and more frequent than ever. International business negotiation has a significant role in international business trade. There are many factors that can affect the negotiation, including language, culture, negotiators, and negotiation strategies. Language as an important tool plays a great role in the negotiation strategies. It is commonly held that precise language should be used in business negotiations in order to avoid misunderstanding. However, people ignore the fact that language itself is vague in essence. Negotiators unavoidably use vague language in business negotiations, for vague language can be used as a kind of politeness strategy. Appropriate use of vague language will make the negotiation go smoothly, and avoid the conflict of business negotiation so as to achieve the purpose of cooperation.

**Index Terms**—international business negotiation, vague language, culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vague language is a kind of social language phenomenon. It is also a kind of cultural phenomenon, a kind of embodiment of culture in language. It is an effective lubricant used by people to coordinate interpersonal relationships, and also an important method to promote successful communication. The study shows that with frequent intercultural communication, vague language is widely used in various fields, and the effective use of vague language in international business negotiation can help people to reduce pragmatic failure and reduce cultural conflicts, and then to further promote international trade development. From the cross-cultural perspective, this paper will use the principle of cooperation, politeness principle and face theory as the theoretical basis, by means of case study, to explore the use of vague language in the various stages of negotiation.

## II. VAGUE LANGUAGE

### A. The Definition of Vague Language

Ambiguity is the basic attribute of natural language. The ambiguity of language mainly refers to the fuzziness caused by individual differences and the ambiguity of comprehension, and the ambiguity of the function of language. Vague language as a flexible language, refers to a special language with the extension of uncertainty and uncertain connotation. Compared with the precise language, vague language has greater generality and flexibility. The generality and flexibility are reflected on the language extension. Wu Tiejing (2002) argues that the words are the expression of the concept. But when many well-defined concepts of a word are expressed, it may break these boundaries, resulting in a lot of vague word<sup>1</sup>. For instance, “morning”, “mid-day”, “afternoon”, “night”, etc. There is no clear distinction between these kinds of words, and there is a transitional area. Just like the blue and green colors in the palette, these two colors are gradually formed with no absolute limit between them. There is also a kind of words, the meaning of which does not have definite scope and depends on the situation to move within or outside the scope. People with different ages, different sex, and different profession have different definitions of the words such as “almost”, “near” and “close”. Therefore, vague language exists in all aspects of people’s lives, especially in interpersonal communication, which is very important in negotiation.

### B. The Study on Vague Language

L.A.Zadeh, the professor from University of California, Berkeley, in an article entitled "Fuzzy sets" of the journal *Information and Control* in 1965, he pointed out that the object which encountered in the real world, often does not have precise limits. And then, Lakoff, a famous American scholar, is the first one who introduced the "linguistic

<sup>1</sup> Wu Tiejing. (2002). *Vague Language*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Education Press.

hedges" in 1972, and defined it as "a vague word for things". He got the theoretical evidence from Rosch's work on category membership. In the view of Rosch (1973), the words like shape and time have their own internal structure, which means that this kind of words has a core meaning. And the core meaning can express exactly the core part of the words. Besides the core meaning, they also include other meanings which can increase difference to the core meaning.<sup>2</sup> Based on the work of Lakoff, Crystal and Davy (1975) thought that the existence of some particular lexical items aims to make the conversation not to be precise.<sup>3</sup> From then on the pragmatic use of vague language has been studied in depth. Channell (2000) believed that the vague language is related to cooperative principle in two aspects: vague expression can be used to enable speakers to follow the maxims or vague expression is often used when one of the maxims is flouted.<sup>4</sup> Pragmatics specializes in specific discourses in specific contexts, especially in how to understand and apply language in different language communication environments. It studies the appropriateness and decency of language from the use of language with a view of getting the subaudition of the discourse. Vague language makes the expression of language obscure "intentionally", requiring the hearer to grasp the implication of vague expression, so as to play the appropriate and decent role in the communication effectively.

From 1965 (when L.A.Zadeh published his paper "Fuzzy Sets") to 1979, many Chinese scholars began their studies in the area of vague language. China's research on vague language began in the late 1970s, with the publication of Professor Wu Tieping's *Vague Language*, and later *Vague Linguistics Re-exploration*. Zhang Qiao (1998) defined vague language as the words that can bring people into a vague reading (e.g. "around" in "around seven o'clock"), or modify vagueness to certain extent (e.g. "quite" in "quite much").<sup>5</sup> From the semantic perspective, vague language can give the meaning of expression more roles in different conversations. It can be found that many vague words in our natural conversation, such as some sentences introduced by "if". It is just a word, but it can make the whole sentence uncertain. On this point, Jaszczolt (2004) held that the "hedge" is just a word or phrase that is used to modify the verbal phrase, the noun phrase and the sentence, so that it can make people trust the contained message more easily and can also make the dialogue more acceptable.<sup>6</sup> Thus it can be seen that vague language enables the interpersonal communication in negotiation to go more smoothly. As in china, in recent 20 years, the linguistic research of vague language is mainly studied from the perspective of semantics, and then to sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis, cross-cultural communication, discourse analysis and so on (Wu Tieping, 2002).<sup>7</sup> After Wu Tieping and Zhao Qiao, the research of vague language has become more and more popular in China. Vague language has begun to attract more and more scholars' attention. And various functions of vague language in different perspectives are introduced from time to time.

All in all, vague language was first studied from the perspective of semantics in the 1970s, and then it was extended to the pragmatic perspective in 1980s. Although there is no certain agreement on the definition of vague language and what definite role it can play in business negotiations, all the above studies demonstrate that vague language mainly plays its role pragmatically. And the pragmatic functions of vague language can be generally divided into the following aspects: being flexible, being persuasive, and being polite. With the research on vague language covering various perspectives, it is now regarded as a way to realize communicative functions such as self-protection, politeness and improving confidence etc.

### III. CULTURE AND INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS NEGOTIATION

#### A. *The Definition of Culture*

When we talk about culture, we may think it is a wide and uncertain concept. Here is one of famous anthropological consensus definition of culture from Kluckhohn (1952). "Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values".<sup>8</sup> People from different countries are bound to have different cultural backgrounds, usually in customs, beliefs and cultural values. Geert Hofstede (1980) makes a concise definition based on this: Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.<sup>9</sup>

However, due to the existence of cultural difference, people from different country are bound to learn the cross-cultural communication properly to achieve the goal of negotiation. The concept of "cross-cultural communication" was first proposed by Edward. T. Hall (1976). It is a communicative activity between people with different cultural senses. It specifically includes interpersonal communication, communication between different groups within the same mainstream culture, transnational communication, and trans-regional communication.<sup>10</sup> Negotiator's

<sup>2</sup> Rosch, E. (1973). 'On the internal structure of perceptual and semantic categories' in Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language. Moore, T. E. (ed). New York: Academic Press.

<sup>3</sup> Crystal, D. & Davy, D. (1975). *Advanced Conversational English*. London: Longman.

<sup>4</sup> Channell, J. (2000). *Vague Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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<sup>9</sup> Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*. California: Sage.

<sup>10</sup> Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. New York: Doubleday.

cross-cultural communicative ability is an integral part of negotiating communicative ability. In international business negotiations, in order to make the communication successful and avoid conflicts or misunderstandings, negotiators must keep cross-cultural awareness in mind.

### B. *International Business Negotiation*

Negotiation can be regarded as one of the commonly adopted communication skills. In China, negotiation refers to discussing and making common agreement. In other foreign countries, there are other definitions of negotiation, such as “a process in the public domain in which two parties, with supporter of various kinds, attempt to reach a joint decision on issues under dispute”. It can be found that people from different cultural backgrounds have almost same points on the definition of negotiation. Actually, in international business negotiation, cultural differences will probably exert deep influences on the negotiators’ sensitivities to time, their forms of agreement and their willingness to take risks. It is well known that the main goal of business negotiation is to exchange something or to reach some agreement. To reach this goal, the two parties of negotiation need to use various strategies or skills. Among them, the most commonly used and also most powerful skill is language. Language is the most intuitive and clearest method to express the requirements or ideas of the negotiator. Different language skills have different roles in international business negotiation, of which, vague language may be regarded as a skill or strategy, which is widely applied and conducive to the success of negotiation. Maybe people think that vague language is too ambiguous for people to understand. However, under the context of business negotiation, vague language is inevitable. For instance, we all know the price is very important in business negotiations. In common sense, the buyers cannot give the exact price to the sellers, and naturally, the sellers cannot give the bottom price directly to the buyers. Thus, the two parties need vague language to avoid a definite answer and give some time and room for both parties to consider more. The proper use of vague language produces effects that cannot be ignored in international business negotiation, not only in improving the flexibility and accuracy of expression, but also in increasing the efficiency of negotiation.

How can we apply the vague language properly in international business negotiation under the influence of cultural differences? The following section will introduce some application of vague language at different stages of international business negotiations, and explore the reasons of the occurrence of vague language in intercultural situation.

## IV. THE APPLICATION OF VAGUE LANGUAGE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS NEGOTIATIONS

### A. *Vague Language at the Initial Stage*

The initial stage is the first time for the two sides of the negotiation to meet each other, a starting point of the entire business negotiation. Whether it is good or bad to a large extent determines the direction of the whole negotiation and the development trend. This stage often witnesses the sincerity and enthusiasm of the two sides. In some cultures, negotiators regard the business negotiation as a problem-solving process and tend to take a comprehensive strategy. However, in other cultures, people tend to regard it as a competition and do not want to compromise. In China, under the influence of traditional Confucian ideology, most Chinese people have affection for modesty. Chinese business negotiators believe that community of interest, long-term cooperation, and mutual trust are mostly significant. Therefore, they are more likely to build trust and friendship with the counterparts before the formal negotiation. While in some other western countries, people are more inclined to rational thinking and go straight to the point. So they regard a business negotiation as a problem-solving activity, and are more likely to put the goal on the first priority. Therefore, more often than not, they appear to be very confident, and willing to show their own advantages at first. But the excessive boast may make the other side feel unreliable, so at this time we can use some vague language to adjust the atmosphere of this situation, so as to achieve a good start. For example, “Our Company is very familiar with the recent customer’s need and has already developed a quite good market.” In this sentence, the speaker used vague expression like “very familiar”, “already”, and “quite good” to enhance the expression of the whole sentence. Obviously, we all do not the exact extent of “very” and “quite”. These words can be regarded obscure or vague. However, it is just the vagueness of this category of words that makes the whole sentence more acceptable. On the one hand, these vague words successfully demonstrated the company’s good image of reliability. On the other hand, they strengthened the company’s confidence to complete this transaction. Therefore, the use of vague language can show the confidence of negotiators properly, ease cultural conflicts. It caters to the modesty of Chinese culture, and the pride or confidence of the westerners. Besides, the proper use of vague language in this situation can strengthen the effect of being polite of the speaker. And thus gives the other side a good first impression at the initial stage.

### B. *Vague Language at the Bargaining Stage*

Bargaining stage is the most important stage of a negotiation. It refers to the whole process from the beginning to the final. The two sides will discuss on the substantive issues at this stage. It is not only the specific contest stage between the two sides of the strength, intelligence and technology, but also the compromise stage of seeking common ground while reserving differences. In international business negotiations, as the parties to the negotiations were born with different cultural influences, both parties have a fixed mode of behavior in business activities. Thus, once the mode of behavior goes beyond its cultural context, conflicts may arise. As the definition in Hofstede’s cultural dimensions,

Chinese culture is characterized by high uncertainty avoidance. Under this kind of culture, people tend to avoid uncertain situations. While American culture emphasizes individualism and self-realization, so the independence and nonconformity are greatly encouraged. In the IBM's research from Hofstede, the individualistic / collectivist tendencies of a society are measured by the individualist index. The bigger the value of index is, the more obvious the individualistic tendencies of the society will be, such as the United States; on the contrary, the smaller it is, the more obvious the collectivist tendencies of the society will be, like China and some Asian countries. Negotiators from different cultural backgrounds always have their own fixed view on the terms of business, such as payment, shipment and date of delivery, etc. Therefore, the two parties of international business negotiation should use vague language more carefully to avoid the occurrence of deadlock. Here is a short example:

*A: This is our rock—bottom price, Mr. Li, we cannot make any further concession.*

*B: If that is the case, there is not much point in further discussion. We might as well call whole deal off.*

*A: What I mean is that we will never be able to come down to your price, The gap is too great.*

Obviously, because Party A with a precise and absolute word "rock-bottom price" (lowest price), the negotiation suddenly stalemated. Party B may not think you want to continue, and probably the negotiation will lead to failure. In order to ease and restore the friendly negotiation atmosphere, party A resorted to the vague expression --- "gap is too great" to save the negotiation. And at the same time, party B would no longer insist on the termination of the negotiation so that the negotiation could move on, and the possibility of success would be increased as well. It can be seen that the precise language with lack of flexibility tends to stiffen the negotiating atmosphere, while vague language can remove this stiffness and avoid the deadlock. The appropriate use of vague language can strengthen the flexibility of words to adjust some unexpected situations. Even when the deadlock occurs, we can also use vague language to give more time and space for both parties. Such as "Under the circumstances, we had better discuss the matter when opportunity arises." The vagueness of "Under the circumstances" makes the discourse more objective, implying problems may occur due to some unidentified factors which are not caused by subjective ones of the concerned parties. It also decentralizes the responsibility of the speaker himself. "When opportunity arises" is a conditional commitment with euphemistic tone, not a sure answer, and the other side is likely to be full of expectations and confidence. And in the course of this stage, due to the uncertainty of some objective factors, the negotiators inevitably have inadequate understanding. At this time, the proper use vague language can surely improve the accuracy of the speaker's expression, such as "It seems that the price on this level you will not accept." In this example, the vague language "it seems" and "on this level" roughly predict the intention of negotiating parties, taking into account that the negotiated price is constrained by a number of uncertainties. The speaker does not say that it is not acceptable, so the seemingly vague language in essence is more accurately expressed in this situation.

Proper use of vague language at this stage is critical to the whole business negotiation. It can maintain trade relations between the two sides, and promote the negotiation to the final stage smoothly.

### C. *Vague Language at the Final Stage*

After a substantive bargaining stage through the two sides, the basic content and conditions have been reached on the agreement, and the main differences between each other have also been eliminated, at this time, the negotiation will move to the final stage. At this stage, the negotiators will consolidate the results of previous stages, and proceed to accept mutual conditions as soon as possible. So it is also important for the whole negotiation to get a good result. And the method or strategy to express the cooperative willingness or specific requirements will affect the achievements of the negotiation directly. It is well known that values are the core of a culture owned by a person, including worldview, outlook on life, and moral standards etc. They also are beliefs that are universally accepted by members of society. For western countries, individualism is the core of culture. Western culture emphasizes democracy and individual. They always highlight personal values, personal interests, so their conversation are more results-oriented. China is committed to "benevolence" and advocates a kind of harmony between man and man. Chinese people believe in collectivism, always emphasizing the team goals, team interests. In the traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese people are inclined to "leave a face" when talking to other people, so that the atmosphere of conversation will be friendlier. If we find something improper in the final documents, we should not point it out directly, as it can make the other side feel embarrassed. We can see the following example about the realization of avoiding embarrassment with vague language. "We have already checked all the documents available and unexpectedly find each of them has doubtful points more or less." The sentence indicates that the speaker is not satisfied with the statement about the results of the examination. However, by using two vague words "unexpectedly" and "more or less", the whole sentence sounds more polite and easier to accept. Thus, the embarrassment of directness and arbitrariness can be avoided masterly. Combination with face theory and politeness principles, vague language can make expression more polite and better defend the interest of both sides of the negotiation, so that the transaction will go smoothly. For more example, "Generally speaking, we pay commission or not is based on the goods that are industrial products or traditional products." As to what is "generally", is blur in terms of scope, extent and boundaries. The use of this vague language makes the discourse rigorous, and moderately calm. With no imposing or absolute meaning, the buyer tends to accept his point of view. As the final stage is the last step to the whole success of international business negotiation, the speed of the process should be well under control. In business negotiations, sometimes it is not necessary to say something too precise. The use of vague language may help to get better results. Vague language does not need the room of retreat, for the use of vague language can

increase the amount of communication information and transmit enough information with less cost. And it leaves more time to make wise judgments and flexible management of complicated things. For example, "I do not deny that the projector is of top quality. If you could go a little lower, I will give you the order right away." In this sentence, the expression "top quality", "a little" and "right away" give the other side full imagination. Therefore, the use of vague language in negotiations can improve the efficiency of language expression.

## V. CONCLUSION

The main feature of international business negotiations lies in its multi-national, multi-ethnic context. Negotiations from different countries, different regions and different nationalities cannot have a completely consistent position, habits and values. They have different negotiating styles or strategies due to cultural differences. Therefore, in the international business negotiation, there are not only shared economic interests and cooperation, but also cultural collision and communicative failure between parties with different cultures. In fact, the particularity of English in business negotiation lies in its strong purpose, and its communicative effect which is directly related to economic benefits. And vague language can help negotiators achieve their goals, and can also help negotiators to establish friendly relations of cooperation, so that negotiators in business negotiations can have an invincible position. Through the above analysis of the application of vague language in different stages of international business negotiation, it can be seen that the proper use of vague language has many positive functions like strengthening the effect of being polite and flexible, and improving the accuracy of expression, etc.

With the development of economic globalization and advanced internet technology, the economic relations with different countries become closer and closer. Therefore, in international business negotiations, it is of great significance to understand the cultural difference between different countries, and use vague language properly in different stages of negotiation, for vague language can play an unexpected positive role; it can maintain a harmonious atmosphere of negotiations, guarantee the negotiation goes smoothly and ensure negotiators have more operating space, if the following situations occur: some information is not convenient to speak directly, or someone does not want to reveal their true thoughts to others; or in some cases, some problems are difficult to answer.

In a word, continuous improvement of language skills and proper application of vague language at every stage of negotiation are conducive to international business negotiations and trade development.

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