

A Study on Vague Language in Business English from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of cross-cultural communication, although business English requires a rigorous style, the use of vague language can enhance the flexibility of expression. Consequently, research on the translation of vague language in business English has attracted significant attention and in-depth exploration from numerous scholars, and the study of vague language in business English has become an inevitable trend in English linguistics research.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication; Business English; Vague Language; English Literature

1. Introduction

The concept of "vague language" was introduced by Wu Tieping in 1979, and it plays a facilitating role in cross-cultural communication. Due to the emphasis on rigor in business English, vague language is rarely employed, which in turn leads to insufficient research in this regard. However, practice has proven that vague language can make business English expressions more flexible and appropriate, making the study of vague language in business English under cross-cultural communication an urgent need.

2. Overview of Vague Language

Vague language exhibits vagueness in semantics, vocabulary, and usage scenarios, and can serve as a means of communication. From the perspectives of linguistics and philosophy, it is both a linguistic phenomenon and a form of human thinking. Possessing flexibility, it enables expressions to be more accurate, natural, and appropriate. The emergence and development of vague language are constrained by social, historical, cultural, psychological, and other factors, thus

embodying social attributes. English vague language refers to frequently used but less precise words and phrases. It possesses both the common characteristics of language and unique features of its own, and is widely used in daily communication and literary works. Due to differences in cultural contexts, its forms of expression differ from those in other languages. Vague language can avoid linguistic inaccuracies and structural flaws, and add a human touch to communication. For instance, in polite communication scenarios, the request "Could you please give me a napkin?" sounds more polite than the direct statement "Give me a napkin."

3. Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language in Cross-Cultural Business English

There are a large number of vague idioms in the English language system, such as "as red as a rose" (alliteration), "by hook or by crook" (alliteration and consonance), and "First come, first served" (antithesis). These idioms have strong expressive power and constitute an important part of business English. Although business English demands objective and accurate expressions, in certain specific contexts, vague language can convey semantics more comprehensively and align better with the actual needs of communication.

3.1 Enhancing Objectivity and Accuracy

Cross-cultural business negotiations are fraught with uncertainties, and the pervasiveness of vague language allows for accurate expression of objective facts. For example, in the sentence "It seems that the investment for next year will be about five billion dollars," the phrases "It seems" and "about five billion dollars" present a vague estimation of the investment amount. By taking into account the uncertainties of investment risks, these vague expressions make the statement more objective and accurate.

3.2 Avoiding Conflicts in Business Communication

In the negotiation process of international business and trade activities, there are contents that are difficult to state directly; improper expression of such contents can easily lead to negotiation deadlocks. In such cases, adhering to the cross-cultural politeness principle and using vague language can enhance the flexibility of responses.

For example, when Enterprise B needs to avoid addressing a dispute during business negotiations, it can respond with the vague statement "Well, our enterprise credit is known to all." When evaluating the quality of the other party's products, using a vague expression like "We know where you are about the quality of your products" not only preserves the other party's dignity but also avoids linguistic conflicts.

3.3 Improving Language Expression Efficiency

In business negotiations, the combination of the politeness principle and the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson is crucial for exerting the pragmatic functions of vague language. Applying Relevance Theory to the use of vague language enables cross-cultural communication in specific contexts without excessive adjustment of linguistic forms.

Vague language has a clear connotation; it can expand the amount of information conveyed within a limited linguistic structure, trigger associations, and efficiently handle complex matters in cross-cultural communication. It achieves favorable results when used to concisely express non-essential matters through metaphors or abstract expressions.

3.4 Making International Business English Vivid, Vivacious, and Humorous

As the poet Mallarmé once stated, "Excessively precise meaning will distort the essence of vague literature beyond recognition." In cross-cultural business communication and negotiations, vague language makes expressions more vivid and humorous.

Words and phrases such as homophones, homographs, euphemisms, argots, puns, polysemes, and words whose meanings change with different stress patterns all fall into the category of vague language. Examples are as

follows:

1. The advertisement slogan for a counterfeit cigarette brand, "Ask for more," utilizes the pun on "more" (referring to both the brand "More" and the concept of "a greater quantity"), making the expression humorous and unique, and facilitating product promotion.
2. The advertisement slogan of Goldstar Electronics, "Go for the Gold. The brightest star in electronics," adopts a metaphor without using comparative words like "as" or "like." It promotes the product through vivid language and possesses strong persuasive power for promotion.
3. The advertisement slogan of Seven-Up, "Seven-up is uncola," has a superficial meaning of "Seven-Up is not cola," while its underlying message conveys that "Seven-Up contains no caffeine." By virtue of the pun, it naturally and humorously completes the product promotion.
4. The vague phrase "a sweet salesman" can be interpreted differently depending on the context—either as "a salesman selling candies" or "a friendly and amiable salesman"—achieving flexible expression through the polysemy of the word "sweet."

4. Application of Vague Language in Business English from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication

4.1 Business Negotiations

In cross-cultural business negotiations, the rational use of vague language can make communication more rigorous, ensure that semantics are clear and appropriate, and help achieve communication goals.

Negotiation Cases (Both parties negotiate on the product price and leave sufficient room for negotiation through vague language):

1. I: Your price sounds too high. (The word "too" is used to express objections to the price in a mild manner.)
2. II: Our goods are moderately priced. (The word "moderately" is used to justify the rationality of the pricing without absolute statements.)
3. III: If you can reduce the price, we might place a larger order. (The word "might" reflects the flexibility of the cooperative intention, while "larger" does not specify the order size. This expression not only conveys the benefit of potential cooperation but also avoids imposing pressure on the other party.)

4. IV: As a gesture of good will, we can meet your wishes when opportunity arises. (No absolute commitment is made; the tone is moderate, leaving sufficient time for the other party to consider and ensuring the smooth progress of the negotiation.)

4.2 Claim Assessment

In claim-related communication, direct expressions are likely to hurt the other party's dignity. Vague language can prevent the full disclosure of one's own views, leaving sufficient room for both parties to reflect, facilitating mutual understanding and negotiation. Even in cases of disagreement, it allows for flexible adjustment of decisions.

Claim Cases (Both parties express their attitudes euphemistically through vague language):

1. I: I'm afraid that the proposal you put forward just now isn't up too much. (The phrases "I'm afraid" and "isn't up too much" weaken the negative tone and leave room for further discussion.)

2. II: Your presentation makes me feel a little too—you know what I mean. (The phrases "a little too" and "you know what I mean" avoid direct negation, allowing the other party to infer the intended meaning on their own and preserving their dignity.)

4.3 Correspondence

In cross-cultural business activities, correspondence requires accurate and concise content within a limited space. Vague language can balance the expression of intentions with respect for the other party, ensuring the smooth progress of communication through letters.

Case (International trade correspondence):

Original text: "To be frank, we like your toy, but your prices appear to be on the high side as compared with those of other makes. It is understood that to accept the prices you quoted would leave us little or no margin of profit on our sales. As you know India is a developing country; its principal demand is for articles in the medium price range."

In this letter, vague expressions such as "appear to be on the high side" (seemingly on the high side) and "little or no margin of profit" (almost no profit margin) are used. Instead of forcing the other party to lower the price, these expressions euphemistically convey the sender's negotiation demands: they make the

other party aware of the issues regarding price and profit, leave room for the other party to consider, and implicitly take the product positioning into account—all of which facilitate the smooth progress of subsequent business negotiations.

4.4 Advertising

Advertising design needs to balance the appropriateness of language, the transmission of product information, and suggestiveness, and the use of vague language can effectively meet these requirements.

Cases: The advertising slogans of Kodak—"A Kodak Moment" (translated as "A Kodak Moment")—and Omega—"The sign of excellence" (translated as "The Epitome of Elegance")—both employ vague words like "Moment" and "excellence," which leave ample room for the audience's imagination. These expressions are also engaging, stimulating the audience's curiosity about the advertisements and promoting product sales.

5. Conclusion

In cross-cultural international business negotiations, the use of such vague language allows information transmission by leveraging the vagueness inherent in the English language. By virtue of its uncertainty, it enables objective and euphemistic communication, embedding the true information within vague expressions. Combined with the context of the negotiation, it helps the other party grasp the core intent. Especially in cross-cultural contexts, vague language can facilitate the smooth progress of negotiations: it not only ensures the accurate transmission of semantics but also enhances the humor and objectivity of communication, thereby promoting the orderly conduct of business activities. Therefore, attaching importance to the application of vague language in business English from the perspective of cross-cultural communication holds significant practical significance for improving the quality of cross-cultural business communication.

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