

A Research on the Fuzzy Language in Diplomacy from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: *Sperber and Wilson (1986) regarded verbal communication as an ostensive-inferential process. Based on their research, the paper investigates how the phenomenon of fuzziness used in diplomatic language. Although fuzziness in language is implicit and vague, it can provide new relevant information to enable the recipient to combine the old information for optimal relevancy through minimum efforts. Furthermore, the author applies the relevance theory in explaining the rationality and function of the fuzziness in diplomatic language. At the same time, as a very important diplomatic strategy, fuzziness in diplomatic language has its role and function which cannot be underestimated.*

Keywords: *fuzziness in diplomatic language; fuzzy; ostensive; context*

1. Introduction

The diplomatic activity is a significant part of national foreign exchange activities, which directly shows the comprehensive strength of a nation. Meanwhile, language is a carrier of communication, so the importance of diplomatic language is self-evident and it is tightly related to the basic position and fundamental interests of a nation. In external communication, fuzziness, as one of the language essences, plays an important role as preciseness. Fuzziness can enhance the efficiency and the flexibility of language expression, making language more euphemistic, implicit and polite. Though fuzziness in diplomatic language is obviously important, its domestic research is rare. Because of that, the study of it is extremely necessary. The thesis studies fuzziness in diplomatic language based on ostensive-inferential communicative principle from Sperber and Wilson, analyzes the usage of fuzzy and implicit words for diplomats in national foreign exchange activities, and figures out whether the relationship between ostensive language and fuzzy language is opposite. If they are opposite, then how to go on the communication of ostensive-inferential process? This thesis will study the above aspects.

2. Diplomatic Language's Fuzziness and Expression

Scientists tend to see things in black and white, while diplomats embrace gray zone between black and white, which is fuzziness. Language's fuzziness means that language has definite connotation but no definite extension. Fuzzy language is indistinct and implicit in representing something and describing a feature of something or an event, usually giving a general outline, not a detailed description or statement. Recipients grasp an object or its characteristics in accordance with fuzzy description. Based on that feature, diplomats often employ tactful expression and convey their content in a subtle and fuzzy way in various diplomatic activities such as communication, foreign affairs negotiations, external publicity, speech debate, announcement, announcement of the results of the talks, answering sensitive questions and easing the atmosphere of communication, in order to avoid irritation or excessive exposure and leave room for negotiation. This action can present politeness, and get the initiative in diplomatic activities, receiving the desired effect.

In diplomacy, the expression of fuzzy language is varied. The first one is to widely harness fuzzy words with unclear boundaries. For instance, to reject other's diplomatic request, you can say "I'll consider that," "Please allow me to consider that," "I'll consider that seriously," or "I'll think over that." Japanese diplomats are adept at using fuzzy language. For example, they do not say no directly, but say "I will consider that," which may lead unwitting recipients to a mistaken thought. In addition, George Walker Bush issued new space policy in 2006, requiring the army to take all appropriate measures to protect U.S. space assets. "All appropriate measures" are a kind of fairly broad, fuzzy expressions, for

the sake of the possibility that deploying weapons in space is not ruled out, and it does not mean that weapons should be made in space at present, laying the excuse for any future action.

The another one is to employ euphemism. Generally speaking, euphemism includes implicitness of taboo or sensitive subject, and tortuous or pleasant words. Euphemism is an increasing tendency in diplomacy. For instance, America, to cover up its atrocities in the Vietnam War, called aerial indiscriminate bombing as “logistical strikes” and “close air support”; called massacre of Vietnamese civilians as “wasting enemy”; called civilian casualties as “collateral damage”. Besides, if America missed the target, it would be called in euphemism that they “bombed a field”; if they hit their own army, it would be called “friendly fire” in euphemism. Apart from that, America failed to send a helicopter to rescue the hostages in Iran in 1980, but American President Carter called it “incomplete success”; American president Bush, Jr. called Iraq’s aggression action of “liberating Iraq people”. All these are to cover the fact and confuse the public.

Another common way is ambiguity of discourse, which is one considering either aspect as reasonable, without a clear attitude or claim. For example, the conflict between Arab and Israel is a major problem in contemporary diplomacy, but the United Nations Security Council adopted the historic resolution 242 on November 22, 1967, conducive to resolving the conflict by means of ambiguous and vague language. The resolution mentioned the withdrawal of “territory occupied in recent conflict” and “secure and recognized borders”, which allowed them to make their own explanations and hence it got adoption.

3. Ostensive-Inferential Communicative Process

Relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986) regards verbal communication as an ostensive-inferential process. According to the relevance theory, the understanding of discourse should rely on the context to find the association of information, then recipients getting inference so as to obtain the contextual effect. The generation of new contextual effect depends on the process in which new information interacts with existing information and one gets reasoning. People always maximize the contextual effect in verbal communication and minimize the reasoning effort to achieve the optimal relevance. “Relevance theory points out that cognitive subjects in discourse understanding will use the reasoning mechanism to integrate the literal meaning of discourse with the possible implied cognitive information, combined with contextual hypotheses, seeking the internal connections between them, and choosing the most relevant explanations among them.”(He & Ran, 1999)

For example:

Under the background of Premier Wen Jiabao attending press conference for Chinese and foreign journalists after the 11th National People’s Congress in March 2008, a foreign journalist asked “By 2009, China is expected to become the world’s largest emitter of greenhouse gases. If the government considers the environmental protection policy goals still useful, will China be willing to accept the greenhouse gas emissions targets jointly set by the international community?” Premier Wen Jiabao replied “The question you raised is mainly our attitude towards greenhouse gas emissions, and we are in favor of the Kyoto Protocol. Although we are a developing country, we have formulated China’s climate change response plan in line with the international conventions on greenhouse gas emissions. We propose that the energy consumption per unit of GDP, from 2006 to 2010, has decreased by 20%. I think although the Kyoto Protocol does not set mandatory indicators for developing countries, the Chinese government still fulfills its international obligations in a responsible attitude.”

The Chinese government is resolute in controlling greenhouse gas emissions and protecting the natural environment, and it has also formulated active policies and taken effective measures. Therefore, Premier Wen Jiabao made a more specific “ostensive expression” to this, providing more clear information for the recipients, such as “from 2006 to 2010, the energy consumption of unit GDP was reduced by 20%” and “fulfilling international obligations”. The recipient combined old information, such as China becoming the world’s largest gas emitter of the past and Kyoto Protocol, with context -- environmental protection, and employed the reasoning mechanism, looking for relevant information -- energy consumption per unit of GDP was reduced by 20% from 2006 to 2010; performing its international obligations, and then generating new contextual effects with minimal treatment efforts to find the most relevant explanation that though China emits a lot of greenhouse gases, it has recognized environmental issues, has taken effective measures, and will develop a program based on the greenhouse gas emissions targets jointly set by the international community with specific digital targets. Premier Wen Jiabao’s answer clearly and specifically manifests China’s firm position on environmental protection.

4. The Relationship between Fuzziness and Ostensiveness

From the foregoing explanation, fuzziness is an implicit and non-exposed language expression so that recipients have to ponder its actual meaning. In this way, fuzziness seems to be contrary to explicitness in the process of verbal communication put forward by Sperber and Wilson, and seems to violate communicative process, resulting in discontinuous communication. However, in many cases, fuzzy words are more favored by speakers than precise words, because fuzzy words can more effectively express the content and intentions that they want to convey. In multitudinous communicative situations, fuzzy words are more relevant than precise words, as the decisive factor is not the language we use but important information that participants perceive. Especially in some political and diplomatic occasions, some specific information is inappropriate to disclose or say directly for various reasons, and fuzzy language is the most effective strategy to avoid conflicts and to leave room for negotiation, making both parties pleasant and having smooth communication. Although fuzzy language is implicit, it can provide new relevant information to enable the recipient to combine the old information for optimal relevancy through minimum efforts.

For example:

At a press conference, a Western journalist asked "How much money does the People's Bank of China have?" Premier Zhou Enlai replied "The People's Bank of China has 18.88 yuan". Journalists were confused. Premier Zhou explained that the People's Bank of China issued denominations of 10 yuan, 5 yuan, 2 yuan, 1 yuan, 5 jiao, 2 jiao, 1 jiao, 5 fen, 2 fen, 1 fen (1 yuan equals 10 jiao and 100 fen), altogether 10 main and auxiliary money, a total of 18.88 yuan. The People's Bank of China is a people-owned financial institution, backed by the people of the country with creditworthiness and strong strength. The currency it issued is the most prestigious currency in the world and enjoys a high international reputation."(Suo Zhenyu, 2000: 122)

Premier Zhou's response was unexpected, who deliberately blurred the word "money" and exchanged it for the total value of various denominations. Everyone knew that this was certainly not the answer that foreign journalists expected, but this speech provided much contextual information -- Firstly, I will not tell you how much money our country has, and do not ask that question; Secondly, I respect you very much, and also thank you for concern about our country, so I reply 18.88 yuan; Besides, it lets everyone learn about the type of Chinese currency denomination; Finally, it's our currency that is the most creditworthy, strong, and prestigious. Some of the above information is related to the question, while others are not. Therefore, in this context, combining with the existing cognitive context, the recipient finds the relevant new information, including the literal meaning and the possible implied cognitive information through the reasoning mechanism to form a new maximum context effect and to choose the most relevant outcome -- First of all, I will not tell you how much finance that our country has, so do not ask this question; Second, I respect you, and thank you for your concern about China.

Therefore, the fuzzy speech being not vague, it's a fuzzy expression to achieve the ostensive effect, so the relationship between fuzziness and ostensiveness is not opposite and instead, fuzziness enriches the ostensiveness. This language expression can have multiple effects, making the speaker more euphemistic, implicit, and polite, gaining initiative, letting the recipient pleasant and willing, activating a serious and embarrassing atmosphere, and receiving unexpected results.

5. The Function and Relevance of Fuzziness in Diplomatic Language

From the above-mentioned analysis, the relevance theory can properly explain the rationality of the use of fuzzy language in diplomacy. At the same time, as a very important diplomatic strategy, fuzziness in diplomatic language has its role and function which cannot be underestimated. Taking fuzziness in diplomatic language as an example, combined with relevance theory, the followings are functions of fuzziness.

5.1 *Implicit and Euphemistic Expression of Position*

On many diplomatic occasions, country's diplomatic spokesmen or senior leaders need to respond to some international events or hot issues, expressing opinions or attitudes on behalf of one's nation. However, there are occasions inappropriate to explain directly due to various reasons, so we use some fuzzy words in order to leave room for negotiation, playing the role of pointing out but indirectly. For example, in the two sessions in 2004, former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing reminded the Japanese

journalist “You can go back and ask your own country leaders that what some European leaders can do in history, why can they not?” The Chinese are very dissatisfied with the Japanese government's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, which has deeply hurt our feelings, but in special diplomatic occasions, we could not make it very clear, otherwise it would cause a lot of unnecessary troubles. Therefore, in such an objective contextual condition, Minister Li obscures historical issues -- World War II -- to state facts in euphemism, and to employ the shared cognitive context that Germany and Italy expresses sincere apologies and profound repentance to the people and countries after the war, particularly the German Chancellor kneeling down. Making ostensiveness with euphemisms, such as “European leaders behavior” and “why can't the Japanese” fuzzy and euphemistic as they are, the new information provided is overt, and the cognitive ability of normal people can instantly react a new contextual effect. In such a contextual effect, the most appropriate relevant explanation is that the Chinese government is very dissatisfied and criticizes the Japanese government in a euphemistic and indirect way, hoping that the Japanese government will realize its wrong behavior, which evinces the position of the Chinese government quite aptly.

5.2 Tactful Avoidance of Adverse Reply

Exchanges between countries are based on their own fundamental interests in diplomatic activities, and conflicts are inevitable when pursuing own interests. For the sake of solving conflicts between countries, the use of fuzzy language can function by avoiding adverse answer so that communication can go on smoothly. The foregoing example of Premier Zhou Enlai's perfect reply is typical. Does he not understand what the journalist mean or the implication of finance? Certainly not, it presents Premier Zhou's diplomatic wisdom, who deliberately blurs the word “finance”, transforming the total reserves of the People's Bank of China into currency that the People's Bank of China issued, seemingly to reply ostensibly but to express fuzzily, which avoids and overshadows the reply of accurate numbers. The importance of fuzziness strategy can be seen in this example.

There are also myriads of such successful diplomatic examples in China in the 21st century. For example, former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing met with more than a dozen professors from renowned universities in the United States one day, and a professor suddenly asked “It was said online that US intelligence had installed cutting-edge eavesdropping equipment on a Boeing plane ordered in China, which they estimated could be used by China as a special plane”. After pondering, Minister Li answered calmly “We adhere to the principle of fairness in international trade. For instance, the United States should offer whatever we purchase in the China-U.S. trade, and we don't accept anything free.” Minister Li tactfully avoids involving the matter and expressing opinions on the matter, answering no word about “plane” or “eavesdropping”. Actually Minister Li knows about the matter, but he doesn't point out directly and pretends to be unwitting. Moreover, he blurs the concept of “buy aircraft”, expanding to “international trade,” “China-U.S. trade,” using “what” the fuzzy word to imply “aircraft,” with “free” the ironic fuzzy word referring to “eavesdropping.” All these fuzzy words actually point out the essence of the issue. It's enough to provide enough new information for the recipient -- China purchases planes from the United States, no eavesdropping; Transaction is fair, but if the U.S. is free to send eavesdropping again, it is not fair for the U.S. and China does not make a deal unfairly. As a communicative expression, combined the context of that time when China ordered an airplane from America which was installed eavesdropping, with the cognitive context of the receiver, the recipient could easily find the most relevant information by reasoning -- If the United States installed eavesdropping devices, China would not purchase American aircraft. Such a tactful answer immediately won a burst of applause from the professors.

5.3 The Cover-up of Fact

It's common that employing language, especially fuzzy language as a tool to speak for own interests in the international political context. Countries also often use fuzzy or euphemistic language to make excuses or cover up the truth, especially about the army and war. The United States is a master at using it.

For example:

The United States and British allied forces began the Second Iraq War on March 20, 2003. British and American government has harnessed a large amount of fuzzy and euphemistic words, and the word “war” even didn't be mentioned in Bush's war speech throughout. “My fellow citizens, at this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its

people and to defend the world from grave danger... A campaign on the harsh terrain of a nation as large as California could be longer and more difficult than some predict... We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens... Our nation enters this conflict reluctantly, yet our purpose is sure... (Iraq is an) outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder... We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others.”

Bush states this war as “Operation Iraq Freedom” in euphemism, and uses amounts of fuzzy expressions to replace glossaries about war, such as “military action”, “disarm”, “campaign”, “come to Iraq”, “conflict”, and “meet the threat”, and so on. Moreover, he even does not mention the initiators of the war, but describe him to enter this conflict reluctantly in fuzzy expression. (Liu Wenge, 2003) These words are chose by the Bush administration to persuade domestic people to support the war and quell international condemnation. In order to launch the war, the Bush administration is already well prepared, stating that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, that he repeatedly warns Saddam to actively remove weapons, and that Saddam threatens world peace, etc. After paving the way for such a context for the American people and the global people, he declares war speech in ostensiveness. Under the mix of such new information and old information, the kind people who had been blinded would naturally try with minimal efforts to find the best connection that the war is for safety and peace of the United States and the world. Certainly, this is also the best connection that the Bush Jr. administration expects, and such fuzzy words do play a soothing role. However, the outcome isn’t consistent with expectation, because people have understood their intentions, whether to remove weapons of mass destruction or for oil?

5.4 A Way out of Stalemate

Another function of fuzziness in diplomatic language is to break the deadlock and make diplomatic breakthroughs. Each country has its own interests, and conflicts will be inevitable when two countries contact. In order to safeguard their own interests, there are often deadlocks between countries, and the use of fuzzy language, especially ambiguous words, can meet demands of both sides and finally reach consensus.

The Sino-US Shanghai Communique is a typical example. It was jointly signed by US President Richard Nixon and China in Shanghai before the end of his visit to China in February 1972. It is a key step and a great breakthrough in the normalization of China-US relations. In particular, on the Taiwan issue, China reiterated that the government of the People’s Republic of China was the only legitimate government of China, that Taiwan was a province of China, that the liberation of Taiwan is China’s internal affairs, and that other countries have no right to interfere. China’s position on the Taiwan issue is firm and couldn’t be questioned. For the United States, under pressure at home and abroad, Nixon was unable to directly adopt the statement issued by China, so China and the United States on Taiwan issue had been deadlocked. Under this circumstance that the normalized relationship of China-US had been blocked, the fuzzy language functioned. The U. S. government issued that all the Chinese including both sides of the Taiwan Strait consider only one China and that Taiwan is part of China. For that, America didn’t object, saying that all armed forces and military facilities would be withdrew from Taiwan.

In this statement, America tactfully employs fuzzy phrases “both sides of the Taiwan Strait,” neither admitting the People’s Republic of China nor accepting Republic of China, and uses “America realized,” “no objection,” instead of sentences which evinces attitude directly. For example, America admitted that the government of the People’s Republic of China was the only legitimate government of China, and Taiwan was a province of China. From the perspective of relevance theory, the information America supported is complicated and obscure, so it was necessary to integrate the special historical background of that time with context for understanding the information. At that time, China-U.S. had been deadlocked on Taiwan issue, reluctant to compromise. After careful deliberation and consultation between both sides, the U.S. finally issued that statement in order to break down the situation. In this context, it is understandable of painstakingly selecting words of the United States, not only to reach a consensus with China, but not to offend the domestic pro-Taiwan people and the Taiwan authorities. Moreover, for the Chinese government, the result is hard-won. Although the language the U.S. selected is obscure, it has improved the Taiwan issue. The words are enough to let us get the best explanation of the government that the United States recognizes that the People’s Republic of China is the only legal government of China, and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States, however, has not stated directly, so we need to find it through the reasoning mechanism based on the objective and cognitive context, as well as combining old and new information.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, fuzziness in diplomatic language is not vague. Although it is implicit, it is not opposite to ostensiveness in the ostensive-inferential communicative process, and instead fuzzy language strengthens the ostensive effect. Because fuzzy language is more informative, people with certain cognitive ability can find the relevant information according to the context, so as to achieve the optimal context effect and the minimal effort to achieve the best relevant explanation. It's accepted that fuzzy language is not only favored by speakers, but welcomed by recipients, and the last example above is the best proof. Fuzzy language can satisfy the different communication purposes of both speakers and recipients, and achieve the perfect win-win effect. Only by fully understanding the nature and importance of fuzziness, can we understand the implied meaning, know whether the speaker is outspoken, or sarcastic, and employ this language strategy flexibly with fearless and calm attitude.

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