



A Pragmatic Analysis of Vague Language in China Daily News

Wu Caixia¹✉

¹School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, China.

Email: comfly@163.com

Abstract

News report, as a widely distributed medium in the information era, plays a crucial role in people's daily lives. Its dissemination is widespread and its impact profound. While accuracy is a cornerstone of news reporting, vague language is inevitably present in news reports. This is because vagueness is an inherent characteristic of natural language, used across various literary forms, including news reporting. The present paper delves into the phenomenon of vague language in news reporting. Utilizing the Cooperative Principle and Adaptation Theory as frameworks, this paper analyzes the occurrence of vagueness in news reporting through theoretical explanations and illustrative case studies. By examining news articles from China Daily, the paper discusses the appropriate use of vague nouns in news reporting. The judicious use of vague language in news articles can enhance communication effectiveness, ultimately boosting the credibility of the news.

Keywords: Adaptation Theory, Cooperative principle, News report, Pragmatic function, Vague language.

Contribution of this paper to the literature

1. Introduction

From the perspective of systemic-functional linguistics, language possesses the capacity to make choices at all linguistic levels to convey thoughts. In other words, we possess the ability to express ourselves through language in diverse ways, utilizing a range of vocabulary and grammatical structures within discourse to articulate our viewpoints and positions.

News reporting, as a specialized discourse with distinct social functions, possesses its unique linguistic characteristics. News serves as a communication medium for recently occurred or discovered information that is both highly intriguing and socially significant. Due to their capacity to swiftly disseminate facts in a concise and truthful manner, news reports are regarded as one of the most effective forms of propaganda. While accuracy is undeniably a paramount requirement of news, it is crucial to recognize that news reporting is a blend of precise and vague language. When reporting on matters that cannot be pinpointed with exactitude, adhering solely to precise language can lead to a divergence from the facts, thereby compromising the authenticity of the news. Consequently, vague language is frequently employed in News reporting to mitigate the risk of inaccuracies, thereby enhancing the objectivity and precision of the language to a certain extent. It also contributes to a more cautious or appropriate linguistic expression, serving a pragmatic purpose.

Vagueness is an inherent trait of language that permeates a wide array of natural languages. Despite our best efforts to be precise, we often resort to using vague words to communicate ideas that are difficult to articulate clearly through speech or writing. Therefore, vague language is often employed to facilitate effective and pleasant communication.

Similarly, vague language holds immense importance in news reporting. For example, vague terminology is utilized in numerical figures to avoid inaccuracies in news reporting while adhering to the principles of truthfulness, immediacy, and objectivity. This is crucial for reporting on the uncertainties associated with news events. Consequently, this paper endeavors to provide a more comprehensive and rational analysis of vague language from a pragmatic standpoint, aiming to address the following questions:

- (1) What linguistic factors justify the inclusion of vagueness in news reporting?
- (2) How do news reports leverage the principle of cooperation and the theory of adaptation to achieve their communicative objectives through the use of vague language?
- (3) What pragmatic functions do vague elements serve in news reporting?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Vague Language

In 1965, Zadeh suggested that the concept of vagueness could be formally expressed as a fuzzy set to capture the inherent ambiguity of language. However, he only introduced the concept of fuzzy sets without providing a clear explanation of vagueness. Peirce (1902), on the other hand, offered a rigorous definition, stating that a proposition is vague when there are possible states of affairs regarding which it is intrinsically uncertain whether

the speaker would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. Because of this, Peirce is widely recognized as the originator of the concept of vagueness in language.

Wittgenstein (1953) further noted that vagueness is a fundamental aspect of language, playing a crucial role in its primary use. He likened words to blurred images, arguing that a vague picture is often the most fitting, and that strict boundaries cannot delineate vagueness. For example, the sentence "It's a nice hat" lacks a clear definition of "nice hat", making its meaning vague in communication, yet it maintains order. Despite the ambiguity in his definition, Wittgenstein contributed to the discussion on the value of vagueness and shed light on its origins and characteristics in News report through his concept of vague rules.

Ullmann emphasized the significance of vagueness in a different way. He claimed that individuals close to the vagueness can easily determine that a word is fuzzy and vague (Ullmann, 1962). He attributed vagueness to various factors, including the generic character of words, context-bound meanings, the lack of clear boundaries in the non-linguistic world, and unfamiliarity with word meanings.

Lakoff (1972) introduced the concept of hedges from both semantic and grammatical perspectives. His research on hedges has significantly impacted the study of vague language, as hedges constitute a specific type of vague language. Responding to Zadeh's fuzzy sets theory, Lakoff wrote, "Clearly, any attempt to restrict truth conditions for natural languages to true, false, and 'nonsense' will distort natural language concepts by portraying them with sharply defined, rather than fuzzily defined, boundaries" (1972:183). His work provided valuable insights into understanding vague language. Furthermore, Kempson (1997) discussed semantic vagueness in her book titled *Semantic Theory*.

Recently, the pragmatics viewpoint has emerged as a popular approach to studying vague language. Researchers now accept vague language as a communication tool and delve deeper into its role in communication. Crystal and Davy (1975) identified four reasons for using vague language in conversation: memory lapse, lack of precise words or inability to articulate accurately, lack of need for accuracy in the communication topic, and deliberate use of vagueness to sustain the conversation.

Chinese linguists also have their unique perspectives on the definition of vagueness. Wu Tie-ping is considered a pioneer in the study of vague language in China. He finds Peirce's arguments persuasive and believes that Peirce's definition in 1902 has proven to be the correct term for expressing this idea. Zhao Yuan-ren (2002) pointed out that a symbol is vague when its borderland cases of applicability are significant compared to its clear cases. Miao Dong-sheng (1987), defined vagueness as the ambiguity of thing's genre and the gradience of object qualification, noting that we cannot always determine precise standards for classifying sentences.

Despite alternative explanations proposed by scholars, a clear consensus on the interpretation of vague language phenomena has not been reached due to the inherently nebulous nature of language. However, it can be said that the trait of indeterminacy underlies vague language in this paper, regardless of the variability in its meanings.

2.2. Classification of Vagueness

Conducting a comprehensive analysis of the myriad categories of linguistic vagueness explored across diverse focuses is a formidable task. This paper will focus on three primary classifications: categorical vagueness, continuum vagueness, and hedges.

2.2.1. Continuum Vagueness

Pang Jiang-rong (2007) explains that continuum vagueness arises when it is uncertain whether a proposition applies. This type of vagueness, often referred to as borderline vagueness, poses challenges in defining clear boundaries. For example, determining the height threshold for what constitutes a "short" person or when an egg becomes a chicken after fertilization involves borderline instances that lack definitive answers. A person standing at 1.6 meters tall falls into a gray area, neither clearly short nor tall, illustrating the vagueness of the term "short." Neither conceptual analysis nor empirical research can conclusively determine if this person is short.

Borderline vagueness commonly applies to descriptions of time (e.g., day, month, year), color (e.g., purple, black, white, orange), and sense (e.g., sweet, sour, spicy). The distinction between when one situation applies and another does not is often difficult to delineate. When language users intentionally adjust terms with borderline vagueness, linguistic vagueness transforms into rhetorical vagueness. For instance, a politician might refer to an audience as "old friends" even on first meeting to create a welcoming atmosphere, intentionally obscuring the distinction between "acquaintance" and "friend."

2.2.2. Categorical Vagueness

Pang Jiang-rong (2007) defines categorical vagueness as a type of vagueness resulting from varied and unclear characteristics defining a category. For example, the term "chair" is vague because it leaves uncertainty about whether the chair in question is a settee, armchair, or rotating chair. Another example is the legal contestation of the phrase "no vehicle should be taken into the park." The vagueness of the term "vehicle" makes it challenging to determine whether a truck delivering trees for planting or a tank preserved for historical memory should be excluded.

2.2.3. Hedges

The term "hedges" was first introduced in G. Lakoff's paper "*A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*." G. Lakoff (1972) defines hedges as words that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. A thorough study of hedging holds both theoretical significance in advancing research in semantics and pragmatics and practical value in effectively using hedging for communication. Many linguists have categorized hedges, with E. F. Prince and his colleagues J. Frader and C. Bosk (1982) being particularly influential. From a pragmatic perspective, they classify hedges into approximators and shields. Approximators, belonging to the semantic category, can alter or slightly modify the original meaning of discourse based on real circumstances, setting a range of variations. In contrast, shields moderate the affirmative tone of the discourse without altering its purpose, falling within the pragmatic category by adding shields to the discourse structure akin to adding a description.

3. Vagueness in News Language

The term “News” has its roots in Greece. Lu Ding-yi (2002) defines news in “Our Fundamentals of Journalism” as a report on current events, which many view as a scientific explanation. Firstly, it emphasizes the authenticity of news, meaning that a news report should present a genuine story with a precise location, distinguishing it from fictional literature. Secondly, it underscores the recency of the events reported, distinguishing news from history and emphasizing its freshness. Lastly, it focuses on mainstream media reports, distinguishing news from gossip, private conversations, and confidential information.

In essence, news is a dynamic concept, with its components and the individuals responsible for selecting it for publication, broadcasting, and digital dissemination constantly evolving. The pervasive and relentless global changes impacting society, economics, politics, and technology continually influence what is deemed as newsworthy and how it reaches its audience.

3.1. Characteristics of News Reporting

The first characteristic of news reporting lies in its strategic approach to precision and vagueness. While accuracy demands precise details, there are instances where a properly vague approach can yield accurate news stories (Ran Yong-ping, 1996). Journalists often employ vague language to avoid exaggeration or misinformation. In certain contexts, fuzzy terms can precisely explain a situation, especially when dealing with the timing or outcomes of events. Using vague language can enhance the credibility of a news report and prevent absolute statements.

The second characteristic is the emphasis on timeliness and conciseness. To ensure timely reporting, journalists may use vague terms. Conciseness, on the other hand, involves using fewer words to convey ideas effectively (ibid). Journalists are expected to balance the use of vague language with the need to provide comprehensive information. Due to the urgency of news, journalists may resort to fuzzy terms to convey the message swiftly, especially when they cannot witness the entire event. Using vague language sensibly can make news more succinct and clearer.

Lastly, news reporting aims to satisfy readers’ expectations. In some cases, reporters use vague terms to provide readers with the information they seek. Readers generally focus on the main points of news reports to stay informed about significant domestic and international events. Even accurate news that includes extensive details may not meet readers’ psychological expectations and reading habits. As Channell (2000) points out, overusing figures can distract readers from the essential information. Ballpark figures can help readers track critical discussions without getting bogged down in exact numbers. When the exact number is relevant or captivating, readers will pay close attention. Additionally, due to the complexity of time, it is unnecessary to provide exhaustive backgrounds for every aspect or event in news reporting. Consequently, vague language or terms frequently appear in various news reports.

3.2. Vague Language in News Report

Drawing upon Marx’s concept of ‘universal connection,’ the distinctions among various natural elements are relative, devoid of absolute boundaries. The emergence of vague language stems from the discrete characteristics of linguistic symbols and the inherent continuity and contradiction within objective realities. In the contexts of time and space, vague language exists as a continuum, devoid of fixed, immutable boundaries. Consequently, any language, when segmented according to its unique structure, results in blurred boundaries between its temporal and spatial aspects. For instance, everyday language fails to delineate clear boundaries between cold and warm, or spring and summer. Crucially, the vagueness of language is an objective phenomenon, independent of human will, necessitating ongoing refinement in our understanding of the ever-evolving objective world, which shifts constantly from sociological, anthropological, and physical perspectives.

Moreover, human cognition is inherently limited when attempting to comprehend the entirety of the world. This constraint influences language, which cannot uniformly express or delineate diverse objective entities, either in content or form, due to various factors. Even when expressions are feasible, language carries distinct communicative meanings shaped by individual backgrounds and experiences. This contributes to the vagueness of language, aligning with the cognitive transition from ambiguity to clarity. Vague language is integral to linguistic expression, and its interpretation hinges on the user’s judgment. It possesses the capacity to transcend the boundaries of objective entities or concepts, employing a single word to convey different sentiments while succinctly reporting news facts. This is a pivotal aspect of linguistic vagueness.

In news reporting, the use of vague language serves to uphold the accuracy and timeliness of news, reflecting its value. When confronted with breaking news where the full truth and detailed circumstances are unknown, journalists utilize vague terms (such as ‘about,’ ‘will,’ etc.) to report on issues. To meet the demands of timeliness and brevity in news reporting, journalists often resort to vague, partially general terms, thereby maximizing the language’s effectiveness.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two pragmatic theories – Cooperative Principle and Adaptation Theory.

4.1. Grice’s Cooperative Principle

Regardless of cultural background, all speakers adhere to Grice’s Cooperative Principle, a fundamental rule of communication. This principle expects participants to collaborate during conversations. Grice (1989) outlined four maxims to encapsulate this idea: Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner. The Maxim of Quality emphasizes truthfulness and sufficient evidence. The Maxim of Quantity suggests providing the necessary information without exceeding what’s required. The Maxim of Relation ensures relevance to the conversation. The Maxim of Manner focuses on clarity, avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, and unnecessary prolixity, while maintaining orderliness.

These maxims help resolve communication issues and guide our speech, whether consciously or not. Speakers should clarify their points to the audience by fulfilling their obligations according to the agreed-upon purpose of the conversation. The Cooperative Principle aims for effective, rational, and cooperative communication, ensuring honesty, relevance, and coherence with adequate details.

Beyond standardizing speech, the Cooperative Principle can analyze vague language in News report. Reporters and readers exchange information, adhering to this principle. However, journalists sometimes deliberately violate it for various reasons, hoping readers will notice. When readers understand news and its implications from a practical standpoint, they can collaborate with reporters to explore deeper meanings, leading to conversational implicature. Reporters may intentionally use vague wording to violate the Cooperative Principle, creating an expectation effect. The next section will explore how to apply the Cooperative Principle to analyze vague language in news.

4.2. Verschueren's Adaptation Theory

In a groundbreaking development in the field of pragmatics, Jef Verschueren introduced the Theory of Adaptation in his seminal 1987 work, "Pragmatics as a Theory of Linguistic Adaptation." This theory was further refined and expanded upon in his 1999 book, "Understanding Pragmatics," where Verschueren offered a fresh perspective on the interpretation of contemporary pragmatics.

According to Verschueren (1999), pragmatics provides a holistic view of language use, encompassing cognitive, social, and cultural dimensions. The study of language use is fundamentally the study of linguistic choice-making, a dynamic response to various levels of psychological awareness within the context and structure of language. Communication through language involves a continuous process of selecting linguistic elements, driven by both internal and external factors. These choices span a wide range of linguistic levels and aspects, including phonology, intonation, vocabulary, syntax, style, text, and language strategies.

Verschueren's Adaptation Theory emphasizes the importance of contextual and linguistic structure adaptation in verbal communication. Contextual adaptation refers to the alignment of language choices with the surrounding context. Verschueren categorizes context into communicative and linguistic contexts, with communicative context encompassing non-linguistic elements such as language users, the physical world, the social world, and the psychological world. The speaker and interpreter are central to language use, as their cognitive activities activate contextual elements, enabling the full realization of language's communicative functions.

In the physical world, the most crucial factor is the referential relationship between time and space. The social world refers to the principles and norms governing speech acts in social settings and environments. The psychological world includes cognitive and emotional factors like personality, emotions, desires, and intentions of both parties in communication. Verschueren emphasizes that in the process of language selection, context and language structure must dynamically adapt to each other to achieve communicative goals.

This groundbreaking theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of language use in communication and has significant implications for various fields, including linguistics, communication studies, and beyond.

5. Pragmatic Analysis of Vague Language in *China Daily* News

5.1. Application of the Cooperative Principle to vague language in China Daily News

This section focuses on utilizing the Cooperative Principle to examine vague language found in news reports. From prior discussions, we have established that both speakers and listeners adhere to certain rules within the scope of the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims during communication. Conversations between reporters and readers adopt a unique format in news reporting. However, due to various reasons, absolute certainty in conveying information is not always achievable in news reporting. Therefore, journalists may occasionally violate one or more of these maxims by incorporating vague language to a certain extent.

5.2. Violation of the Quality Maxim

To fulfill the requirements of the quality maxim, participants' statements must be truthful. Nevertheless, because of the unique nature of news, violation of this principle frequently occurs due to several reasons. Firstly, news events are constantly evolving, which may lead to insufficient, inaccurate, or incomplete information. Secondly, reporters may not always have access to sufficient accurate and detailed information. Moreover, reporters may struggle to find the precise terminology to explain the news. To evade responsibility for the news's accuracy, reporters may violate the quality maxim by employing vague language, which serves as an optimal choice.

Example 1: "A joint investigation has found that the final note left by Chengdu University's Party chief before taking his life lacks a factual basis, the Chengdu government information office said on Friday in a statement." (*China Daily*, November 28, 2020)

The phrase 'lacks a factual basis' in this sentence may be understood as meaning that the content of the suicide note itself lacks factual basis, rather than referring to the fact that the suicide notes, as evidence left before suicide, lacks factual basis. This way of expression may lead to misunderstandings. In this way, the data is obscured and intentionally covered up to yield better results.

5.2.1. Violation of the Quantity Maxim

The quantity maxim stipulates that the message should provide an adequate amount of information without being excessive. It is difficult for reporters to recall every detail following an event, especially given the limited timeframe they have to gather information, which contradicts the quantity maxim.

Example 2: "US retail giant Wal-Mart Stores Inc plans to open 115 new outlets by 2017 and remodel more than 50 others this year to offset slowing growth in China, a top company executive said on Wednesday. The US retail chain has spent 600 million yuan (\$96.8 million) to remodel more than 90 stores and now plans to invest more than 370 million yuan to upgrade 50 stores this year, while the number of its stores in China is close to 412." (*China Daily*, September 12, 2024)

In this example, the phrases "more than" and "close to" violate the quantity maxim by failing to provide specific numbers of new openings. Although news writers violated the quantity maxim, vague language still rendered the news more accurate and convincing.

5.2.2. Violation of the Relevant Maxim

The relevant maxim requires participants' information to be pertinent to the ongoing discussion. Although violations of this rule are uncommon, there are instances where providing sufficient information to meet the other three maxims necessitates disregarding the relevant maxim.

Example 3: “City officials are pleased, even though New York City recently experienced a violent gun incident that killed three people.” (*China Daily*, May 20, 2021)

In Example 3, the news focuses on the increase in visitors to New York City, leading to city officials’ satisfaction. However, the use of the phrase “even though” which violates the relevant maxim, aims to emphasize that the shooting had a minor impact on the city’s tourism industry.

5.2.3. Violation of the Manner Maxim

The manner maxim demands that information be clear and avoid confusion and uncertainty. In news reporting, certain phrases like “some,” “at least,” “nearly,” “more than,” etc., are frequently used, potentially violating the manner maxim.

Example 4: “China’s central bank injected at least 1 trillion yuan (\$142 billion) into the financial system via reverse repos on Monday, the People’s Bank of China (PBOC) announced, as the country strives to maintain adequate liquidity in the banking system amid economic pressures.” (*China Daily*, November 21, 2023)

In this example, the phrase “at least” is vague as the figure may fluctuate over time, violating the manner maxim, which demands clear information to eliminate uncertainty, aligning with the quality maxim. By using vague language, journalists can partially relieve themselves of the responsibility that accompanies it.

5.3. Application of the Adaptation Theory to Vague Language in China Daily News

This section delves further into Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory, which serves as a framework to elucidate the vagueness often found in news reporting. While accuracy is paramount in news language, this accuracy is qualified; it demands a high level of accuracy in some instances while permitting a degree of vagueness in others. News reporting constitutes a unilateral communicative act, with reporters as the transmitters and the audience as the recipients. Given the lack of opportunity for dialogue in this setup, journalists must align their writing with the psychological, social, and physical contexts.

5.3.1. Adaptation to the Psychological World

The mental realm encompasses cognitive and emotional factors such as personality traits, emotions, desires, and intentions of both the communicator and receiver. The selection of language by the speaker is a dynamic process that aligns with both their own and the listener’s psychological landscape.

5.3.1.1. Adapting to the Audience’s Reading Psychology

The audience forms the core of news activities, serving as both the target and beneficiary. It is unrealistic to expect the audience to absorb all media content; they typically engage with only a fraction. Thus, it is crucial to understand what information the audience is willing to accept and how it aligns with their reading preferences.

Audiences tend to favor content that resonates with them. This proximity can refer to geographical closeness or alignment with their viewpoints, allowing them to reinforce their beliefs or adapt external perspectives to suit their own emotions and opinions. Additionally, audiences prefer content that interests them, exercising considerable discretion in their media consumption choices. Detailed, seemingly precise news reports may not capture readers’ attention but rather overwhelm them.

According to the Uses and Gratifications theory, audiences access media with specific motivations to fulfill informational, entertainment, psychological, and spiritual needs. They are only interested in information that meets their criteria. Consequently, journalists use vague language to omit unnecessary details and emphasize key points, catering to audience demands.

Example 5: “Millions of dead sardines were found floating on Tuesday in a harbor marina just south of Los Angeles, puzzling authorities and triggering a massive cleanup effort.” (*China Daily*, March 10, 2011)

Here, “millions of” is a vague expression. Reporters do not need to specify the exact number of dead sardines, as the emphasis is on the harbor marina’s significance in international trade. Detailed or overly precise figures might discourage reading.

Example 6: “The central and local governments have been increasing subsidies for needy people to ensure their basic living needs are met.” (*China Daily*, November 18, 2020)

The phrase “needy people” is vague, helping journalists empathize with the less fortunate while fostering a strong connection with readers.

5.2.1.2 Adapting to the Journalist’s Self-Protection Psychology

In news reporting, journalists may sometimes be unable to accurately assess event factors. Vague language offers self-protection, allowing reporters to avoid absolutism. Common vague expressions in News report include “it is reported,” “it is said,” “it is learned,” and “it is claimed.” These indicate the source of information, ensuring discourse objectivity and accuracy while substantially reducing the author’s responsibility. They convey that opinions stem from external sources and reflect the author’s views or predictions, shielding the journalist from direct scrutiny.

Example 7: “An estimated more than 1.8 million people were killed in traffic accidents worldwide in 2021, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).” (*China Daily*, May 15, 2022)

Reporters may not know the exact number, so they use vague terms like “estimated” and “more than”, enhancing language flexibility and accuracy while protecting themselves from potential inaccuracies.

Example 8: “People demonstrate in Nairobi, Kenya on March 20, 2023, protesting **high cost** of living, economic challenges, and election results dissatisfaction.” (*China Daily*, March 23, 2023)

Example 9: “Puglia is the new Tuscany. So much is conveyed by that sentence: the food will be tasty; you won’t meet Tony Blair; you won’t even meet anyone English; you definitely will not find yourself on exactly the same town-to-town perambulation as another English couple with the same guidebook. It’s a **rare** find.” (*China Daily*, November 8, 2024)

Adjectives with vague connotations, such as “high” and “rare,” are used here. These subjective judgments are left to individual interpretation, allowing the news to maintain an objective tone while improving language flexibility. Vague language thus serves a protective function.

Example 10: “The epidemic prevention and control work is also a professional and technical task that requires diligence on the part of those tasked with carrying it out, especially with the colder weather being in the virus’ favor. It is also a test of the governance system and critical capacity.” (*China Daily*, November 1, 2021)

This news involves epidemic prevention and control work in extreme situation. The extent of the injuries is unclear as the situation evolves. The reporter uses vague expressions to convey the general situation without speculating, allowing the audience to understand without being misled.

5.3.2. Adaptation to the Social Context

The social context encompasses the principles and standards that govern the communicative acts of individuals in various social settings and environments. During verbal exchanges, language choices must align with the norms of the social occasion, environment, and linguistic community. These communicators are not hypothetical or idealized language users; rather, their speech is constrained by social and cultural norms.

5.3.2.1. Adaptation to Social Communication Norms

A norm serves as a guideline for achieving social objectives and regulating individual behavior, outlining acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Language users are members of society, and their linguistic expressions are influenced by social communication norms. The news media are no different, and their utterances must conform to these norms, with significant implications for their impact. Deviating from social communication norms can lead to severe and irreversible repercussions. Therefore, news report, particularly in political and diplomatic contexts, must strictly adhere to these norms. Journalists must be cautious to prevent grave consequences.

5.3.2.2. Adaptation to Journalistic Standards and Practices

News, as a practical genre, has its unique standards and practices. Internationally recognized journalistic ethics require reporters to anonymize sources when reporting on individuals’ rights and interests, using phrases like “an unnamed source,” “a witness,” or “well-informed sources.”

Furthermore, when news topics involve national security, such as confidential figures, vague language is employed to adhere to journalistic discipline.

Example 11: “The U.S. is planning give 80 million vaccines to other countries. One of the Reuters sources said the United States is considering giving high importance to providing vaccines to North and South America. The second source said the drug company Pfizer has begun exporting millions of its U.S.-made shots largely to countries in Central and South America.” (*China Daily*, May 25, 2021)

In this instance, the reporter did not disclose the identities of the sources, thereby safeguarding the privacy of those involved. Given that the event had not yet occurred, the informed sources’ opinions were not fully definitive. Thus, anonymizing their identities protected their privacy.

5.3.3. Adaptation to the Physical World

The physical environment primarily refers to time and space, encompassing the timing of the event and its location. Additionally, it includes non-verbal elements like body posture, gestures, appearance, and physical attributes of the communicator. The subject of news reporting is real-life events, which are dynamic, evolving, and uncertain. To accommodate this temporal uncertainty, vague language is essential in news reporting. As events unfold continuously and news is time-sensitive, it must cover the various stages of change, from quantitative to qualitative. To ensure accurate reporting and avoid absolutism during specific quantitative stages, vagueness is widely used.

Example 12: “Levels of concern in the UK Two years ago, a survey revealed that at least seven new reservoirs were planned in England, as expected after another dry winter.” (*China Daily*, November 8, 2024)

In this news report, the reporter used vague terms like “at least” and “expected” to indicate the current casualty figures. Exact numbers were not yet available for the disaster. At this quantitative stage, the reporter appropriately used fuzzy language, respecting the timeliness of news while ensuring its accuracy. Therefore, vague language aligns with the physical environment.

Example 13: “56 lost Chinese cultural relics returned from Italy, recent progress in China-Italy relations, following the last cultural relics repatriation in 2020.” (*China Daily*, November 9, 2024)

The underlined phrases in the news above provide vague time references. Without specifying exact information, phrases like “recent progress” and “last cultural relics” allow readers to make their own assessments. These examples demonstrate that vague language provides readers with sufficient information while maintaining news truthfulness. Moreover, readers can more easily understand vague terms than precise time details.

Example 14: “Now, China is marching forward, advancing Chinese modernization, to build a better China, and create more opportunities for the world.” (*China Daily*, October 1, 2024)

The adjectives “more” and “better” in the above examples are vague due to individual variations in judgment. In the physical world, distinctions between concepts like fat and slim, big and small, or tall and short are vague. Therefore, it is crucial for journalists to use vague language in news to adapt to this characteristic.

While the use of vague language in news is justifiable, it does not grant journalists the liberty to abuse it to conceal the truth. Journalists must uphold objectivity and impartiality, employing vague language appropriately and reasonably to achieve its full effect.

6. Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language in *China Daily* News

Vague language intentionally obscures linguistic expressions and is frequently employed in news reporting to enhance communication effectiveness. Consequently, its pragmatic function is growing in significance.

6.1. Stimulating Readers’ Interest

The headline, a distinctive and prominent title of a news article, is crucial for capturing readers’ attention. A well-crafted headline serves as a concise news summary, guiding readers to the essence of the story. The incorporation of vague expressions in news headlines can play a pivotal role in drawing readers in.

Example 15: “Facebook agrees to pay 40m fine over ad metrics discrepancies” (*China Daily*, May 14, 2019)

Example 16: “One killed, 16 injured in Alabama campus shooting” (*China Daily*, November 11, 2024)

These headlines utilize vague language, not only reflecting the news content but also obscuring specific details to pique readers' curiosity and encourage them to continue reading.

6.2. Comforting To Readers

Disaster news briefly reports recent calamities. Sociologically, disasters disrupt the process of fulfilling human needs, impacting the interdependent links of work, harvest, and consumption. Any disruption in these links can lead to societal collapse and loss of life, constituting a catastrophe.

Emergencies are unforeseen events that occur suddenly, leaving little time for preparation. They can be categorized into four types: natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, typhoons, sandstorms, blizzards, etc.), political and military incidents (armed conflicts, riots, invasions, coups, terrorist attacks, illegal rallies, student unrest, strikes, attacks on institutions, ethnic disputes, religious conflicts, etc.), vicious fires and traffic accidents (mass casualty fires, car crashes, ship sinkings, plane crashes, etc.), and other unexpected events (hijackings, explosions, etc.).

The competency of news media lies in their ability to cover emergencies successfully and creatively. Audiences are highly susceptible to news public opinion, placing a significant responsibility on reporters to cover unexpected events responsibly. They must adhere to certain standards and employ specific techniques with caution, as missteps can have severe repercussions.

Firstly, reporters must respond swiftly and prioritize timeliness when covering emergencies. The value of breaking news is closely tied to its reporting speed. Therefore, journalists should report news as promptly as possible to enhance its value. However, the dynamic nature of breaking news makes it challenging for reporters to comprehend all circumstances immediately. In such scenarios, vague language becomes useful. Yet, prioritizing timeliness does not equate to prioritizing speed, as fuzziness does not imply ambiguity. Journalists must strike the right balance.

Secondly, it is crucial to choose the right angle and maintain correct guidance when reporting on emergencies. Comparing mainstream media in China and the West, it is evident that media should report catastrophic emergencies calmly and cautiously. While some Western media outlets occasionally focus excessively on details to capture audience attention and maximize revenue, over-describing terrible facts can overwhelm audiences with fear and sorrow, severely impacting their mental well-being. While highlighting the positive aspects of breaking news is important, journalists must not publish misleading information or conceal facts. Therefore, vagueness serves as a valuable tool for journalists to maintain control.

Example 17: "Two men were killed and six others were injured in Shanghai yesterday in two separate incidents at subway construction sites." (*China Daily*, January 8, 2009)

The use of vague language 'others' reflects the efficiency of the news. The reporter appropriately employs vague language to provide readers with the initial report without precise figures. Moreover, using vague terms to describe casualties not only makes a scientific judgment but also offers readers a psychological buffer, serving a comforting function.

6.3. Avoiding the Negative Effects

Certain aspects in news reports must be handled using vague language for a multitude of reasons. This is evident in crime news, where details of criminal activities must often be obscured. Many specifics of criminal incidents are kept confidential because young readers are susceptible to external influences and might replicate criminal strategies if they come across detailed descriptions. Consequently, the media should never be viewed as a source for criminal tactics. Hence, some details of criminal activities need to be presented vaguely to steer clear of potential issues.

In other words, journalists should refrain from providing extensive details about crimes committed by perpetrators and police investigations, as this could have a detrimental impact on communication. Additionally, it is prudent to obscure the names of individuals who could face reputational disputes, along with irrelevant specifics such as time, location, and contact numbers, as these might occasionally spark unnecessary complications. Furthermore, the rights and interests of those featured in the news should be obscured. For instance, expressions like "eyewitnesses", "someone" and "a source" are outcomes of the journalist's deliberate vagueness in reporting. In rare cases, information regarding military operations, criminal investigations, and significant disasters is deliberately excluded from news reports, aligning with international norms. From the standpoint of safeguarding the audience's right to know, mainstream media, such as *China Daily*, should not neglect their responsibility to cover major news, except in specific scenarios where vague language is the most prudent approach.

6.4. Conveying Aesthetic Information

Beyond accuracy, news language should also be lively and multidimensional. News, as a literary genre, should aspire to evoke a sense of vividness and aesthetic appeal. Vague language can enrich language with vitality and imagination, thereby effectively conveying aesthetic messages. Numerical precision is invaluable, yet numbers often bore most readers. When mundane statistics are transformed into vivid, tangible expressions through apt vague terms, the result is clearer and more relatable to readers than seemingly exact figures. Consequently, the news report becomes more engaging.

Example 18: "Notably, 16 alumni have become academicians of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering, and four have served as directors of the State Oceanic Administration. Its graduates have contributed significantly across various fields, including space exploration, polar expeditions, marine science, national defense, and sustainable fisheries." (*China Daily*, November 1, 2024)

In this news report, instead of employing precise figures, the reporter uses the vague term "significantly" to convey the urgent message that the contribution is large.

7. Conclusion

This paper elucidates that language inherently possesses an element of vagueness, which is extensively utilized in news media due to its unique functionality. Vague language satisfies the public's thirst for knowledge while adhering to the fundamental principles of journalism and infusing the news with vitality. The use of hedges avoids absolute statements, thereby enhancing the credibility of news reporting and mitigating potential negative

repercussions. News reporting necessitates the incorporation of vague language to strike a balance between the appeal of vagueness and accuracy. A thorough analysis of vague language lays a solid foundation for further pragmatic explorations and ensures precise usage of news in journalism.

Prior to this study, news language had been examined from various perspectives. However, this research adopts a novel approach to analyzing news language and delves into the pragmatic implications of vagueness. Additionally, it provides a fundamental overview of news language, vagueness, and related research conducted domestically and internationally. Subsequently, this study categorizes vagueness and discusses its inevitability in news reports. The findings of these studies indicate that vagueness is a prevalent practice in news, fulfilling readers' psychological needs and facilitating their understanding of vague language in news. This paper not only assists news researchers but also offers a unique perspective on the study of vagueness in news coverage. Furthermore, it aims to inspire more research on the vagueness of news language or related topics in the future.

The initial analysis of vague language in news report presented in this paper reveals several limitations, paving the way for further exploration. Firstly, despite not fully exploring the application of vagueness to news language, this paper could have presented a more robust framework. Due to the limited pool of vague language in *China Daily* news, this paper has not yet provided a comprehensive and accurate analysis, necessitating further refinement. Secondly, the research has overlooked the negative effects of vague language in news report, which warrants further investigation. Additionally, a potential area for further exploration could be the comparison of vague language across different languages in news, as news stories in various languages may exhibit distinct generic characteristics.

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