

Original Paper

On the Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language in Political Discourse: A Study on Vague Language in Donald Trump's Inaugural Address

Siying Qin^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou College of Commerce, Guangzhou, China

* Siying Qin, Guangzhou College of Commerce, NO. 206 Jiulongdadao, Huangpu district, Guangzhou 511363, P.R. China, E-mail: 2991957725@qq.com

Received: July 28, 2023 Accepted: September 15, 2023 Online Published: September 27, 2023

doi:10.22158/eltls.v5n4p118 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v5n4p118>

Abstract

This study employs discourse analysis to examine the pragmatic functions of vague language in Donald Trump's Inaugural Address. By interpreting hedging, abstract concepts and generalizations in the address, the author explores how vague language is strategically utilized by political leaders to achieve his political purposes, such as establishing unity and inclusivity, alluding to past grievances, and promising change, eliciting emotional reactions, allowing flexibility, and calling attention to threats. The findings of this analysis enhance our comprehension of the inaugural address given by the former US president, while also providing valuable insights into the language strategies utilized by politicians in political discourses.

Keywords

pragmatic function, vague language, political discourses, inaugural speech

1. Introduction

As one of the natural attributes of human language, vague language holds a significant place in political speech, allowing politicians to navigate complex issues, shape public perception, and maintain flexibility in their positions. Politicians often find their aims best served by being vague and evasive (Thomas J., 1995). Donald Trump's inaugural speech, delivered on January 20, 2017, served as a platform to outline his vision and agenda as the 45th President of the United States. One notable feature of his address was the strategic use of vague language, which allowed Trump to connect with a diverse

audience and shape public perception. By employing ambiguous terms and expressions, Trump utilized the power of vagueness to foster unity, evoke emotional responses, and navigate the complexities of political discourse. This essay aims to analyze the role and impact of vague language in the former U.S. President Donald Trump's inaugural speech, shedding light on its pragmatic functions and examining its implications for political communication. Through a closer examination of specific examples, we can gain insight into how vague language was strategically employed to engage and influence the American public during this important moment in history.

2. Literature Review

Vague language refers to the use of words, expressions, or statements that are imprecise, ambiguous, or lacking in specificity. It is commonly used in everyday conversations, advertising, political speeches, and legal discourse. According to Channel (1983), speakers can be vague by employing "hedges" (in the sense of Lakoff, 1972) such as "probably" or "might", generalizations like "some people say". This chapter reviews and summarizes the main topics and discoveries from previous studies on vague language.

2.1 Previous Studies on Vague Language

Scholars' interests in vague language can be traced back to Peirce's entry for "vague" in 1902. "A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition" (Peirce, 1902, p. 748). In other words, vagueness arises when there is inherent uncertainty about whether certain states of things would be considered part of the proposition or not. In *Vagueness*, Russell (1923) argued "all language is more or less vague" and that vagueness allows for multiple interpretations and can be intentionally used to avoid commitment, provide flexibility, or create a sense of uncertainty. The study of vagueness in linguistics comes after the concept of "fuzzy set" proposed by Zadeh, which is defined as "a class of objects with a continuum of grades of membership" (Zadeh, 1965, p. 338). It is a generalization of the traditional idea of a set, where an object either fully belongs or does not belong to a set, meaning that the degree to which an element belongs to a fuzzy set can vary along a continuum. Based on Zadeh's fuzzy theory, Lakoff (1972) defined words involving vagueness or fuzziness like this:

"For me, some of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness- words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. I will refer to such words as 'hedges'" (Lakoff, 1972, p. 192).

That means hedges serve to downplay the assertiveness or certainty of a statement and can be seen as a form of vague language, allowing speakers to express caution, uncertainty, or politeness while still conveying their intended message. Hence, Kasper (1981) believed that the use of hedges serves the purpose of politeness, allowing for greater flexibility in word choice, minimizing negative impact, and protecting one's face.

Political discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, influencing policy decisions, and constructing political identities. Within this context, the use of vague language by politicians has attracted significant scholarly attention. In his analysis of Bush's Presidential Address to the Nation on Presidential Address to the Nation, Chilton (2004) examined vague language as a persuasive tool in political discourses and asserted the use of the term "history" seems to assume several rather unclear conceptualizations, but within the notion of history, it becomes even more vague. The demonstration of vagueness being a language device can be also seen in Ren and Hao's (2011) study on vague language in Obama's inaugural speech, noting that using vague language in a flexible manner has enabled his speeches to achieve greater effectiveness and accuracy, thereby helping the president to effectively communicate with the public and achieve his intended goals. As part of political discourse, the diplomatic and delicate nature of interpreting foreign affairs shapes the use of euphemisms and flexibility in its interpretation. Consequently, the extensive utilization of vague language also becomes a notable characteristic of foreign affairs interpretation. The significance of vague language in the interpretation of foreign affairs should not be underestimated (Wen, 2016).

2.2 Previous Studies on the Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language

One key pragmatic function of vague language is to facilitate politeness and mitigate face threats in communications. As Chanell (1983) noted in the analysis of deference and politeness example, "the hearer is provided with the opportunity to act upon the speaker's utterance in different ways, and so uncertainty passed on to him, at least until he has made a choice." Vague language thus can be a strategy for speakers to soften potentially confrontational or offensive statements, maintaining positive social relationships. Vagueness can also facilitate cooperation and maintain harmony among participants. Cutting (2007) found that vague language plays a crucial role in facilitating cooperative communication and social interaction in everyday conversations, enabling participants to express politeness, manage turn-taking and coherence, and reduce potential conflicts or tensions. According to Ren and Hao (2011), however, vague language can allow politicians to pose threats and create a sense of crisis and urgency to achieve their political intentions, which further proves vagueness in expressions is a linguistic strategic device. Zhu and Li (2013) revealed that the use of vague language in commercial advertising has dual effects. On one hand, it enhances the flexibility and persuasiveness of communication, ensuring that information is conveyed accurately. However, on the other hand, it has the potential to mislead readers and result in false understanding. As Zhao and Nie (2015) pointed out "the vagueness pragmatic motivations of hedging are found to be deception and self-protection." This implies that when speakers intentionally use vague language, their intentions may involve deceiving others or safeguarding themselves. As vague language is an integral feature of human communication, it is reasonable to expect it may have negative effects. This idea is consistent with Chiasson's philosophical views on vagueness. Chiasson's (2001) argued that critical thinking is required to engage genuine doubt in the course of inquiry, and understanding the "logic of vagueness" should be a priority in a democratic society. It is important to investigate this aspect since many individuals seem to

habitually adopt a state of vagueness, which can lead to ignorance and absolutism.

This chapter presents previous studies on vague language in different discourses and highlights pragmatic functions of vague language in communication. It can be concluded that vague language in political discourse can negatively or positively influence readers or listeners. Hence, analyzing vague language in political discourse is important for uncovering strategies, examining ideological manipulation, etc. By studying vague language, we gain deeper insights into the complexities of political discourse and its impact on society.

3. Research Method

This study employs a discourse analytical approach to examine vague language used in Donald Trump's inaugural address, with a specific focus on its pragmatic functions. The full inaugural text is collected from the website of The White House, and qualitative analysis is adopted to study the pragmatic functions of different types of vague language in it. Instances of vague language are initially identified and then the use of it in specific examples will be pragmatically examined in detail. The study particularly emphasizes hedging, generalizations, and abstract concepts. Hedging, as described by Hyland (1995), involves "the expression of tentativeness in language use that represents an absence of certainty in describing any linguistic item or strategy employed to indicate either a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or a desire not to express that commitment categorically". This includes the use of words and phrases such as "will", "small", "too long", which is tentative or cautious language that conveys uncertainty or lack of commitment. Generalizations can be words and phrases such as "many", "there have been instances...", which involves using imprecise or vague terms to describe concepts or groups, making their exact meaning subjective and open to interpretation. Examples of such terms include "many" and "about". Abstract concepts are the words such as "victory", "effort", which are ideas without clear explanations or tangible references.

4. Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language in Donald Trump's Inaugural Speech

4.1 *Establishing Unity and Inclusivity*

One pragmatic function of vague language is its ability to promote consensus and unity among diverse groups. Phrases like "fellow Americans", "the citizens of America" and the term "we" as forms of hedging is used by Donald Trump in his address. Some of them can be seen in the following examples:

- (1) Chief Justice Roberts, President Carter, President Clinton, President Bush, President Obama, fellow Americans and people of the world, thank you.
- (2) We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people.
- (3) Together we will determine the course of America and the world for many, many years to come.
- (4) We will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America

proud again. We will make America safe again.

The theme of Trump's speech is people supremacy and U.S. Supremacy. He emphasized there is no racial boundaries or distinctions in the nation and every American should stand as one and promote patriotism, aiming to create a broad sense of community and togetherness. And this is realized by the use of terms "fellow Americans", "people of the world", "all of our people", and "we" in the above sentences. It should be noted that in an address around 1800 words, the term "we" appears 50 times, showing that the speaker wants to connect the government and the people together. These expressions create an inclusive atmosphere and helps to bridge gaps between different ideological perspectives and foster a sense of shared purpose. At the same time, the vagueness allows the speaker to tap into the emotions and aspirations of individuals, evoking positive sentiments and forge bonds with their supporters.

4.2 Alluding to Past Grievances and Promising Change

One of the purposes of employing vague language by politicians is to allude to past grievances and to promise change because it allows them to appeal to a wide range of people without making specific commitments that may be difficult to fulfill, which is embodied in the following sentences.

(5) For too long, a small group in our nation's capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have born the cost.

(6) Their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs have not been your triumphs.

(7) ...and spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas, while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.

(8) The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.

In example (5) and (6), hedges - "too long" and "a small group"-, and abstract concepts -"victories" and "triumphs"-, and the generalization- "trillions and trillions" are employed by Trump to emphasize who have reaped the rewards of government, while the people have borne the cost. With the vague language, Trump highlights the establishment's shortcomings without explicitly naming specific individuals or groups and his expression allow individuals to project their own experiences and frustrations onto the politician's message. The generalization- "the forgotten men and women" and the hedge "will" in example (8) allows Trump to make promise without outlining clear steps or policies since specific commitments may be difficult to fulfill. The use of vagueness allows for a broad critique of the existing system and the promise of change without directly accusing anyone.

4.3 Eliciting Emotional Response:

Another pragmatic function of vague language in the address is its capacity to evoke emotional responses and establish connections with the audience, which is realized by hedges like "will", abstract concepts like effort, generalizations like "tens of millions", and generalization like "historic movement" in the following examples.

(9) We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and restore its promise for all of our people.

(10) You came by the tens of millions to become part of an historic movement, the likes of which the world has never seen before.

(11) We will make America strong again. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again.

“Great national effort”, “restore its promise”, and “historic movement”, “the tens of millions”, etc. in example (9) & (10) are emotionally charged and open to interpretation. They allow listeners to project their own hopes, desires, and emotions onto these statements, eliciting a sense of enthusiasm and motivation. I have discussed the use of vague language in example (11) helps to build unity and inclusivity. It should also be noted that they help to tap into the emotions and aspirations of individuals without explicitly defining what constitutes greatness or who the forgotten are. This allows Trump to evoke positive sentiments and forge bonds with his supporters.

4.4 Calling on Attention to Threats

Vague language can be used to emphasize the potential severity of a threat, without being specific about the details. This can evoke fear and anxiety in the audience and encourage them to take actions.

(12) We will face challenges.

(13) We will confront hardships, but we will get the job done.

In Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “challenge” is defined as a summons that is often threatening, provocative, stimulating, or inciting while “hardship” means things “that causes or entails suffering or privation”. Both are abstract concepts and can evoke fear and anxiety in the audience without sufficient information and thus a sense of struggle and resilience is elicited. However, vagueness in “we will get the job done” shows that the speaker acknowledges the existence of challenges and hardships without discouraging optimism, which raises a sense of unity and collaboration, leading to greater support for policies or actions aimed at mitigating the threat.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of vagueness in examples shows that the use of vague language in Donald Trump’s inaugural speech served multiple pragmatic functions. Firstly, it helped establish unity and inclusivity by promoting consensus among listeners. Secondly, vague language allowed Trump to allude to past grievances and promise change without making specific commitments. Thirdly, vague language elicited emotional responses and established connections with the audience. Furthermore, vague language provided flexibility for politicians to adapt their positions and policies based on changing circumstances. Lastly, vague language could be used to emphasize the severity of threats without providing specific details. These shows that tactical use of vague language like hedges, generalizations, generalizations, and abstract concepts allows politicians to connect with their audiences and achieve their goals effectively. For audiences, however, they should be aware of the potential manipulation behind vague language and should focus on more specific policies and actions from their political

leaders.

References

- “Challenge”. (2003). *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster, Inc.
- Channell, J. (1983). *Vague language: Some vague expressions in English*. Oxford University Press.
- Cutting, J. (2007). *Vague Language Explored*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230627420>
- Chiasson, P. (2001). Peirce’s Logic of Vagueness. In M. Bergman, & J. Queiroz (Eds.), *The Commens Encyclopedia: The Digital Encyclopedia of Peirce Studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.commens.org/encyclopedia/article/chiasson-phyllis-peirce%e2%80%99s-logic-vagueness>
- Chilton, P. (2003). *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203561218>
- Hyland. (1995). The Author in the Text: Hedging Scientific Writing. *Hongkong Papers in Linguistics & Language Teaching*, 18, 33-42.
- “Hardship”. (2003). *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster, Inc.
- House, J., & Kasper, G. (1981). Politeness markers in English and German. In Coulmas, F. (Ed.), *Conversational Routine*. Mouton, The Hague (pp. 157-185).
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110809145.157>
- Lakoff, G. (1972). Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts. *Linguistic Society Papers*. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00262952>
- Peirce, C. S. (1902). “Vague”, in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, J. M. Baldwin (ed.), New York: MacMillan, 748.
- Russell, B. (1923). Vagueness. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1, 84-92.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402308540623>
- Ren, J. J., & Hao, H. X. (2011). Pragmatic Functions of Fuzzy Language in Obama’s Presidential Inaugural Address. *Journal of Hebei North University (Social Science Edition)*, 23(3), 31-34.
- Thomas, J. A. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Wen, H. (2016). Interpretation Strategy for Vague Language in Foreign Affairs: Based on Premier Li Keqiang’s Answering to the Press in 2015 NPC and CPPCC. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Technology*, 23(3), 88-94.
- Zhao, D. M., & Nie, J. L. (2015). Vague Language in Business Negotiation—From a Pragmatics Perspective. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(6), 1257-1262.
<https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0506.19>
- Zadeh, L. A. (1965). *Fuzzy sets*. *Information and Control*, (8), 338-353.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0019-9958\(65\)90241-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0019-9958(65)90241-X)
- Zhu, W. Z., & Li, J. Y. (2013). A Pragmatic Study on the Functions of Vague Language in Commercial

Advertising. *English Language Teaching*, 6(6), 103-112. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n6p103>