

## Original Paper

# The Vague Expressions in English News Headlines and Film

## Works

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Received: September 6, 2024 Accepted: September 16, 2024 Online Published: September 27, 2024

doi:10.22158/sll.v8n4p46

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v8n4p46>

### Abstract

*As a language phenomenon, vagueness has been a prevalent research subject in verbal communication. According to Dictionary of Language and Linguistics, vagueness is expressions that possess uncertain semantic content and undefined extensions, yet remain comprehensible. Hedges and fuzzy language frequently appear in mass media, including news articles, subtitles, and television shows. In film and television production, to enhance their global visibility, it is essential to account for the contextual and cultural differences between Chinese and foreign audiences during the translation of subtitles, in which the use of vague expressions plays an indispensable role. This paper investigated the use of vague expressions in news headlines and English subtitles of a Chinese film, analyzing their linguistic features and pragmatic functions within these specific contexts. The study aims to provide an overview of how vagueness is employed across the Chinese and English languages, shedding light on the translation tendency of Chinese translators towards the use of words in such communicative texts.*

### Keywords

*vagueness, news headlines, English subtitles, pragmatic functions*

## 1. Introduction

Vagueness is a universal feature of nature, human society, cognition, and language. The concept of vagueness in language gained significant attention with the emergence of Fuzzy Set Theory, introduced by Zadeh (1965). As the theory evolved, its application to linguistic phenomena became increasingly prominent, leading to the establishment of fuzzy linguistics as a distinct field of study.

In China, the systematic construction of fuzzy linguistic theory was pioneered by scholars such as Tieping Wu, whose book *Fuzzy Linguistics* formally introduced the study of vagueness in language in a Chinese academic context. Wu (1999) explored how vagueness interacts with various linguistic

domains, including lexicography, etymology, rhetoric, and pragmatics. Building upon these foundations, Wu (2005) further developed the theory, focusing on how vagueness operates in language use from the aspects of pragmatic causes, mechanisms, and functions.

In addition to its theoretical development, fuzzy linguistic theory has been applied across multiple disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, rhetoric, logic, and artificial intelligence. From a cognitive perspective, scholars put insights into how language users comprehend and produce fuzzy expressions. Moreover, translation studies have incorporated fuzzy linguistic theory to explore the treatment of vague expressions in cross-language texts. For instance, drawing on an English-Chinese parallel corpus, Wu and Zhang (2020) employed a random sampling method to investigate the translation strategies used for seven high-frequency English fuzzy restriction phrases in Chinese. The findings indicated that direct translation strategies are predominantly employed to preserve the inherent vagueness of the source language.

Overall, research in fuzzy linguistics has significantly broadened the boundaries of linguistics. The growing body of studies offers valuable insights into the nature of vagueness and provides practical guidance for language learners in the comprehension and translation of vague expressions. However, few studies focus on the use of vague expressions in media texts and their translation practices. By analyzing English news headlines and English subtitles of a Chinese movie, this paper seeks to explore the application of vague expressions and identify effective translation strategies, contributing to a broader understanding of how vagueness functions within cross-linguistic systems and cross-cultural contexts.

## 2. Analysis

Vague expression, with its inherent ambiguity, imprecision, and relativity, is a common feature in both written texts and daily conversation. Due to these characteristics, it presents significant challenges for language learners, complicating comprehension and usage. In the context of news headlines, vagueness serves the functions of condensing complex discussion and enhancing the credibility of content. Scholars have noted that the strategic use of vagueness in headlines can fulfill multiple goals, such as attracting readers' attention, aligning with the headline's requirements for generalization, truthfulness, and accuracy, and expressing the reporter's position tactfully, which is discussed by Wu and Zhang (2020).

In the context of cross-cultural communication, Chinese films serve as a powerful medium for conveying Chinese stories and cultural values to the global audience. Vague language, often employed in movie lines, plays a pivotal role in enhancing flexibility and expressive power of language, while also strengthening the emotive and rhetorical impact of the narrative. The translation of such vague expressions into English subtitles presents a unique challenge, as subtitling is not merely a linguistic exercise, but a cultural one as well, through which, the global reach of Chinese films could be

broadened. Scholars have emphasized that translation is a form of cross-cultural communication, in which the translator's role extends beyond merely transferring meaning between languages, but also mediates between different cultural contexts (Baker, 2011; Nida, 1964). In this domain, achieving an accurate translation of vague expressions is crucial. Therefore, a successful translation requires an in-depth understanding of both the linguistic and cultural conventions of the source and target languages. For example, translators could preserve the integrity of the original lines' meaning by translating vague expressions of Chinese with equivalent strategies in English expressions.

Vague expressions play a crucial role in communication by allowing for flexibility, nuance, and subtlety across various contexts. In the subsequent sections, the use of vague expressions in these two genres has been examined. First, the analysis focused on how vague expressions are strategically employed in news headlines to effectively convey information. And then, the translation of vagueness in film subtitles has been discussed, highlighting the complexities and strategies to maintain both linguistic and cultural integrity.

### **3. Vague Expressions in News Headlines**

In her influential work *Vague Language*, Joanna Channell (1994) identified two primary forms of English vagueness from a pragmatic perspective, namely explicit vagueness and implicit vagueness. She categorized vague language into three main groups: vague words, hedges, and vagueness by implicature. Explicit vagueness encompasses vague words and hedges, while vagueness by implicature belongs to implicit vagueness. Many Chinese scholars have also applied Channell's framework to analyze vague language in Chinese and English contexts.

Vague words refer to expressions with inherently unclear meanings. For instance, the word *person* can be ambiguous when it does not specify characteristics like gender or age. Similarly, adjectives like *hot* and *warm* lack precise denotations, leaving their interpretation open to context. Hedges are words or expressions attached to other clear terms, making them less definitive. As defined by Lakoff (1972), these are linguistic tools used to soften statements, introducing ambiguity into communication. They are further divided into approximators (e.g., *almost*, *about*, *around*) that reduce the absoluteness of a statement, and shields (e.g., *could*, *would*, *may*) that express uncertainty and soften the tone. Hedges are often found in news headlines to reduce absolutism and emphasize uncertainty, as seen in phrases like *could* or *might* to indicate speculation. For instance, in the headlines *Japanese Official Says Olympics Could Still Be Canceled* and *China Could Cut Methane Emissions through Monitoring and Diet Changes*, Experts Say the modal verb *could* is employed to indicate speculation while attributing statements to "experts" and "official" shift responsibility away from the writer, further softening the claim. Vagueness of implicature, as defined by Channell (1994), on the other hand, refers to a more indirect form of ambiguity, where the vagueness is not overt but implied. This technique relies on shared

knowledge and context between the speaker and the audience to convey an indirect and uncertain meaning without explicitly stating it.

Channell (1994) further outlines the pragmatic functions of ambiguity, identifying purposes such as appropriateness of information, politeness, concealment, strategic vagueness, and disclaimers. Based on previous academic research, this analysis has critically examined and explored the pragmatic functional roles of vague expressions in news headlines.

#### Vague Language as a Pragmatic Tool for Politeness and Mitigating Directness

In the context of news reporting, where the audience is diverse, it is crucial for writers to consider the potential impact of language on readers, ensuring that expressions are appropriate and sensitive. The use of vague expressions enhances the level of euphemism, meeting the psychological expectations of the audience by softening potentially harsh or direct statements. For instance, when reporting election outcomes, media outlets often avoid blunt terms like fail or lose, opting instead for softer alternatives such as fall short to implicitly convey the candidate's defeat to imply not meeting expectations. A case in point is the headline *Completing Vision Falls Short* (China Daily), where vague expressions are employed to convey the result in a less confrontational manner, reflecting both cultural and communicative norms of politeness and sensitivity (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This demonstrates how vague expressions in headlines can serve the purpose of maintaining decorum in public discourse.

#### Enhancing Generalization and Precision in Speech within the Framework of the Cooperative Principle

The use of vague expressions in news headlines serves as an important tool for conveying critical information in a concise and accessible manner, in alignment with the Gricean Cooperative Principle, particularly the maxim of Quantity, Quality, and Manner (Grice, 1975). Headlines often need to be concise and focus on the core message, adhering to the maxim of Quantity, which recommends providing the necessary amount of information, but no more. Vague expressions help achieve this by replacing specific details that may be too complex for a general audience, allowing them to grasp the essence of the news quickly. For instance, headlines such as *Visiting Museums is Increasingly Popular in China* and *Central Bank Up RMB Reserves to a High* utilize vague expressions like popular and high, serving to highlight trends without the need for precise data. These words, though imprecise, describe the main thrust of the content, allowing readers to grasp the core at a glance.

Furthermore, the use of vague expressions supports the maxim of Quality, which emphasizes the need to provide truthful information without asserting what lacks sufficient evidence. In sensitive domains like politics, economics, and diplomacy, where accuracy and objectivity are paramount, vague expressions can serve as a valuable tool. It allows news outlets to present information that is accurate, but flexible enough to accommodate the risk of misreporting, especially when immediate, detailed verification is unavailable. For example, in CNN's headline *Existing Vaccines May Not Be Effective Against the New, Mutant Corona Virus*, the use of hedge may conveys uncertainty while safeguarding the integrity of the statement in the face of an evolving situation. By incorporating hedges, the headline avoids making

definitive claims while maintaining the credibility of the source (Baker, 1992). In this way, vague expressions in headlines effectively balance the need for brevity and accuracy, making it a vital rhetorical tool in news reporting, particularly in contexts when the information is still unfolding.

In addition, vagueness can also enhance the rhetorical impact of speech by substituting lengthy descriptions with more concise, yet powerful, expressions. For instance, in a China Daily headline, Doctoral Thesis's Tale of Hardship Wins Praise Online, which is about the struggle study experience of a poor student, the phrase Tale of Hardship summarizes a student's challenging academic journey. This expression avoids detailed recounting but still conveys the emotional weight of the experience. Moreover, it draws subtle allusions to Dickens' classic works Hard Times and A Tale of Two Cities to resonate with readers, creating a cultural connection. This expression demonstrates how vague language can simplify complex ideas while maintaining emotional impact, making the message more accessible and engaging for a broad audience.

The analysis reveals that official political news, given its significant impact and the high level of public attention it gains, emphasizes objectivity and timeliness. Consequently, the use of vague language in such headlines tends to be more explicit. Explicit vagueness, which provides generally understood meanings without specific detail, helps deliver timely and accurate information, particularly for headlines about ongoing events. For instance, expressions such as may or could allow headlines to remain flexible while events unfold. In contrast, implicit vagueness, whose surface meaning is clear but a more nuanced or ambiguous interpretation is conveyed, serves a more aesthetic or rhetorical function. The type of vagueness is rarely employed in current affairs reporting due to the need for precision, but is prevalent in films, where it enhances the narrative depth and aligns with the audience's aesthetic preferences. The following analysis has demonstrated how implicit vagueness is used and translated in film dialogue to enrich narrative depth and meet audience expectations.

#### **4. Vague Expressions in Movie Subtitles**

In the context of cross-cultural communication, Chinese films serve as a powerful medium for conveying Chinese stories and cultural values to the global audience. Vague language, often employed in movie lines, plays a pivotal role in enhancing flexibility and expressive power of language, while also strengthening the rhetorical impact of the narrative. The translation of such vague expressions into English subtitles presents a unique challenge, as subtitling is not merely a linguistic exercise, but a cultural one as well, through which, the global reach of Chinese films could be broadened. Scholars have emphasized that translation is a form of cross-cultural communication, in which the translator's role extends beyond merely transferring meaning between languages, but also mediates between different cultural contexts (Baker, 2011; Nida, 1964). In this domain, achieving an accurate translation of vague expressions is crucial. Therefore, a successful translation requires an in-depth understanding of both the linguistic and cultural conventions of the source and target languages. For example, translators could

preserve the integrity of the original lines' meaning by translating vague expressions of Chinese with equivalent strategies in English expressions. This analysis focused on the film *My People, My Country*, released in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, as a case study to explore the translation of vague expressions in movie subtitles. By analyzing specific instances of vague expressions in the film's dialogue, some effective translation strategies have been identified.

The film *My People, My Country* portrays several landmark historical events from 70 years since the founding of the Republic of China, focusing on the deep emotional connection between individuals and the nation. Set against a global backdrop, the film not only seeks to evoke a sense of family and patriotism among Chinese people worldwide but also aims to convey these emotions to the international audience, enabling a deeper understanding of China's historical experiences and cultural narratives. Throughout the film, the characters' dialogue reflects various vague expressions, spanning different historical contexts and emotional tones. Within the translation into English subtitles, these vague expressions are distinctly categorized into four types: syntactic vagueness, semantic vagueness, rhetorical vagueness, and pragmatic vagueness, each reflecting unique challenges and translation strategies to preserve the connotation meanings that can effectively communicate to foreign audiences. Syntactic vagueness, in which the formal structure of sentences does not explicitly convey clear meaning or logical connections, is a notable characteristic throughout this film. Although traditional language standards emphasize grammatical accuracy and clarity, this film deliberately employs vague syntax for artistic or narrative purposes. This vagueness is often manifested through incomplete or elliptical sentences and unconventional sentence structures, where the subject or object might be omitted, or word order appears reserved. Despite these irregularities, meaning is still effectively communicated. For example, the English subtitle *Why didn't you leave me a message for three years? At least a note through the door*, translates an original Chinese sentence that lacks both subject and object, yet the Chinese audience can easily infer the missing elements based on context. This syntactic flexibility aligns with the notion that ellipsis, as described by Halliday and Hasan (1976), plays a significant role in discourse cohesion by allowing the speaker to leave out parts of a sentence while still maintaining meaning, especially when shared knowledge is assumed. When translating from Chinese to English, it is essential to consider the inherent differences between the two languages, regarding its precision and logical structure characteristics. Translators should add appropriate subject or logical connectors to preserve the completeness and clarity of the sentence. Therefore, in this case, translators often adopt a strategy of converting vague expressions into more precise and explicit language to enhance both accuracy and coherence.

Semantic vagueness, on the other hand, refers to the broad and often ambiguous connotation of words. According to Channel (1994), vague language in semantics allows for flexibility in interpretation, making communication more adaptable to context. Semantic vagueness, one of the most common

manifestations of vagueness in films, can be analyzed from the perspective of connotation and denotation. From the perspective of connotation, it refers to the lack of clarity in the meaning they are intended to express. In *My People, My Country*, semantic vagueness often emerges in the use of culturally specific terms with ambiguous extensions. For example, the Chinese term *Tiefanwan* (literally “iron bowl”) metaphorically represents a secure job, typically within a government or state-owned enterprise. When translating this into English, a more contextually precise term like *work for the government* is necessary to avoid confusion that the target audience can not grasp the intended meaning. From the denotation perspective, it refers to the unclear role it is intended to play, among which the typical expressions are temporal and colour words. In the line, *It’s been 154 years, and we won’t and we can’t wait for one more second*, where although the word *second* may appear to convey a specific measure of time, its denotation is often ambiguous, not merely expressing how short or how long time is, but rather reflecting the urgent and excited feelings. As such, it cannot be directly translated into corresponding numbers but should be interpreted in line with the underlying sentiments conveyed by the vague expression. It should be translated as *we have waited too long to express the hard experience they have*, illustrating why the speaker refuses to wait for just one more second. Consequently, it is also appropriate to translate Chinese vagueness into precise English expressions.

In the film, temporal expressions and rhetorical vagueness intertwine, enriching the dialogue and enhancing its artistic expression. An example *We can’t be wrong for a second tonight*, which also includes *second*, can be interpreted as rhetorical vagueness. In this sentence, the word *second* serves not only as a time measurement but also as a rhetorical device, a form of hyperbole, emphasizing the critical nature of the situation. The dual function illustrates Lakoff’s (1973) notion that vague expressions often serve rhetorical functions by enabling speakers to convey emotions and attitudes indirectly. In subtitling, the translation *There can be no mistake tonight* would be more appropriate, which maintains the urgency of the original while omitting the temporal reference that might be more specific or more empathetic towards the scene for Chinese people. This approach aligns with Nida’s (1964) theory of dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes the overall impact on the target audience over a literal translation. Furthermore, rhetorical vagueness, which pervades the film, expresses complex ideas through indirect statements, creating a rich linguistic texture. For instance, the phrase *money tree* symbolizes wealth and good fortune, and it’s commonly associated with the idea of attracting financial abundance, paralleling the English expression *cash cow*. Such vague expressions are intricately connected to various rhetorical devices, facilitating cross-cultural understanding. Rhetorical vagueness refers to the use of language that conveys meaning through specific events or imagery rather than through direct and explicit statements. When translating such expressions, it is crucial to grasp both the vague and rhetorical elements of the original text and to employ appropriate English equivalents that maintain the intended nuance. Common rhetorical devices, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, and pun contribute to the prevalence of vagueness. For example, in *My People, My Country*, the line *Do you think it is only a red cloth that goes*

up?, red cloth refers to the national flag, symbolizing the unwavering faith of the Chinese people, while That's your star, kids. Chase it!, in which star represents the hopes and aspirations of the lost youth generation during a turbulent period.

Pragmatic vagueness plays a crucial role in stimulating the audience's imagination and aesthetic appreciation. It is highly dependent on the context in which the discourse occurs the specific discourse context, so it is essential to analyze and understand it within the framework of the actual situation. However, even with a relatively clear context, the intended meaning can remain ambiguous—the phenomenon known as Pragmatic Vagueness. In many Chinese film subtitles, vague expressions related to sexual content are often regarded as the author's deliberate use of pragmatic vagueness to convey a sense of implicit beauty. This approach aligns with the subtle aesthetics, which is highly valued in Chinese culture. Eastern cultures, with their emphasis on subtlety and politeness, often avoid or hesitate when addressing such topics. Consequently, when translating movie subtitles, it is essential for translators to fully recognize the semantic gaps and ambiguity from the perspective of reception aesthetics. Then, to effectively convey the intended implicit beauty, translators should preserve the inherent vagueness and the pragmatic function of the original language, employing the equivalent English vague expressions to achieve a similar effect. Considering this context, the translation strategy of “vagueness to vagueness” should be adopted. In *My People, My Country*, in a line that Practising with Qinghuai, in which Qinghuai is a vague expression and it cannot find a very exact English word to summarize, so it is appropriate to employ a similar expression like faith or belief to let audience grasp the core feeling of it. In sum, for this type, translating vagueness to vagueness is commonly employed to convey meaning and leave the audience infinitive space for imagination.

In addition to the challenges of translating vague expressions from Chinese to English, another noteworthy phenomenon is the unique numerical expressions in Chinese, which often become ambiguous when translated into English. These numerical usages, which carry specific cultural or contextual nuances in Chinese, might lose clarity in English, contributing to vagueness. In *My People, My Country*, many precise numerical expressions in Chinese are employed to create vagueness. For example, certain numbers like 3, 6, 9, and 12 in Chinese often imply “many”, a nuance that does not exist in English. Similarly, the expression three to five months in Chinese extends beyond the literal interpretation of the exact duration, conveying a sense of a longer period. It requires adaptation when translating these numerical expressions which blend accuracy with vagueness, making the “precise” Chinese expressions into vague language in English. For example, Chinese phrases something does not occur even in a hundred years and once in a century function as both exaggerations and vague expressions, indicating the rarity of an event, which can be translated as once-in-a-lifetime chance into English. This ensures that the audience can follow the plot while maintaining the film's aesthetics.



## 5. Conclusion

This paper presented a two-part analysis of the use of vague language. The first section examined English news headlines, focusing on the application of vagueness mainly within the framework of the Cooperative Principle. The second part shifted to the analysis of film subtitles, identifying four types of vague expressions in Chinese and exploring strategies used in their English translation. It can be concluded that, for syntactic and semantic vagueness, translators often choose the strategy of translating vagueness into precise expressions; and for rhetorical and pragmatic vagueness, maintaining vagueness through equivalent English expressions is often more appropriate. This section highlights the distinctive features of vague expressions in movie dialogue and discusses solutions to the challenges posed by linguistic and cultural differences in the translation process. Through these analyses, the study offers insights into the characteristics of vagueness across different media and the strategies employed in cross-linguistic translation.

In summary, the use of vague expressions facilitates mutual understanding between the author and the reader by appropriately conveying information and achieving multiple purposes in news headlines. Moreover, it plays an important rhetorical role in both news headlines and movie subtitles. In *My People, My Country*, vague expressions reflect the essential features of cinematic language, conveying intended meaning and enhancing the emotional and imaginative engagement of the audience. The translation of such vague expressions into English is crucial in maintaining the original meaning and cultural nuance in a cross-cultural context. Therefore, when translating film dialogue, it is essential not only to focus on literal translation but also to employ strategies that capture the subtle nuance of vagueness. Additionally, translators should view the dialogue from a cultural and artistic perspective to fully express the ideological and emotional depth of the film, thereby enhancing its appeal to and acceptability of the foreign audience. This analysis aims to explore how vagueness operates in different linguistic systems and identify high-frequency translation strategies. Future research could build on this analysis by analyzing a broader range of films to further investigate the application of vagueness and evaluate effective translation strategies, ultimately contributing to a more systematic understanding of vagueness in cross-linguistic translation.

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