

# A Study of Fuzzy Language in Business Negotiation

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**Abstract:** The study of Fuzzy language is an important branch in the family of linguistics. With the globalization of economy, people tend to pay more attention to international business negotiation, and fuzzy language in international business negotiation got particular attention. This paper makes sufficient review concerning the study of fuzzy language both at home and abroad. It reveals the pragmatic functions of saving face, being flexible and self protection. The paper provides a pragmatic analysis of fuzzy language in business negotiation from perspective of politeness strategy to give people a better understanding on how to use fuzzy language to achieve certain communicative purposes in business negotiation. It selects some dialogues with fuzzy language from real business negotiations and analyzes the significance as well as the positive and negative functions of fuzzy language in business negotiation. It discusses the application of fuzzy language in business negotiation and tries to arouse more attention to the research of the field.

**Keywords:** Business Negotiation, Fuzz Language, Face-saving Theory, Pragmatic Analysis

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## 1. Introduction

Fuzzy language is widely used in our daily life and can be found everywhere. Better understanding of fuzzy language can effectively approach to understand the mind of people. Scholars have studied it at home and abroad already for a long time. Over the years, it became a hot topic and attracted an increasing number of scholars' attention. In the field of business negotiation, more and more people notice that it's vital important to focus on fuzzy language. The purpose of business negotiation is to make business successfully by using proper language and achieving a win-win situation. Negotiators should follow some language skills to express some complex intention and emotion in some specific negotiation situations and contexts. Fuzzy language, as an effective rhetorical device, is widely used in business negotiations. It can not only adjust the atmosphere of negotiation, make the negotiation go smoothly, but also try to find out the real intention of the other party. In the process of business negotiations, fuzzy language has been regarded as an effective strategy and be widely used to achieve a certain purpose of communication, and therefore research on it is quite essential.

## 2. Literature Review

Fuzzy sets was first advanced by Lotfi A. Zadeh [1] from University of California. In 1965, he put forward the concept of fuzziness and contributed a lot to the development of fuzzy language. Zadeh has successively published dozens of papers about fuzzy theory, which provide fuzzy language a theoretical basis. Geirge Lakoff is the first person who advanced hedge as a component of fuzzy language. He applies Zadeh's theory to semantics. Joanna Channell [2], an English scholar on applied linguistics, has studied fuzzy language for nearly twenty years and have a great influence on the fuzzy linguistics. Channell [2] believes that English speakers have a large number of ways to be fuzzy, and it's not only an ability but also a kind of important strategy for a native English speaker. She claims that the interpretation of fuzzy language can't be isolated from certain context and inferences. She uses the pragmatic principles to describe the linguistic forms and the pragmatic consequences, to analyze the vague expressions. Crystal and Davy [3] discuss fuzzy language from the angle of pragmatics and they put forward the view that fuzziness is uncertain in different conversation background and fuzziness is on a scale related to the formality of the occasion. In order to make the speaker's statements more precise, the speakers will

choose the fuzzy statement just for the specific aims and intentions. They hold that fuzziness is intrinsic and important in the language system of English.

The study of fuzzy language in China focuses on its semantic aspects. Wu Tieping [4], the person who making the birth of fuzzy linguistics in China, concentrates on the analysis of fuzzy language from the perspective of semantics. In his work *Fuzzy Linguistics*, Wu Tieping [4] contributes seven pages to the discussion of fuzziness, which mainly focus on the classification of fuzziness. Up to now, many scholars have achieved a great success in studying fuzzy language in different fields, like Chinese Rhetoric [5], Hedges [6], The Origin of Fuzziness [7], and some other fields. But there are also some fields of fuzzy language that only a few scholars have got in touch with, such as computer application, economic and trade, business negotiation and etc. Compared with accurate language, fuzzy language is more uncertain, general and flexible. So we have to understand it through some cases. However, up to now, those papers which analyse fuzzy language in business negotiation pay more attention on the theoretical analysis and most of the them is difficult to understand for lack of examples to explain it.

### 3. Method of the Research

Business negotiation is a complex process of communication. The correct use of fuzzy language will greatly promote the effect of negotiations and accelerate the realization of negotiating goals. The purpose of this research is, firstly, to provide a comprehensive analysis related to fuzzy language in business negotiation, Secondly, to make a study of fuzzy language especially from the angle of pragmatics, Thirdly, to provide some theoretical analysis with actual cases and some suggestions on business negotiation from the perspective of pragmatics. This paper tends to carry out a systematic research of the skillful use of fuzzy language in business negotiation. Therefore, this paper makes an analysis of fuzzy language in business negotiation from the pragmatic perspective on the base of Face-saving theory. Besides, in the procedure of research, this paper selects some dialogues with fuzzy language from real business negotiations. Then the significance and the positive and negative functions of fuzzy language in business negotiation are analyzed.

## 4. Results of Research on Fuzzy Language in Business Negotiation Based on Pragmatic Functions

Usually, language is used to express the ideas and transmit the messages. Meanwhile, it's also helpful for us to establish and maintain a good human relation. Fuzzy language is widely used in business negotiation for its pragmatic functions. So it deserves people's more attention to fuzzy language in business negotiation.

### 4.1. Saving Face

During the process of business negotiation, both the two parties would try to use some strategies to minimize the threat to listener's face, such as negative politeness, positive politeness, don't do face-threatening act and so on.

In most business negotiations, negotiators leave some space for his partner to express his ideas by making his or her words very vague. Negotiators can use vague language to avoid apodictic statements. Usually, they may take some speech act which is not so disrespectful to achieve their goals. Just like per promise, request, suggest, etc.

For example: We may revert to the question of sole agency when the business between us has developed to our mutual satisfaction. (Excerpt from former researches)

"revert to" and "to our mutual satisfaction" both sound positive in the example. Actually, the negotiator refused others requirement in a euphemistic way. it means that the necessary condition of taking the question of sole agency is that the business between us has developed to a mutual satisfaction. It not only shows considerations for the other side but also protects the relationship between the two sides. The proper use of fuzzy language in the example shows the special function of fuzzy language in business negotiation.

### 4.2. Being Flexible

Fuzziness plays a unique role in language and its related fields, and even in the fields that people generally think is accurate, such as mathematics, economics, medicine, etc., Language exists and changes for the needs of the objective world. So language must be flexible to meet the demands of the changing objective world.

There is no absolute language in the world. Exact language is relative to fuzzy language. We are required to use exact language in most cases. But the fuzzy language will become the most appropriate and accurate words when the exact language can't express our thoughts clearly.

For example: (In the counter-offer process of import and export) A reply to an offer which purports to be an acceptance but contains additional or different terms which do not materially alter the terms of the offer constitutes an acceptance, unless the offeror, without undue delay, objects orally to the discrepancy or dispatches a notice to that effect. (Excerpt from Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sales of Goods).

In this sentence, the use of the fuzzy word "undue" is reasonable. The rules of contract involve a wide range and a lot of complex issues. If the provisions are too detailed, the choice of solution ways will be limited. The use of fuzzy language can handle the problem reasonably without violating the principle.

Chinese economist Xiong Yingwu [8] said that "there are also fuzzy phenomena in the economic field, and there are many fuzzy concepts in economics. For example, poor, rich, speed, proportion, expanded reproduction, growth, more pay for more work, etc. Of course, this is not a strange phenomenon, but normal. Because economics must use a

small amount of economic concepts (categories) to reflect a large number of economic relations. In this way, the extension of many economic concepts is often uncertain or adjustable and scalable. So the economic concept have a better adaptability."

### 4.3. Self-protection

British linguist Channell [9] points out that vague language has the function of self-protection. The so-called self-protection means that the language communicators avoid damage and protect their interests in the specific context through the proper use of fuzzy language.

In business negotiation, sometimes one party knows the exact information of the trade, and the other party wants to know it as well. So they usually make the original information obscure by using fuzzy language intentionally. The use of fuzzy language seems to be against the maxim of quantity and the maxim of quality. It produces conversational implicature in this way. One of the important features of conversational implicature is to weaken the meaning of the original words. The real purpose of this approach is to avoid taking responsibility so as to protect one's own interests.

For example: A is a house buyer, B is a seller. A wants to know some details about the environment around the house. (Excerpt from Internet).

A: How many buildings are there on this road?

B: About ten. (B has read the exact numbers on the promotional material).

In this example, B knows that there are ten buildings on this road for he has read the promotional material. But, as a real estate developer, in order not to take the responsibility, he gives a fuzzy answer by use fuzzy word "about". The use of fuzzy language can provide the speaker a safe space to protect themselves.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Application of Face-saving to Fuzzy Language in Business Negotiation

Face theory aims to study how different cultures respond to clashes and conflicts in the world. More specifically, "face" is something about self-image, and it can also be defined as "the claimed sense of favorable social self-worth and/or projected other-worth in a public situation" [10]. In Ting-Toomey's opinion, it is possible to lose face, save face, and protect face. In order to avoid losing face and be polite, parties of the conversation tend to stick to face-saving theory and Politeness Principle and maintain listener's face. In business negotiation, when other party's acts are likely to damage their face, both sides would take some measures to protect their face. This kind of act is regarded as FTA (face-threatening act). Xie Xuan [11] mentioned that Brown and Levinson [12] believe such kind of acts would damage listener's face by nature.

a) Warning, advising, ordering, threatening, etc.

b) Criticizing, complaining, disagreeing raising taboo topics, etc.

c) Accepting thanks, offers, or promising unwillingly, etc.

d) Accepting compliments, apologizing, confessing, etc.

Usually, the addresser would try to minimize the threat to the listener's face by using a repressive act. There are five levels of strategies which can fix the face of both sides involved in a conversation, namely, (1) positive politeness; (2) negative politeness; (3) bold on record; (4) off-record; (5) don't do face-threatening act. In the following part, attention would be focused on the negative strategy and positive strategy.

### 5.2. Vagueness as a Negative Politeness Strategy

In most cases, negative politeness revolves around reducing the forces which may threaten the listener's faces. In a conversation, addresser should recognize and respect the free action of the listener.

In business negotiation, negotiator should use some fuzzy language to leave his counterpart some space to express their opinions. Addresser can use vague language to avoid apodictic statements in order not to neglect the wish of listener's to judge for themselves. Usually, negotiators may take some speech act which is not so disrespectful to achieve their goals. Just like per promise, request, suggest, etc. For example, those expressions like "I think" "I wonder" "I guess" "I suppose". Negotiators are likely to use those expressions to make up for the loss of listener's negative face. (delete this part).

For example: (Excerpt from former researches).

1) A: I wonder if we can draw up a tentative plan now. I'm afraid 10% is beyond my negotiation limit. Any other ideas?

B: I'm afraid we cannot accept your counter-offer. This is our rock bottom price.

The negotiation is too direct and could damage the negative face of the listener.

2) A: We are giving you instructions. Inform us at once of your intentions.

The force of the above reply may too strong, so vague language is very useful in this situation. It can be revised into: We'd like to give you some suggestions. We'd be if you could let us know your intentions earlier.

It's impossible for negotiators to negotiate smoothly unless they build a harmonious business negotiation. However, although the result may be inevitable, the use of Fuzzy Language can moderate the tone and save the negative face of the other party.

### 5.3. Vagueness as a Positive Politeness Strategy

Fuzzy language is not only a negative politeness strategy, but also a positive strategy. In business negotiation, if one side overlooks the other side's demand and emotion, it threatens the positive face of the other side.

Positive politeness revolves around the positive face of the listener, the positive self-image he claims for himself [12]. That is to say, positive politeness is actually a kind of face-saving act, both sides tend to achieve win-win situation and pay more attention to the same goals both sides want to

achieve. The addresser try to treat the listener as people on their own side and get closer to the listener. In this way, the addresser can got the real information about the listener's demands. Brown and Levinsons [12] listed fifteen strategies in their book in 1987 such as slang, nicknames, less direct request, shared dialect, etc. They claim that avoidance strategy is the best way to express positive politeness. The negotiator can seek agreement with the former by expressing their ideas more fuzzy when the other side has not clearly expressed their ideas.

For example:

1) A: Frankly speaking, I agree with most of your opinions.

Literally, the addresser expresses his agreement with the other side's opinions. But, the implicated meaning of his words is that the addresser cannot agree with all of the listener's opinions. In this example, the addresser uses a fuzzy language to express his refusal euphemistically when he doesn't believe in the truth of the other side's statement, in this way to lessen the threat to the positive face of the listener.

As the same, fuzzy language can also be used to show addresser's dissatisfaction or hint others.

2) A: Obviously, we are giving up too much.

In this example, to protect his own interest, the addresser show his dissatisfaction and hints his counterpart that it is unfair or improper to hurt the benefits of one side of the negotiation.

3) A: You should have sent the sample of product X to us earlier.

In this sentence, the addresser wants to use the structure of "should have" to obscure his words, but his words is nothing but criticism. If we revise the sentence into "You should send the sample of product X to us earlier", the listener's positive face can be damaged. There are some similar examples: 1) Although the favourable terms that you give our company seems fantastic, compared with Mr. B's, it seems there is no difference." 2): I'm afraid you may have made some mistakes. In the two situations, the addressers express their criticism vaguely and tactfully, so, they can avoid not to damage the listener's positive face. More examples about vague refusal and disapproval are as follows;

4) A: Could you tell me the specific information of your company's acquisition plan.

B: Um, we have made a broad and comprehensive plan. I think the plan is pretty good.

Here, A wants to know the acquisition plan of B's company, while, B just says the plan is very good, B says nothing about the plan itself, it is apparently a refusal. B expresses his refusal in fuzzy language in order to save A's positive face.

5) A: What do you think of this advise?

B: Well, I sort of like it.

Here, B wants to maximize praise of A and minimize the dispraise of A. But obviously he doesn't like this advise. He uses the fuzzy language "sort of like it" in order not to damage B's positive face.

Fuzziness is one of nature inherent properties of language. It is widely used in advertisement, new media, advertisement, daily communication and business negotiation, etc. It can not

be replaced by clear and precise language for that without it, some rhetorical effects and pragmatic purposes cannot be achieved. So, better understanding of fuzzy language can make language user communicate more efficiently.

## 6. Conclusion

It's hard to define fuzziness in exact words for it has rich meanings. The thesis wants to attract more and more attention to its pragmatic functions and usage in business negotiation. As was mentioned above, negotiators can use fuzzy language to achieve their certain purpose smoothly, protect themselves' interest and save face in some difficult situations for its various functions. Thus, it's necessary to use fuzzy language in business negotiation. On the other hand, it is also helpful for the listeners. With a good study of fuzzy language, listeners may have a better understanding of the reason why the speaker use fuzzy language and what the speaker really wants in negotiation.

The thesis has discussed some problems on pragmatic fuzziness in business negotiation based on face-saving theory. But, there are also some limitations in the present study for the inadequate personal understanding of the author. Firstly, the data and examples collected is not so comprehensive. It is difficult to collect data and examples for a corpus analysis of pragmatic phenomenon. Secondly, similar to many other linguistic studies, it is the major weakness in this study that the lack of experimental support. So, the analyses in this paper is more or less subjective. It would be better if the study resorted to some experimental studies. Thirdly, the present study may also suffer from the problem of overlapped classification. All in all, the proper use of fuzzy language wouldn't hinder their negotiation but facilitate it. The study of pragmatic fuzziness deserves attention, and further research in this filed should be conducted. The current study is not the final one and we awaits further improvement. There is a long way to go for the researchers.

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