WHAT IS VAGUE LANGUAGE

In the late of 20th century, foreign linguists did a series of studies of the ambiguity of language, especially the ambiguity of semantics. In these studies, they were in agreement that there is ambiguity in the language, but the research method and the based theories are different.

They have studied the ambiguity of the language from different aspects, such as the language, logic, cognition and pragmatic etc., so that this emerging discipline of vague language from the outset shows the prosperity of lively debate. Chinese language scholars started to do some researches on vague language in the early 1980s, their findings are also impressive.

With the birth and development of fuzzy linguistics, in China, the real and serious study of fuzzy linguistics began in the late 1970s. Linguists of China have taken great efforts to make research on Chinese with the fuzzy theory. It is commonly acknowledged that Wu Tieping’s *A tentative analysis of fuzzy language* is the first article using fuzzy theories to analyze linguistic fuzziness, which symbolizes the birth of fuzzy linguistics in China.

His study on fuzzy linguistics involves a wide range, including fuzzy words, fuzzy concepts, facts that affect fuzziness, the mutual conversions of fuzzy words and precise words, the history of fuzzy theories, the quantitative study of fuzzy language, and the relationship between fuzzy theories and lexicology, terminology, rhetoric, etymology, etc.
As the study of vague language starts late, many theoretical and methodological issues are to be solved, but the study on vague language has attracted more and more attention and participation of the linguists, which will help improve the vague language research theory, explore more effective research methods, and deepen the study of the ambiguity of language.

Definition of Vague Language

1 Classification of Some Terms

Before we give definition to vague language, we need to know what vagueness is. Linguists have made efforts to give a definition, but often find themselves confused in distinguishing vagueness and other terms, such as fuzziness, generality and ambiguity.

Vagueness refers to an expression which has more than one possible interpretation (i.e. is polysemous). For example, good has a range of interpretations: good (fine) weather, good (hard-working) student, good (warm-hearted) people, good (beautiful) legs, etc. Similarly, the sentence Mary has my book could mean ‘Mary has a book written by me’; ‘Mary has a book borrowed by me’, etc.

Another type of vague meaning is expressed by ‘either…or’. For example, the sentence I either go to school or stay at home has at least two possible true readings: ‘I go to school’ vs. ‘I stay at home’. Moreover, in the sentence I either eat an apple or drink a glass of milk, the unique meaning of either…or is such that there are three possible true statements involved: ‘I eat an apple’, or ‘I drink a glass of milk’, or ‘I eat an apple and drink a glass of milk’.
Ambiguity is an expression with more than one competing but distinct meaning, while for vagueness, distinct meanings can not be identified. Vagueness is characteristic of a single meaning that has borderline cases. So, homonymy and polysemy cause ambiguity but not vagueness. For example, “Flying planes can be dangerous” is ambiguous because of two unrelated meanings of “flying planes”, and “We saw her duck” is ambiguous because of the homonymic meaning of “duck”.

(These two examples are quoted by many linguists to explain ambiguity) Another two examples can also explain vagueness and ambiguity clearly. “It is good weather” is vague because of the one meaning of “good”, and we don’t know how good it is. “She has a good leg” is ambiguous because of the several meanings of “good”. Does it mean “healthy”, or “athletic” or “beautiful”?

Generality is a matter of unspecification: the meaning of an expression is general in the sense that it does not specify certain details. For example: the meaning of city is general because it does not specify whether or not a city is big or small, modern of ancient. My friend is general, as it could mean a female friend, a male friend, or a friend from New Zealand. For example,

a. Mary saw John.

b. Mary changes a baby.

c. Mary receives a degree.

The meaning of (a) is general because it does not specify whether or not Mary saw John is a shop, or in a school, or any other place. In (b), Mary could be changing her own baby, or a baby belonging to her husband’s
ex-wife, or a baby she has kidnapped. Question of whose baby it is left open. In(c), Mary could have an art degree, or a science degree, a BA degree or a PhD. Again, the sentence does not say specifically what kind of degree Mary received.

The term fuzzy is derived from the fuzzy mathematic developed by Zedah who suggests that fuzziness can be formally handled in terms of a fuzzy set, a class of entities with a continuum of grades of membership. Other scholars like Lakoff and McCawley also use fuzzy to show there is a certain degree of fuzziness around componental boundaries. If we consider “bird-likeness”, it appears that “robin” is a central member which belongs to “bird-likeness” completely while “bat” is a peripheral member which hardly belongs to “bird-likeness”.

2 Different Definitions of Vagueness Language

Vague language is hard to define because of the vague nature of language itself. If non-specialists are asked what “vague” means, they will reply that it is “not clearly expressed or perceived “or “not specific or exact, imprecise” or “uncertain, indistinct”, etc. What is vagueness? This is the basic question which fuzzy linguist must answer. Vagueness has been observed to occur widely in language use. However, people vary in defining this phenomenon.

Peirce(1902) is considered as the originator of the notion of vagueness of language. He was perhaps the first to try to formulate the notion in a rigorous way as follows:

A proposition is vague where 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. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker’s habits of language were indeterminate; so that one day he would regard the proposition must be understood to have reference to what might be deduced from a perfect knowledge of his state of mind; for it is precisely because these questions never did, or did not frequently, present themselves that his habit remained indeterminate.

The definition given by Channell in Vague Language is: an expression or word is vague if:

1) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition;

2) it is purposely and unabashedly vague;

3) its meaning arises from the ‘intrinsic uncertainty’ referred to by Pierce.