

Vague language: A critical reading

Língua ambigua: Uma leitura crítica

Lenguaje vago: Una lectura crítica

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Abstract

Vague language is observed in language elements that make the meaning unclear. In this pragma-linguistic paper, the authors aim to review the different proposed theories and definitions of vague language that were suggested in the middle of the past century. Through discourse analysis of vague usage, authors justify politeness in communication, gender, culture, press releases, and education. Authors found that there is dissatisfaction among speakers with describing the terminologies and possible meanings of a text. Another promising finding is that the vague language creates controversial semantics and pragmatics discussions among discourse genre specialists. The listener's comprehension of quantifiers and linguistic approximators is limited to an exact number of vague words; thus, speakers are strongly recommended to avoid using vagueness in their speeches.

Keywords: Vague language; Vagueness; Linguist; Discourse analysis; Ambiguous language; VL.

Resumo

A linguagem vaga é observada em elementos da linguagem que tornam o significado pouco claro. Neste artigo pragma-linguístico, os autores pretendem revisar as diferentes teorias propostas e definições de linguagem vaga que foram sugeridas em meados do século passado. Por meio da análise do discurso de uso vago, os autores justificam a polidez na comunicação, gênero, cultura, press releases e educação. Os autores constataram que há insatisfação entre os falantes em descrever as terminologias e os possíveis significados de um texto. Outra descoberta promissora é que a linguagem vaga gera polêmicas discussões semânticas e pragmáticas entre especialistas em gêneros discursivos. A compreensão de quantificadores e aproximadores linguísticos do ouvinte é limitada a um número exato de palavras vagas; assim, os falantes são fortemente recomendados para evitar o uso de imprecisão em seus discursos.

Palavras-chave: Língua ambigua; Imprecisão; Linguista; Análise de discursos; LA.

Resumen

El lenguaje vago se observa en los elementos del lenguaje en la cultura, el género y los discursos para que el significado no sea claro. En este artículo, revisamos las diferentes teorías propuestas y definiciones del lenguaje vago que se sugirieron a mediados del siglo pasado. También presenta un análisis del discurso de uso vago y justifica la cortesía en la comunicación, el género, la cultura, los comunicados de prensa y la educación. Encontramos que existe insatisfacción entre los hablantes con la descripción de las terminologías y los posibles significados de un texto. The Vague Language (el lenguaje vago) crea discusiones semánticas y pragmáticas, controvertidas entre académicos y especialistas en géneros discursivos.

Palabras clave: Lenguaje vago; Vaguedad; Lingüista; Análisis del discurso; LV.

1. Introduction

This study assumes that the vague language (hereafter VL) has existed since the foundation of the language itself. However, it appears on the surface at the beginning of the 1900s. This tendency of reflection on vagueness inaugurated the discussion on the approximate existence of vagueness in modern language. Therefore, the confusion in analyzing particular

approaches and phrases had made VL come to the round table of dissuasion. Many fundamental theories engaged in VL illustrated how vague language had been implemented in real-life situations. Several of the broad literature shows the evolution of ideas on the function and methods of investigating the VL. We consider the recent theories in our analysis of the usage of VL worldwide; therefore, the findings can lead to new unreached areas to be studied. The description of vagueness is a bit complicated to be linked with linguistics and psychology in terms of consistent references. However, linguist researchers have relied on this as a starting point to understand the VL as a way of assuming its implantation. VL is an intrinsic feature of the human being. It can be used in newspapers, conversations, business affairs, and sciences. However, scholars have not paid much attention to it from a pragmatic perspective. VL could be a good command for some functions of the language as it gives teachers full of awareness to help students communicate with full of communicative competence. The weakness of VL is that sometimes the listener has misunderstood the speaker. The ambiguity could lead to severe problems as the semantics are not clear. Based on the foregoing, the authors believe that a systematic conceptualization of VL is needed to create a better understanding of vagueness for interested readers and other researchers (Zhang, 2011).

2. Methodology

The authors used the integrative literature review to identify a central issue in the area and present a conceptual framework for readers (Russell, 2005). The integrative design is mainly used to theoretically understand the gaps in the field and links between related areas. The authors first formulated the aim of the paper, i.e. vague language in the elements of the language, then gathered secondary data published by previous research and commented on their results from a theoretical point of view. Hence, the authors finally considered all topics discussed in the paper. The outcomes are a significant contribution to the term "vagueness". Equally important is to create a baseline reference for future work in the field of vagueness. This kind of qualitative research is the engine behind evidence-based outcomes Abuhamda et al. (2021).

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

3.1 Vague language theory

Why is it complicated to define?

Recent theoretical developments have revealed that VL can be defined in various ways due to its broad coverage of domains. Unsurprisingly, it is commonly believed that using vagueness in spoken or written language is a negative feature. Junker et al. (2003, p. 1737) bring some information about the background of the vagueness. They stated 'a deplorable deviation from precision and clarity. However, exceptional cases such as scientific explanations must be clear and precise. The opposing view of vagueness is slightly related to the western tendency to describe the truth (Kenney & Smith, 2010).

Scholars agree that a positive world description should be readable and clear for the person. However, any language around the world occurs in fewer rigorous places. Although this is true, a specific quantity of vagueness is acceptable in daily situations or probably wanted in rich and creative areas such as literature and arts.

However, this attempt to define vague is slightly repetitious. Nonetheless, this attempt is generally viewed as an influential outset point. It is additionally not legitimate as an authority on what VL should be clarified and analyzed. Drave (2001) characterized VL as which adjusts a language specialist's thing, state, or articulation to create an ambiguous meaning (Dave, 2001, p.25).

The last attempt to define VL is quite acceptable since somebody may sometimes learn that they are utilizing vague and may have a remarkable opinion about why they are ingesting. However, a person sometimes might not be unaware that they are using vague in their speech or written text. Moreover, the latter definition is still pretty comprehensive because the

phrase or word that does not particularize precisely which part of speech or semantic part is utilized to produce something less specific. Vague can be narrated in terms and described by the body. Sentences would contain lexical items, styles, questions, statements, and intonation. Ismail & Sharan (2020) stated, "it is often believed that literature is rich in linguistic knowledge and has been proved as a good source of well-developed structure". We can understand that sentences are rich in linguistic sources. By the same token, body language involves feelings in the eyes or movements of some body parts. We cannot consider the foregoing as a comprehensive definition but it is an adequate description that can be used to present further information in this paper.

We believe it is a bit complicated to connect vague to specific domains or approaches because it simultaneously covers many topics in linguistics and psychology (Cutting, 2007).

The researchers found an interesting study that supports these claims done by Grice in 1989. The study focused on the real thoughts and intentions that the speaker holds during their speech. The study tried to cover all possible meanings a speaker might mean but not exactly said. However, Grice found that different speakers share the same norms, enabling them to understand each other (Grice, 1989). Later, in the 1990s, a comprehensive study suggested that these norms might not be appropriate or accurate (Neale, 1992).

Think about the recipient's commitment to figuring out which implications are connected and can be added to the conversation. This comprises a slight association between semantics and pragmatics in the importance of joint conversation among speaker and audience.

People think vague and bad languages are similar to each other, but some differences exist. As mentioned earlier, VL allows the speaker not to commit themselves or not to sound too definite. While as bad language happens when the speaker vulgar language that could be hectic and hurt the listener. Bad language is also known to alter our behavior. Bad language also provokes a physical response.

All in all, among the different definitions of VL, we believe it includes both words and phrases that do not deliver the exact meaning. They are not exact words and are not precisely used in the text. The writer uses them in the essay when they lack knowledge and are unsure about a specific point. The lack of information and small details lead the writer to use VL, this usually happens when two friends are talking or in informal speech, whereas other people use it to pass the time during the conversation.

3.2 Usage in communication

It is widely considered that language should be exact and that ambiguity should be avoided at all costs. Several linguists, however, have critiqued this idea as being excessively simplistic in its approach to language. Stubbs claims, as cited above, that accurate language is not necessarily more effective than imprecise language. Moreover, vague is not a derogatory word when used as a technical term. For the most part, vague terms suffice, and excessive specificity is time-consuming. It is simple to spot situations where it's more or less acceptable. Vagueness is not just a natural aspect of language, but it is also, and more importantly, a technique in speech. People are presented with various communication aspects, some intentionally unclear. Changing the level of vagueness can aid the addressee in making the intended representations of entities and events and drawing the expected conclusions from them. We will concentrate on four communication activities that frequently occur in ordinary talks. Speakers must first develop a means to elicit suitable mental images of the things to discuss. Speakers commonly utilize natural language terms to quantify, even if they are not precise. However, these ambiguous statements may convey distinct meanings when compared to exact figures. Finally, speakers frequently seek to express a propositional attitude toward the content. They may want to communicate their confidence in a claim or their scenario assessment. Gonçalves (2020) stated that improving communication in the classroom would encourage students to engage themselves in the learning material.

Gonçalves believed that using technology would enhance communication among students. Silva et al. (2022) agreed with the previous work. They found that using technology has successfully helped teach history to students. Communication through technology has proved itself a successful tool for clear communication.

3.3 Vague language in gender

According to Boakye (2007), there are gender disparities in the use of ambiguous language. In comparison to their male counterparts, women employed more ambiguous expressions. Certain vague expressions were preferred by both males and females, indicating gender construction. Men, for example, employed more ambiguous additions in their sentences, whereas women used more hedges. The difference and dominance theories are used to try and explain these preferences. It was also discovered that within these academic contexts, the normally formal context of meetings operated informally. The level of distance in associations and the recurrence of collaboration among partners are two factors for the informality prevalent in academic gatherings. A study that used questionnaires found disparities in ambiguous language usage between the two genders on certain issues. This showed a possible gender construction hint. For instance, boys were more touchy to some items when utilizing VL, though females were less delicate to other items. A consistent and fixed female adherence to informality explains the differences between girls' and boys' reactions to the questionnaire items. On the other hand, good manners did not arise as a predominant characteristic, since neither the boys nor the girls in the sample considered politeness an essential capacity of utilizing VL. (Boakye, 2007).

According to several studies, women are more likely to employ ambiguity. Concerning the assumed superiority of the male, men are regularly expected to be strong and positive, while women are relied upon to be bashful and dubious. Language and gender are now considered with considerably more variety and complexity, with much more room for choices to suit diverse settings (Peter, 2018).

3.4 Vague language in culture

According to intercultural communication studies, people from all cultures employ ambiguous language from time to time, but still, we can notice different behaviours in terms of linguistics and culture (Alkhatnai, 2017). In this globalized world, the interaction between cultures is increasingly intensified due to the development of media and technological devices. This advancement has led to breaking the borders, and people interaction has increased significantly. Thus, people from different cultures and backgrounds try to communicate yet they fall to deliver the meaning clearly due to language barriers, one of which is vague (Silva and Coutinho, 2022). Other scholars call to translate vague terms to make communication easier (Azari and Halimi, 2019). Corpus linguistics is a common tool for investigating this and other types of language variation. This phenomenon refers to the quantitative and qualitative analysis of data obtained from audio or video recordings of men and women talking.

3.5 Vague language in press releases and speeches

An interesting argument by Milanović and Milanović (2010) stated, 'hedging' is a means of expressing a broad remark to avoid committing to a single idea to balance. As a result, this journalistically is common in VL. Economists analyzing crises are aware that their work may be contentious, causing readers anxiety and tension. According to Milanović and Milanović (2010), 'hedging' is a means of expressing a broad remark to avoid committing to a single idea and to make a balance. As a result, it is another example of journalistically common ambiguous language. According to an empirical study of economic news coverage during the global financial crisis in 2008, hedges are somehow used to limit the extent of what is recommended to avoid mistakes (Milanović and Milanović, 2010). Economists analyzing crises are aware that their work may be contentious,

causing readers anxiety and tension. A recent study based on cross-cultural reporting of English news in China found that news in either language regularly violates all of the Gricean maxims listed above and that news story writers used VL in various ways and for various purposes. Most of these involved creating artistic effects or managing the reader's comprehension and emotions. They aimed to make the reader think about the news while avoiding violence (Pan, 2012). That is an example of vagueness that has been utilized for a variety of objectives in relatively formal written writings. Ewata (2021) study aimed at studying the VL of Nigerian presidents' speeches. They tried to analyze the frequency of terms and phrases produced by Nigerian presidents. Their study found that the presidents used vague quantifiers and linguistic approximators on different occasions. The reason for using these quantifiers and linguistics, according to Ewata, was to create a common ground with the listener and engage them in their speech.

3.6 Vague language in education

Another topic worth exploring is English pedagogy, which relates to students who are studying English and its language skills. It is fairly easy to acquire the formulaic extensions and tags that express ambiguity in language, but using these aspects of discourse naturally without communication breaks is a more advanced skill. Because of the asymmetry between native speakers and teenagers or adults learning a second language, the use of ambiguous language always carries the risk of misinterpretation or pragmatic failure. Each discussion is based on various contextual elements, such as the speaker's personality and past, as well as details such as the talk's time, place, topic, and aim. In recent comparative research by British and Taiwanese students using three types of vague expressions: a) vague categories, b) approximations and c) hedging, some quite different results were obtained (Lin, 2013). The frequency with which these categories were used and how they were used were found to be significantly different in this study. Further research, ideally across different cultural groups, seems to be needed to examine this issue of ambiguous language use by different cultural groups (Peter, 2018).

Some scholars recently stated that VL helps English learners to speak easily due to the variety of available vague words to express their ideas. Hereupon, it is recommended to use vague because it makes their speeches natural and productive Samigoullina (2020).

4. Discussion

The usage of VL reveals that VL's purpose is to fill lexical gaps and to create relaxing and friendly negotiations. VL appears as a valuable tool to enrich communication in business, education, and so on. According to the works mentioned above, we can say that VL is a broad subject and can be one of the relevant topics for investigating research in linguistics, language teaching, advisement, and mass media. This paper explored the role of VL in diffident aspects such as communication, gender, culture, press, and education. Few studies investigated the influence of these aspects on the usage of VL. From the analyses of this study from various aspects, VL is not just an undesirable language for speakers and writers. It is often strategically chosen by speakers to convey meaning to guarantee successful communication. Communicative aspects of vagueness in speech are another key role VL plays as part of everyday language. The study has also highlighted the theoretical background of VL. The VL is used as one of the tools for learning a second language to communicate with others. Also, the VL can provide structural management of interaction between participants of communication. This paper has attempted to give some suggestions from the above analyses (paper sections) that would be useful for improving language learning. First, the teacher needs to give more attention to teaching the practical usage of VL, such as definitions, functions, and purpose in the context. Second, to understand the student's needs and difficulties in recognizing the particular type of VL and the reason why such type of VL is challenging for them. Third, to motivate students to read materials that contain VL. VL is everywhere, from academic works to everyday speech, television, business, and commercial issues. Mastering VL must be a priority, and it must

not be shadowed by the teaching only detailed vocabulary and grammar. Moreover, the VL can contribute to a significant effect on the communication process. The other significant trend observed concerns that VL can serve resemblance, emphasizing quantification and approximation, uncertainty, or self-protection.

5. Final Considerations

We investigated the role of using VL to facilitate the usage of VL in different aspects of life. The VL is appropriately used in all fields. It functions to help the speakers supply the number of information when a specific number is lacking. Additionally, VL can hedge the uncertain statement so that the participants (speaker/writer and listener/reader) of communication do not claim that the information is unfaithful. Consequently, VL skill is part of any language competence and an important communicative tool. Above all, VL is currently used by many professionals such as journalists, lawyers, TV presenters, and daily life conversations. It also helps distinguish social psychological aspects of human relations and utilize speakers or writers to form and maintain proper communication. We can state that VL is the modern language of communication that allows one to speak naturally in the view of various life circumstances. This paper offered the chance to conclude that language teachers can help learners by allowing them to use VL everywhere and accept VL as an integral part of the language mastering that helps the development of communicative skills of the speakers.

Recommendations for further research

6. Recommendations

This study introduced VL from different social aspects of usage. However, further research can investigate analyzing VL from linguistic perspectives, such as the frequency and pattern of VL in standard and nonstandard language knowledge. VL is quite interesting, so foreign language teachers can involve students to identify and discuss through various types of materials such as movies, YouTube videos, games, and dictionaries for better communication skills and correct utilization. In reality, people used VL more frequently and spontaneously when chatting, discussing different types of topics, expressing opinions and ideas, and even giving public speeches. We recommend using VL in foreign language classes because it allows learners to comprehend text content in a foreign language properly. It reduces stress during reading and speaking activities.

We hope that this paper will help enhance awareness about a foreign language element, and this paper can be a valuable reference for students for the following reasons:

- promotes VL language awareness;
- provides ideas about communication competency;
- helps to distinguish VL in conversation;
- sets up a general pattern of VL in linguistics and language education.

Generally, competency in VL provides notions to generate a design of language materials to enhance students' pragmatic competence for developing the clustering VL model. According to new foreign language teaching trends, teachers must present VL as one of the language elements. These activities can prevent cultural and linguistic miscommunication and misunderstanding. The main idea for further research is to confirm that the VL's role includes communication, and it needs to combine VL instruction in language education. Speakers in the same language are recommended to avoid using vague words for an adequate understanding.

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