

On the Translation of Vague Language in International Business Negotiations from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

Successful international business negotiations are vital for the integration of the global economy. To avoid misunderstandings that can harm both parties, it's crucial to communicate with precision and clarity. However, vagueness can sometimes be beneficial in negotiations. The challenge is in effectively using and translating vague language, especially across different cultures. Further research is necessary to understand the application of vague language in cross-cultural communication in international business negotiations, as it has both practical and theoretical significance.

This study explores the use of vague language in international business negotiations from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. It thoroughly analyzes the practical purposes of vague language and uses relevant examples to support its claims. Additionally, the paper delves into the translation strategies of vague language in international business negotiations. The results of the study indicate that translators should consider the cultural differences between various countries and regions and adjust their translation strategies accordingly. These strategies include explicit and implicit translation, equivalent translation, omission translation, relevance translation, and communicative translation to cross the barriers of cultural differences as far as possible and to promote cross-cultural communication and trade.

Keywords: intercultural communication, international business negotiations, vague language, translation strategies

1. Introduction

With the increasing momentum of global economic integration, economic activities among countries and regions worldwide have become interdependent and interrelated, forming an organic whole on a global scale. In this objective process of world economic development, business negotiations between countries and

between regions have increased significantly, becoming a crucial component in the global business landscape today. International business negotiation refers to the process in which different stakeholders in international business activities negotiate on various terms of a transaction to reach an agreement. It serves as an indispensable means to adjust and resolve the inevitable economic interest conflicts

between governments and business entities of different countries and regions.

Negotiators in international business negotiations represent the interests of different countries and regions, with distinct social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds. Their values, ways of thinking, behavioral patterns, languages, and customs vary significantly, rendering the factors influencing negotiations more complex and the negotiation process more challenging. In international business negotiations, one party often finds it inconvenient or unwilling to disclose its actual intentions to the other due to various hidden reasons. Under such circumstances, both parties may break certain rules of the cooperative principle and use vague language to gain more time for themselves, thereby creating favorable conditions for further negotiations and ultimately maximizing their interests. However, due to the linguistic and cultural differences across countries and regions, mistranslations of vague language in cross-cultural translation often lead to misunderstandings or even conflicts between negotiating parties, becoming obstacles to cross-cultural business negotiations. Therefore, to enhance the understanding and effective application of vague language in international business negotiations, this paper first elaborates on the relevant concepts of vague language, then further analyzes the pragmatic functions of vague language in international business negotiations, and subsequently expounds in detail the translation strategies of vague language in this context. It also explores how translators and international business negotiators can bridge the cultural gaps between different countries and regions to convey the connotations of vague language in international business negotiations in a tactful, polite, flexible, and efficient manner, thereby promoting communication and cooperation in international business activities from the perspective of cross-cultural communication.

1.1 Research Object

The research object of this study is vague language in international business negotiations. In the modern international economic community, transactions usually require going through long and complicated negotiation processes. Although it is generally believed that the success or failure of a negotiation is ultimately determined by factors such as the quality of goods provided in the transaction, the

advancement of industrial technology, or the reasonableness of product prices, in actual business activities, the success or failure of a transaction often depends largely on whether the negotiation is successful. The basic procedure of international business negotiations consists of four distinct stages. Throughout this process, both negotiating parties often need to employ flexible negotiation techniques and adopt continuously adjusted negotiation strategies to achieve the optimal negotiation outcome. In business negotiation activities, the focus lies on “negotiating”—this means that language plays a crucial role in this process, while also involving a series of language application skills and pragmatic functions.

However, in international business negotiation activities, due to the different cultural backgrounds and the disparities in their respective business environments, the two negotiating parties often fail to achieve a high degree of consistency in their cognitive understanding of transaction matters and emotional resonance. This implicitly adds an obstacle to the negotiation and cooperation between the two sides. Therefore, in business negotiation activities, precise language sometimes fails to exert its inherent positive effect; on the contrary, in specific situations, the other party will neither sincerely recognize nor accept it, and it may even further lead to intense disputes and conflicts. Under such circumstances, to ensure the smooth progress of the negotiation, both parties will tactfully and skillfully use a large amount of vague language. By perceiving the hidden meanings behind the other party’s vague language, carefully analyzing the other party’s attitudes and intentions, they will eventually take corresponding measures to ease the negotiation atmosphere and promote the smooth conclusion of the transaction between the two sides. Nevertheless, in cross-cultural communication, the linguistic and cultural differences between the negotiating parties are likely to lead to mistranslations of vague language, resulting in unnecessary misunderstandings and conflicts between the cooperating parties, which is detrimental to cross-cultural business communication and cooperation. Therefore, the research on the translation of vague language in international business negotiations is of great significance and value both theoretically and practically.

1.2 Literature Review

This section provides a review of domestic and international research findings on vague language. British philosopher Bertrand Arthur William Russell (1923) pointed out that human language is more or less vague—this marked the initial formation of the vagueness theory. Austrian philosopher Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein concurred with Russell's view, arguing that although many commonly used phrases are ambiguous, they can still be properly used by people as long as they fulfill their intended functions. American computer scientist Lotfi Zadeh (1965) proposed the “fuzzy set” theory; subsequently, linguists applied this theory to study linguistic vagueness from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives, gradually developing a new interdisciplinary discipline—fuzzy linguistics. In China, the study of Chinese fuzzy linguistics originated in the late 1970s. In his paper *A Preliminary Study of Vague Language*, Wu Tieping (1979) was the first to apply the vagueness theory to the study of linguistic vagueness—a contribution generally acknowledged as symbolizing the birth of fuzzy linguistics in China. Since then, Chinese researchers have published approximately 800 papers on fuzzy linguistics, greatly expanding the scope of China's linguistic research. In their work *Linguistic Vagueness and Translation*, Mao Ronggui and Fan Wuqiu (2005) pointed out that linguistic vagueness influences our translation principles: instead of blindly pursuing “fidelity”, we should adopt flexible approaches to translate vague language. They summarized four main translation techniques, namely “translating precision with precision”, “translating vagueness with precision”, “translating precision with vagueness”, and “translating vagueness with vagueness”. Yu Fubin (2000), in his *Vague Language and Translation*, explored the correlation between vague language and translation in detail, focusing on three basic translation methods—“using vagueness to render concreteness”, “using vagueness to render vagueness”, and “using concreteness to render vagueness”—with the aim of providing research insights into such translation theoretical issues as “literal translation” and “free translation”.

Through a review of relevant literature, it is found that there is a wealth of existing research on vague language. Most scholars have studied the translation strategies of vague language

from different perspectives, such as translatology and Skopos theory. By examining vague language in various contexts and texts, these scholars have proposed a series of translation principles and methods, laying a solid foundation for future research and inspiring other scholars in the field.

However, despite the richness of existing studies on vague language and its translation, research that focuses on the translation of vague language in international business negotiations from the perspective of intercultural communication remains relatively insufficient. Given the prominent role of cultural differences in international business negotiations and their direct impact on the understanding and translation of vague language, this research gap limits the practical guidance of existing translation theories for cross-cultural business negotiation practices.

Therefore, this study will focus on the translation of vague language in international business negotiations from the perspective of intercultural communication, and analyze whether translators adopt appropriate translation strategies and techniques in translating vague language to facilitate international business communication and cooperation. This research is expected to complement the existing body of knowledge by integrating intercultural communication theories with vague language translation studies, and to provide more targeted practical guidance for translators and business negotiators engaged in cross-cultural business activities.

2. Vague Language in International Business Negotiations

2.1 The Definition of Vague Language

The research on vague language has a long history, and the value of vague language has been recognized for various reasons. However, different linguistic disciplines hold different definitions of vague language, making it difficult to provide an accurate definition for it. Regarding the definition of vagueness, the linguistic philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce argued that when a thing exhibits several possible states, even if the speaker has carefully considered these states, they still cannot definitively determine whether to exclude these states from a certain proposition or attribute them to it. In such cases, the proposition is vague. Bertrand Russell, a British logician and

founder of analytic philosophy, pointed out that in our daily lives, there are numerous vague words, which are frequently used in our descriptive or narrative discourses, such as “long”, “short”, “fat”, and “thin”. Except for logic and mathematics, which are primarily characterized by rigor and precision, all other existing fields are often marked by uncertainty. Therefore, Russell believed that vagueness is analogous to a non-simple one-to-one relationship, but rather a system of one-to-many relationships.

2.2 The Relationship Between International Business Negotiations and Vague Language

In terms of category, international business negotiations are an extension of domestic business negotiations. As the name suggests, they refer to the behavioral activities in which stakeholders from two different countries or regions engage in continuous communication and consultation around the relevant key items of a specific transaction, and finally reach an agreement recognized by all parties involved in the business activity. In essence, international business negotiations are cross-cultural in nature. Differences in social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds increase the difficulty of international business negotiations and make the negotiating factors more complex. Therefore, higher requirements are placed on the negotiators’ language application skills and cultural literacy. Chen Hong (2011) pointed out that a flexible response style which is vague yet infinitely appealing also constituted one of the forms of “tactful replies”. The effective use of vague language, as a negotiation strategy and method, plays a positive role in both clarifying issues and easing the negotiation atmosphere when the negotiation reaches a deadlock or when conflicts of opinion arise among negotiation participants. Conducting research on the integration of vague language and international business negotiations not only helps enrich the research results of vague language and expand our research perspective on this linguistic phenomenon, but also achieves more positive business communication effects. By further understanding and mastering the practical application of vague language in business communication, business professionals can consciously and effectively use vague language to achieve the goal of successful cross-cultural communication.

3. The Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language

in International Business Negotiations

Relevance Theory holds that in verbal communication, the words expressed by the speaker require the listener to make a certain amount of effort to comprehend. The listener not only needs to understand the literal meaning of the utterance but also capture the relevant implications of the discourse; this is conducive to the continuous and smooth progress of communication. In cross-cultural communication, especially in scenarios such as international business negotiations, the speaker must, based on the listener’s reasoning ability and knowledge scope, use vague language as a pragmatic strategy in specific contexts. This practice serves to fulfill pragmatic functions such as being euphemistic and polite, maintaining flexibility, and self-protection. Ultimately, it enhances the negotiation efficiency of stakeholders and provides support for cross-cultural business negotiations.

3.1 The Function of Euphemism and Politeness

To further enhance the politeness and euphemism of negotiation language, vague language plays a crucial role in international business negotiations. Lian Tianxue (2017) proposed that during the process of business negotiations, all parties should abide by the politeness principle. In this regard, the application of vague language could achieve the effects of being polite, euphemistic, indirect and appropriate. In the process of cross-border communication, the core idea of the politeness principle is to strive for the other party’s benefits as much as possible and maximize their interests, thereby making the other party feel respected and facilitating the establishment of sustainable and sound interpersonal relationships. In specific business activity cases, the use of vague language undoubtedly embodies the concept of civilized and friendly communication: when the two parties hold conflicting positions, vague language allows for the avoidance of explicit expression of opposing views; instead, it enables the presentation and exchange of information in a gentlemanly and non-confrontational manner. This not only prevents hurting the other party’s feelings but also avoids the negotiation from reaching a deadlock.

Example 1: “I have good reason to assume that if your pricing are favorably competitive with those of other suppliers, we may make ongoing

purchases with you.”

In this case, “have good reason”, “favorably”, and “other” are merely vague expressions, whose purpose is to reduce the sense of coercion inherent in the otherwise challenging negotiation content. Since it is inferred that the other party’s quotation is too high to reach an agreement, the term “favorably” euphemistically and implicitly requests the other party to lower the price. “Other” implies that the buyer has conducted market research prior to the negotiation and is well-acquainted with market prices. This also means that if the seller refuses to lower the price, the buyer will seek alternative suppliers, carrying an implicit implication of potential risk. The use of “have good reason” indicates that the buyer, in order to avoid the disruption of transactions between the two parties, adds a layer of sincerity to the negotiation discourse. By using these vague expressions, the buyer avoids explicitly opposing the other party’s pricing; meanwhile, it also makes the threat of seeking other suppliers less conspicuous, which constitutes a more friendly, implicit, and effective statement.

3.2 The Function of Flexibility and Adaptability

In business negotiations, the most crucial point is to strive to facilitate transactions in a harmonious and friendly atmosphere. This is particularly true for cross-border transactions: given that they involve more subtle factors—including differing cultural mentalities, social codes of conduct, and value systems—their complexity is significantly heightened. In such contexts, the use of vague language not only enriches the conduct of business activities but also enables all stakeholders to foster collaborative relationships based on dynamic market changes and economic objectives. During the course of business negotiations, vague language can adjust the rhythm of conversations while also influencing the way proposals are presented.

Example 2: “All the documents that are now accessible have previously been reviewed, and we unexpectedly discovered that each one encompasses more or less dubious aspects.”

As described, the speaker making the comment was expressing their disappointment with the test results. By inserting vague expressions such as “unexpectedly” and “more or less”, the entire statement became more coherent and appropriate. This not only facilitated the other

party’s understanding and acceptance but also avoided the harm to the emotional rapport between the two parties that blunt language would have caused. In negotiation scenarios like this, vague language could obviously preserve the “face” of business participants in the negotiation, reserve sufficient buffer space and thinking time for the interlocutors, and achieve the positive effect of clearly indicating the problem while flexibly avoiding conflicts.

3.3 The Function of Self-Protection

In the field of international trade and economics, the use of vague language plays a significant positive role in safeguarding one’s own interests under two specific circumstances. Firstly, when certain clients request that we assume specific responsibilities and risks, the use of vague language can greatly facilitate self-protection. Secondly, when the information we provide may inevitably have a negative impact on other clients, the use of vague language enables us to maintain a relatively advantageous position in future business activities.

Example 3: “The products we offer may represent the finest workmanship on the market throughout the world.”

Due to the ambiguous meaning of “may” in the aforementioned context, the supplier’s liability is significantly reduced. If the buyer later discovers another product of higher quality in the market, this often cannot serve as a ground for terminating the contract. Since “may” allows for interpretations of varying degrees, the seller has full discretion over the use of this term. Even in cases where the buyer accuses the seller of acts such as breaching good faith, the seller can fully leverage the ambiguity of “may” to achieve the goal of self-protection and minimize risks and losses.

4. Translation Strategies of Vague Language in International Business Negotiations

Words often acquire their true meaning only in specific contexts. Compared with bilingual proficiency, the translator’s level of cognitive understanding of two distinct cultures determines the quality of the translation to a certain extent. Vagueness is an inherent objective property of language. While it exerts positive effects, it also poses significant challenges to translators’ work: on the one hand, translators must take into account the specific business linguistic context; on the other hand, they need to integrate cross-cultural factors. In

international business negotiations, while using vague language cautiously, greater emphasis should be placed on the accurate translation of vague language. This not only affects the negotiation outcomes but also relates to the rights and obligations that stakeholders are obligated to undertake.

4.1 Explicitation and Implication

Explicitation is a direct and explicit translation strategy. Specifically, it refers to the practice where translators expand specific textual materials by adding content-related explanatory or connective words, thereby making the translated text more logical and easier to understand and accept. Implication, in contrast to explicitation, requires the appropriate omission of certain words or other elements during the specific translation process. Both explicitation and implication can be adopted as translation strategies in many economic tasks, but their specific application depends on the specific needs of the trade process.

The use of explicitation can largely bridge the cultural differences between participants in business activities, allowing for an intuitive understanding of the true meaning of the content. This is undoubtedly the most effective approach for revealing the hidden meaning of discourses. However, in some awkward business negotiation scenarios, implication is used more frequently, as it provides a safety net for relatively sensitive topics.

Example 4: “We provide direct services on a bimonthly basis for steamers departing from Shanghai towards Australia.”

Translation: 我们有从上海到澳大利亚的直达船，每半月一次。

Direct shipping from Shanghai to Australia is feasible, but the term “bimonthly” is ambiguous—it could refer to “每半月一次” or “每两个月一次”. In this case, the specific reference of “bimonthly” is relatively vague, which may lead to information confusion or even misunderstanding among the other stakeholders. Therefore, under such circumstances, we can adopt an explicit translation strategy centered on the semantic meaning of the source language. By accurately grasping the true trade information and based on objective facts, we can clearly and precisely interpret “bimonthly” as “每半月一次”. This decisively avoids semantic ambiguity and achieves information parity between the

negotiating parties.

Example 5: “We have scrutinized all the bottles and detected each of them was leaking.”

Translation: 我们已经检查了所有的瓶子，发现或多或少都在漏水。

To soften the tone of this statement, we can translate the phrase “each of them” as “或多或少”. By adopting the implication translation strategy, the original meaning is veiled and obscured, making the expression of the text more implicit and euphemistic. This mitigates the sharpness of the problem and preserves the friendly communication atmosphere essential for negotiations. While facilitating the listener’s quick comprehension of the discourse meaning, it also reduces the intensity of verbal stimulation. Undoubtedly, the effective application of the implication strategy significantly minimizes the arbitrariness of speech acts.

4.2 The Equivalence Translation Method

When translating vague language in international business negotiations, the Equivalence translation method can also be adopted based on specific contexts. This method involves replacing the vague language in the source language with vague language in the target language. While preserving the vagueness of the source text, it also takes the target language culture into account, thereby facilitating the other party’s reception and understanding of the information. Meanwhile, to reflect the vagueness of the source language, translators should prioritize literal translation as much as possible, under the principle of not altering the meaning of the source text.

Example 6: “We will prepare all the necessary documentation and present it to the responsible authority. And we will do it within three months.”

Translation: 我们将在三个月内准备所有必要的文件，并将其提交给主管部门。

In this example, the translator first identifies the vague phrase “do it within three months” in the original utterance, then adopts a literal translation approach to clearly convey the meaning of the source discourse in the target language. The Equivalence Translation Method effectively preserves the vague language in both the source language and the target language. If disputes arise among various stakeholders in subsequent business activities, the speaker—by

retaining the vagueness of the source language—can avoid many issues and liabilities, achieve effective self-protection, and ultimately gain greater verbal initiative in the negotiation and consultation between the two parties.

4.3 The Omission Translation Method

In business activities, vague language is applied in various negotiation scenarios. However, in certain contexts, vague language has little relevance to the core points of contention in the overall information and exerts no substantial impact on the negotiation content of stakeholders in terms of semantics. Therefore, on the premise of fully understanding the core information conveyed by the source language, translators can flexibly adjust their translation strategies and effectively apply the Omission translation method, appropriately omitting the translation of vague language in business negotiations. The positive effect of this approach is that it reduces translation efforts while conveying the core information concisely and clearly, thereby improving the efficiency of cross-cultural business negotiations.

Example 7: “The drug produced by our company can relieve some symptoms commonly associated with fallen arches.”

Translation: 我们公司生产的药物可以缓解足弓脱落的症状。

In this sentence, the two vague terms “some” and “commonly” are involved. However, during the translation process, we can find that these two vague terms have no impact on the overall semantics of the sentence; instead, they make the negotiation content more complicated and create an obvious sense of redundancy. Therefore, under such circumstances, translators may choose to omit these two vague expressions, or in some cases, make targeted revisions based on the language preferences of the negotiation counterparts.

4.4 The Relevance Translation Method

The Relevance Translation Method for vague language in business negotiations refers to a practice where, within a specific context, the translator first refines the source language information in the simplest and most direct manner, then conducts translation processing by integrating it with the specific cultural background of the target language. The core focus lies in reasoning about obscure concepts within the information and exploring the

meaning of vague language in its specific cultural context. Vague language in business activities can often provide both negotiating parties with more room for understanding and reflection, enabling the speaker to achieve a more desirable expressive effect than that of precise language. Therefore, correctly leveraging the relevance between the source language information and the other party’s psychological expectations is a key strategy that translators must grasp when translating vague language in cross-cultural business negotiations.

For instance, in business negotiations, negotiating parties often use the phrase “good quality and low prices” to make positive descriptions of a product’s quality and price. If this vague phrase is directly translated as “好的质量与低廉的价格”, the expression will appear rigid and unnatural, causing confusion in the information receiver’s understanding to a certain extent. However, if the translation is carried out by integrating the linguistic and cultural background as well as the expressive habits of the target language—taking Chinese as the target language here as an example—translating it as “物美价廉” not only conveys the core information concisely and clearly but also achieves a better reception effect. This makes the other party feel more approachable and effectively narrows the psychological and emotional distance between the negotiating parties. Chen Shanshan and Yu Peng (2015) pointed out that translators need to draw on the useful information of vague language, integrate various contextual factors, and identify the optimal relevance between the vague language in the source text and its context. Although language is subjective and translation is also a subjective process, the application of language ultimately needs to serve our objective context. This characteristic is particularly prominent, especially in business activities.

4.5 The Communicative Translation Method

The “communicative translation” theory proposed by Peter Newmark emphasizes the outcomes generated by information. Similarly, Eugene A. Nida, in his “dynamic equivalence” theory, also stresses the “equivalence between the response of the source text readers and that of the target text readers.” Vague language manifests itself at various levels such as phonetics, discourse, and text, which largely increases the ambiguity of negotiation

information. Zhao Junfeng (1999) argued that in economic and trade translation, translators should carefully analyze the source text, and on the basis of full comprehension and under the premise of conforming to linguistic conventions, properly convey the meaning of the source text. Therefore, when translating vague language in cross-cultural business negotiations, translators should prioritize the purpose of communication and the effects of information transmission, so as to avoid further ambiguities and conflicts between the negotiating parties. For example, consider the phrase “a hot dog”: if the stress falls on the first syllable (“hot”), the information conveyed refers to a type of fast food; if both words are stressed, the core meaning communicated is “a very hot dog” (referring to the animal).

Huang Haixia (2022) pointed out that in international business negotiations, negotiators should adopt different negotiation strategies based on distinct cultural characteristics. International business negotiations are a form of cross-cultural communication. Translators must proficiently master the linguistic and cultural backgrounds as well as the expressive conventions of different countries and regions to convey information accurately and effectively, thereby achieving the goal of successful communication.

Example 8: “The project went a bomb.”

The exact equivalent of “bomb” is “炸弹” in Chinese. However, this word carries distinct meanings in the cultural contexts of the United States and the United Kingdom. In the United States, “bomb” means “a thing that fails badly,” so in this linguistic context, the sentence translates to “这个项目太失败了”. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, “bomb” means “a successful thing,” making the sentence convey the meaning of “这个项目棒极了”. Therefore, in practical international business negotiation activities, translators must not only possess bilingual proficiency but also take into account the diverse social, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds of different countries and regions, and handle the translation of vague language with great caution. Otherwise, the information conveyed will be vastly different, which may hinder or even trigger disputes in international business negotiations within cross-cultural communication.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this study analyzes and explores the translation strategies of vague language in international business negotiations. Through the analysis of the above examples, the author draws the following conclusions: In cross-cultural communication, especially in scenarios such as international business negotiations, the use of vague language as a pragmatic strategy can achieve pragmatic functions including tact and politeness, flexibility, and self-protection. The study finds that when translating vague language in international business negotiations, translators, by fully considering the differences in cultural backgrounds between different countries and regions, appropriately adopt five translation strategies—namely, explicitation and implicitation, the Equivalence Translation Method, the Omission Translation Method, the Relevance Translation Method, and the Communicative Translation Method. These strategies help to overcome cultural differences to the greatest extent, convey the connotation of vague language in international business negotiations effectively and accurately, promote cross-cultural communication and trade, and also play a positive role in cross-cultural translation.

In international trade, the ability to express emotions effectively and maintain cooperative relationships constitutes a key factor in the smooth progression of business activities. The economic utility of language lies in the way various stakeholders leverage language to obtain expected economic benefits. Vague language in international business negotiations, by virtue of its unique pragmatic functions, is widely applied in foreign-oriented business activities. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on the research of translation strategies for vague language in international business negotiations. We should continuously develop new translation methods and techniques to translate vague language in business negotiations more accurately and effectively. This will not only promote the development of enterprises’ foreign trade and safeguard the interests of all stakeholders to the greatest extent but also facilitate communication and cooperation in international business activities from the perspective of cross-cultural communication.

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