

# An Interpretation of Relevance Theory on Vague Language in Business English Negotiations

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Received: February 18, 2020; Accepted: March 5, 2020; Published: March 10, 2020

## Abstract

With the globalization of the economy, the fuzzy language in business English negotiations is widely used. The motivation for negotiators to use fuzzy language is not to hide information, but to convey information more clearly. This article attempts to divide business negotiations into three stages: the beginning, the process, and the end. With fuzzy language in business negotiation as a corpus, this paper studies how people adapt to different contextual factors to regulate fuzzy language in the process of business English negotiations under the guidance of relevance theory so as to achieve the optimal contextual effect with the minimum effort.

**Keywords:** relevance theory, vague language, business negotiation, cognitive context, relevance

## 1. Introduction

As a linguistic phenomenon widely existing in the human communication, Linguistic ambiguity is an objective attribute of human natural language and one of the essential characteristics of human thinking. *On Vagueness*, published by British philosopher Russell in 1923, marked the preliminary formation of fuzzy language theory. In 1965, an article titled "Fuzzy Sets" published by Professor Zade of the University of California in the United States in the "Information and Control" magazine showed that human cognitive ability has a fuzzy nature, creating a new subject of fuzzy linguistics. In China, *Fuzzy Linguistics* by Professor Tieping Wu in Beijing Normal University in 1979 marked the birth of fuzzy linguistics in China. Later, linguists have applied this theory to the study of the linguistic ambiguity from the aspects of semantics and pragmatics. As English for specific purposes (ESP), business English should be in pursuit of accuracy, preciseness and clearness. However, fuzzy language is still widely used in every aspect of business English. Business negotiation is a microcosm of human communication and fuzzy language plays an irreplaceable role in business English negotiation. Therefore, the author makes use of fuzzy language in the area of business negotiations where fuzzy language is a pragmatic strategy for language users. Much progress has been done in the systematic descriptive study on the application, classification, characteristics and pragmatic functions of fuzzy language. However, little work is done in the internal mechanism of how negotiators can achieve an implicit, objective, rigorous and polite communication in order to achieve the best communicative effect. Pragmatic ambiguity is not a static concept, but a dynamic activity. It is a process of dynamic understanding of context and dynamic adaptation to semantics. Therefore, based on the three stages of business negotiation: the starting point, the process, and the end point, the author uses relevance theory to analyze the causes and effects of using vague language in business negotiations, and theoretically and objectively interprets vague language in business negotiations. The purpose of this research is to raise people's awareness of ambiguity in language and understand the theoretical basis for the generation of fuzzy language as well as its role in negotiations.

## 2. Relevance theory

Human communication is based on reasoning about other people's behavior. Message senders will produce stimulus for the content to be expressed through words or actions, and the receivers infer their meaning. Described in terms of relevance theory, it's called "Information Intent" (Zao Zeng, 2018). Relevance Theory is a communication theory proposed and developed by Sperber & Wilson on the basis of Grice's pragmatic criteria. It holds that the speaker's statement is similar to what he/she thinks, and the central principle of communication is the principle of relevance, which means that "every explicit communicative act is assumed to have the best relevance in itself." (Sperber, 2001, 158).

The communicative view of relevance theory regards verbal communication as a cognitive process of explicitness and reasoning, that is, the dynamic process of explicitness by speakers and inference by listeners. The realization of cognition lies in its relevance. Relevance theory has two important principles: ① the cognitive principle of relevance, that is, human cognition is always oriented towards the greatest relevance; ② the communicative principle of relevance, that is, every explicit communicative act should assume that it has the optimal relevance itself (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Reaffirming the communicative model of language, it considers that linguistic communication is a process from cognition to reasoning. Cognition needs relevance and relevance needs thinking and reasoning (Shan Li, 2019). Sperber and Wilson proposed the principle of maximum relevance and optimal relevance, which belongs to different fields. People pursue “maximum relevance” in the cognitive field and “the optima relevance” in the communication field. Their main difference is that they deal with problems from different angles (Aiping Mo: 2016, 156). Under the same conditions, the smaller the processing effort and the greater the contextual effect, the stronger the relevance.

### 3. Fuzzy Language and Relevance Theory

Vagueness is one of the essential attributes of language. Professor Tieping Wu pointed out: “The subject of language is vague. Even precise science cannot be separated from vague words.” (Tieping Wu, 1999). From this, we can think that ambiguity is the characteristic of the word itself and exists in all areas of life. From the perspective of relevance theory, fuzzy language has three characteristics: relevance, communicativeness, and contextual adaptability.

#### (1) Relevance of Fuzzy Language

Relevance theory treats language communication as a process of “mutual understanding” of cognition and reasoning. If the communicating party understands the meaning and intention of the other party, it can realize “mutual understanding” and achieve successful communication. However, in the actual communication process, the speaker chooses to use vague language to conceal his discourse meaning, and often achieves better pragmatic effects. Whether they are mutual or implicit understanding, the purpose is to make the discourse internally related. In order to reduce the effort put into understanding the discourse, the speaker must make the listener acquire sufficient relevance. The implication is to follow the principle of politeness, encourage the other party to find internally-related information, expand the other party's cognitive context, making the communicative purpose clearer.

#### (2) Communicativeness of Fuzzy Language

Fuzzy language is one of the tools for effective information exchange. In communication activities, people use vague language to effectively express the content and intention of communication, increase the flexibility of language and make the language more euphemistic, implicit and polite, thereby ensuring the smooth communication. At the same time, due to the existence of various differences in culture, national conditions, and regions, communication will produce semantic ambiguity and understanding bias. Therefore, vague language is used and generated in communication with strong communicativeness.

#### (3) Contextual Adaptability of Fuzzy Language

The meaning of fuzzy language is ambiguous and dynamic. Correct understanding depends on the context in which the two parties communicate. Therefore, fuzzy language has unique contextual adaptability. In communication, different cognitive environments and cultural differences make it necessary for both parties to adjust the way of speaking according to different contexts, and use the connection between meaning and context to adapt to the needs of communication so as to achieve smooth communication.

### 4. Fuzzy Language in Business English Negotiations

Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory provides a convincing explanation and description of fuzzy language phenomena. All human speech is the speaker's description or interpretation of the content represented by his own thoughts. Descriptive discourse expresses the truth conditions of propositions, while interpretive discourse expresses similarities in contents. If users of language need to control the language flexibly and express their thoughts and emotions fully and effectively, they must make use of the characteristics of fuzzy language. The communicator's speech must be similar to the interpretation of the thought, and the listener must rely on the relevance of the communicative behavior and constantly deduce it so as to obtain the meaning expected by the speaker.

#### (1) Starting Point of Business Negotiation: Cognitive Context

The traditional concept of context includes knowledge of language, context, world knowledge, social and cultural background, communication time and place, and way of speaking, but from the perspective of cognitive linguists, context should be a psychological phenomenon (Sperber and Wilson, 2001, 39). Once the facts of the objective world constitute psychological representations in the human brain and are further perceived or inferred by individuals, these facts form the human cognitive environment, which contains logical, encyclopedic, and lexical information. The facts perceived in these communications are the objective factors in the cognitive environment. In addition, they also involve the subjective factor, that is, the cognitive entity---people. Due to the different cognitive abilities of individuals, the understanding of the cognitive environment will also vary. However, the cognitive environments of different cognitive individuals can be intersected to form the cognitive environment shared by the two, and the overlapping parts constitute the cognitive context used by both parties in communication.

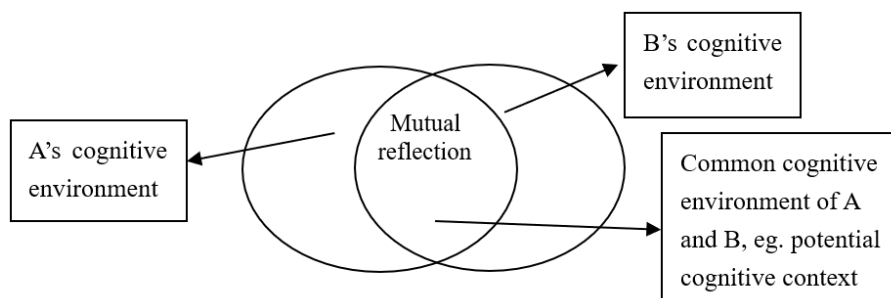


Figure 1.

As shown from the Figure 1, there is an overlapping of mutual reflection between A's cognitive environment and B's, which forms the common cognitive environment of A and B, potential cognitive context. It can be seen that the cognitive context used by the two parties in the communication process is only a part of the cognitive environment that manifests each other. When the facts or assumptions reflected in the cognitive environment of two parties are the same, an overlap of cognitive environment occurs, which constitutes a common cognitive environment for both parties in the communication. At this point, it can be concluded that the relationship between cognitive context and cognitive environment is as follows: cognitive environment is the background and the premise of cognitive context. The cognitive environment shared by both parties forms the cognitive context and is the starting point of communication. Relevance theory holds that context is composed of a series of incomplete propositions, and inference is needed to get a complete context. Cognitive context is not determined ahead of discourse understanding, but is the result of the listener's continuous choice in the process of discourse understanding. The listener needs to combine new information with a cognitive context composed of a series of hypotheses when processing it. In processing every new information, the structure of the listener's encyclopedic memory and the mental activities he/she engages in restrict the listener's choice of contextual assumptions. All the following examples are taken from the book *International Business Negotiation-Theory, Cases and Practices*.

Example (1):

A: *Would you drive a Mercedes?*

B: *I wouldn't drive any expensive car.*

B's answer provided A with an inferential cognitive environment, enabling A to obtain contextual information (explicit information) that "B does not drive expensive cars." A then confirms the contextual assumption that Mercedes is an expensive car from his own cognitive context. Consequently, A makes logical deductive reasoning based on these two assumptions, analyzes and infers from the information provided by B by explicit means that "Mercedes is an expensive car" in context. Therefore, the derivation of the contextual meaning of the dialogue is the searching process of the listener's cognitive context. In a common cognitive environment, the cognitive environment of the two parties in communication is manifested by each other, which means that they have a communication foundation composed of similar material environments and cognitive abilities. Speech communication itself is a dynamic process of deductive reasoning. The dynamic process of deductive reasoning determines the dynamics of context.

(2) Communication Process of Business Negotiation: Relevance Principle

Relevance theory holds that the understanding of dialogue should rely on context to find the relevance of information, and then make inferences based on the relationship between discourse and context to obtain

contextual effects. Relevance is determined by two factors: contextual effect and cognitive effort. In speech communication, people always maximize the contextual effect and minimize the reasoning effort to achieve the best correlation. Relevance principles include such two principles as cognitive principles, which means human cognition tends to coincide with the greatest degree of relevance and communicative principles, which means every discourse should be conceived as the optimal relevance of the discourse or action itself. In relevance theory, relevance is seen as a characteristic of utterances, thoughts, behaviors, situations, etc. that are input into the cognitive process (Yilian Peng, 2004). "Every explicit communicative action conveys the hypothesis of the greatest relevance" (Sperber and Wilson, 2001). The speaker has the intention to pass a certain hypothesis through discourse, and this hypothesis must be the one with the greatest correlation. The listener must find the best corresponding correlation hypothesis from his own cognitive context to match it. Therefore, context is chosen, not given, which can be represented by Figure 2. Speakers will combine the chosen cognitive context with the proposition to reason out the relevance, finally leading to the listener's understanding of the proposition, contextual effect.

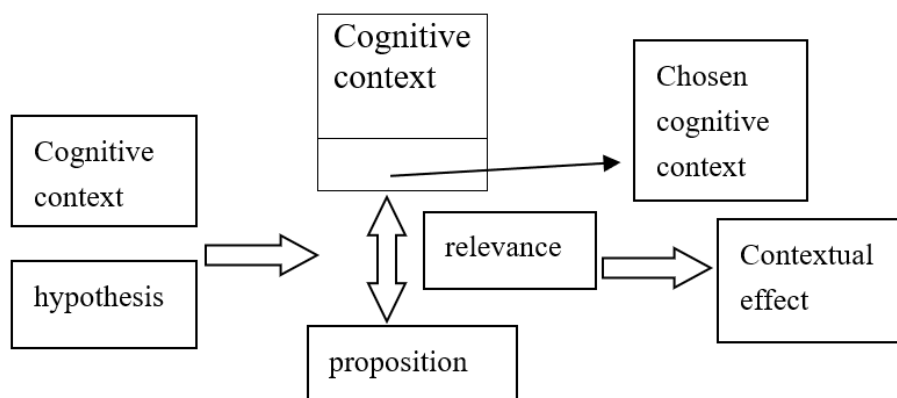


Figure 2.

As is shown in the figure, communication is not a simple process of encoding and decoding, but an explicit-inferential communication. Guided by the principle of relevance, the listener must find out the hypothesis that matches the new hypothesis from the old hypothesis manifested in his own cognitive context. After the human brain calculates and decodes the information, it can achieve the maximum effect with the minimum effort, which is the discourse understanding, or the communication process. Blackmore (1987) has proposed the semantic limitation of relevance, that is, by analyzing certain modal indicators, discourse connectives, etc., the listener is restricted in the assumptions made in the course of searching for its relevance and understanding in terms of quantity and scope in order to facilitate understanding. Therefore, the use of vague words such as “*acceptable*”, “*some discount*”, “*urgent need*” in business negotiation can provide the other party with the relevance of explicit communication, reduce the effort to understand, and achieve the optimal relevance.

Example (2)

*I think it's probable for us to buy elsewhere as your competitors are offering lower prices.*

The vague word “*probable*” indicates the uncertainty of the tone of the negotiator, which can make the other party feel that there may be other channels to obtain cheap and good products.

Example (3)

*Our products cover a wide range of farm uses and we have long enjoyed an excellent reputation with our customers.*

Example (4)

*As stated before, our vacuum air pots have been selling well in the world market owing to their fine quality and reasonable prices.*

The vague expressions “*excellent reputation*”, “*fine quality*”, and “*reasonable prices*” in Example (3) and (4) accurately convey the communicative intentions of the negotiator to the other party. No extra reasoning effort is required to know his intentions. For example, by using “*reasonable in price*”, the other party will understand “*reasonable*” as the price slightly lower than other suppliers, so the best communicative effect is achieved.

## Example (5)

*When the goods reach you, we feel confident you will be completely satisfied with them at the prices offered.*

The vague words “*we feel confident*” and “*completely*” show the authenticity of the stated content to the fullest, express the underlying information of the seller's preferential price, reasonableness and good quality of goods and reduce the time and efforts of the other party to reason, thus realizing the optimal relevance.

The use of fuzzy language is to control the listener's discourse understanding to a certain degree, so as to ensure that the listener puts as little effort as possible to find the relevance between the discourse and cognitive context. When the effort required to obtain these contextual effects is small, the hypothetical effect is personally relevant (Jianguo, Wang, 2009, 35). Therefore, the use of fuzzy language by the speaker is to form a certain restriction on the listener's understanding, that is, to ensure that the listener, after making as little effort as possible, looks for the relevance between the discourse and the cognitive context, thereby deriving the speaker's communicative intention.

## (3) End Point of Negotiation Communication: Contextual Effect

Contextual effect is the effect that the listener combines with new hypotheses or propositions under the guidance of the principle of relevance. Relevance theory holds that the receiver always pursues and follows the optimal relevance in communication, that is, in the cognitive process, the receiver strives to obtain sufficient contextual effects with minimal input. Human cognition is oriented towards relevance. The greater the contextual effect, the stronger the relevance between discourse and context. Whether a discourse can obtain contextual effects depends on three factors, the complexity of the discourse, the clarity of the context, and the effort the listener has made to reason about the contextual effects of the discourse. The listener always uses the minimum cognitive effort to obtain the most likely contextual hypothesis and the greatest contextual effect so as to gain the understanding of the discourse. Pierce pointed out that ambiguity does help achieve flexibility in various texts and introduces communication to a deeper level of meaning (Yunpeng Liu, 2018). The use of vague language in business negotiations allows the negotiating party to derive communicative effects that cannot be achieved by using precise language through the explicit expression of the optimal relevance (such as showing politeness, achieving self-protection, or enhancing the flexibility of linguistic expression, etc.).

## Example (6):

*Inquiries regarding our new product, the Deer Mountain Bike, have been coming in from all parts of the world. Reports from users confirm what we knew before it was put on the market---that it is the best mountain bike available.*

In example (6), the information that the listener extracted from the discourse was “*our product is very popular*”. In order not to let the other party know their sales channels, the information was obscured with “*from all parts of the world*”. Our intent was expressed clearly to the other party so that they do not need to make extra effort in understanding this sentence, producing the contextual effect that the speaker expects to indicate that his product is selling well.

In addition, when the other party is required to complete certain tasks, euphemisms such as “*if*” clauses, “*questions*”, and “*suggestions*” can be used to make the sentence sound polite, make the other party feel respected, and avoid coercion caused by direct statements.

## Example (7)

*If we can agree on these points A and B can immediately start to work up the standards for the wire pads.*

## Example (8)

*Would it be possible for you to start production before all of the fabric is complete so that you could ship some product sooner?*

## Example (9)

*I would suggest that you make it similar to the King size that you have done for the M1 and the M2.5.*

The “*if*” in Example (7) fully expresses the idea that he requires the other party to take action so that the other party can receive instructions quickly both emotionally and mentally. The similar management of events in example (8) and (9) can also make the other party truly feel the tasks that the speaker asks them to fulfil from the expressions, achieving the desired contextual effect of the speaker.

The purpose of speakers using fuzzy language is to minimize the efforts of the listener to understand the discourse and to maximize the contextual effect of the discourse.

### Example (10)

*We are sorry to say that your price is out of line with the prevailing market level. We are obtaining the same quality through other channels at a much lower price.*

Obscuring the latter sentence, the speaker guides the listener to combine the new information with his own known information, re-search for the relevant information between the discourse and the cognitive context and process the new information according to the context hypothesis in order to find the relevance of the discourse, which leads to the conclusion that the other party thinks the price is too high. The listener does not need to make extra efforts in understanding the sentence, making the discourse produce the contextual effect expected by the speaker. The use of fuzzy language by the speaker minimizes the effort of the listener's speech comprehension and maximizes the contextual effect of the discourse.

### 5. Conclusion

In summary, fuzzy language is common in business English negotiations with a unique communicative function. Different cognitive environments and cultural differences make different communicative parties' understanding of fuzzy language. Only when it is related to the context of the language can the best communicative effect be received. The use of fuzzy language can not only express the true intention and connotation of the speaker's message, but also enhance the euphemism and objectivity of the language, forming a good communication effect (Yinping Ji, 2018). Although the fuzzy language used by negotiators is implicit, the amount of information provided is more extensive. Realizing the internal mechanism of cognitive context, relevance and contextual effect during the negotiation, negotiators can make use of fuzzy language consciously and effectively so as to achieve the purpose of successful communication.

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