A Case Study on Rhetorical Vagueness in Press Conference Interpreting

XIA Hao
Sichuan University

While vague language study is flourishing, rhetorical vagueness, which stands between the studies of vagueness and rhetoric, is also worth researching. In China, after the introduction of studies on vagueness by Wu Tieping from the western world, more scholars have involved themselves in further studies of vague rhetoric. Rhetorical vagueness can be concluded as the study of using language vagueness to achieve special communication purposes. In press conferences, a large number of applications of rhetorical vagueness can be found. Therefore, a case study on press conference interpreting is included in research of rhetorical vagueness and interpreting. What are the major manifestations of rhetorical vagueness in press conferences? How to interpret them? What specific strategies can we choose? These are the questions the case study aims to answer. The structure of this thesis is: introduction of vague rhetoric, including definition, classification, as well as language vagueness study; the case study of government press conferences, in which different speeches will be analyzed; and then the conclusion of this case.
study. The research in this thesis is of both theoretical and practical significance, and could lead to more effective interpreting in press conferences.

Vagueness is a natural property of human language. There is no absolute accuracy in human language, and because people have limited and uncertain acknowledgement of natural objectives, the existence of vague language is not accidental, but inevitable. Vagueness is present in a great deal of language uses. People' interest towards vague language study arose in the 1960s.

Traditionally, two contradictory views exist in valuing vagueness: bad and good. Ullmann (1962) pointed out the inadequacy of language to express thoughts because of the lack of precision. He also noted that among poets and creative writers, vagueness is conversely an advantage.\[1\] Ullmann also suggests that some of the vagueness is inherent in the very nature of language, whereas others come into play in special circumstances. Thus divides vagueness into two aspects: inherent nature and circumstances-oriented. He attributes vagueness to four factors: \[1\] generic character of words; meaning is never homogeneous (i.e. it is context-bound); lack of clear-cut boundaries in the non-linguistic world; lack of familiarity with what the words stand for. Besides Ullmann, Deese (1974) proposed another approach to vagueness definition, who holds that vagueness is not inherent in our natural language, but in the structure of our ideas.\[2\] This notion pulls vagueness out of the language itself, but applies it to the content language expresses.

Different linguistics have different definitions of vague language from different perspectives, therefore, it is not easy to give a definite answer to what is vague language. The common notion is that vagueness arises from uncertain natural language, idea or thought. Maybe Joanna Channell’s conclusive notion of vagueness can lead to some systematic thoughts on vague language: an expression or word is vague if:

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

b. it is ‘purposely and unabashedly vague’

c. its meaning arises from the ‘intrinsic uncertainty’ referred to by Peirce. \[3\]

Rhetorical vagueness study is a sub-disciplinary study under rhetoric study and vague language study. According to Jiang Youjing in his book, “rhetorical vagueness is aimed at studying use of language vagueness to improve rhetorical effect of language use” \[4\], the subject of rhetorical vagueness study must be the language in use, but not the fixed nature of language-vague. According to Li Qianju
in his book, rhetorical vagueness is defined as “study on the method, rules of careful choosing and appliance of vague language to express meaning, exchange ideas, so as to improve rhetoric effect of language in use. It is a discipline under both rhetoric study and vague langue study.” Furthermore, according to Pang Jianrong, “Vagueness, in a certain sense, constitutes a substantial object of study in rhetoric.”

According to Jiang Youjing, rhetorical vagueness can be divided into positive and negative ones. In positive ones, the task is to analyze standard of best rhetorical effect of language in use and how to achieve effect when vagueness is needed. For negative ones, it mainly explores the reason for negative effect with vagueness and tries to avoid negative factors of vagueness in communication. Han Qinglin classifies it mainly into tow categories: stable vague rhetoric and temporary vague rhetoric. The former includes (1) vague nouns; (2) vague verbs; (3) vague adjectives; (4) vague adverbs or hedges; (5) Round numbers; (6) vague pronouns. Temporary rhetorical vagueness appeals to vagueness generated temporarily by word collocation. Some traditional rhetoric devices such as euphemism, metaphor, simile, etc fall into this category. Pang Jianrong expands rhetorical vagueness by adding purpose-oriented expressions for vagueness, such as indirect answers which gives implicature and the above rhetorical devices which avoid direct answers to some particular question. Here, vagueness is adopted for special communication goals and particular rhetorical effect. Hence, it also falls into vague rhetoric.

Drawing upon different ideas of scholars on vague rhetoric, first, there should be a working definition of “vague” for this thesis, a word, an expression or a particular way of talking is vague if: 1) itself is vague, no matter semantically, or with border-line cases, or is itself unclear or unfamiliar; 2) it can be replaced by another way of talking which is of greater precision; 3) it is unclear purposely or strategically for a special rhetorical effect. 4) indirect expression or implicature should also be included. Then, the working definition of rhetorical vagueness in this thesis can be identified as “utilization of language vagueness to achieve best rhetorical effect in language communication.” Here, some points should be noted:

1) The word “vague” is chosen instead of “fuzzy”, “general”, or “ambiguity” is because this thesis is not constrained as semantic study, but to study the use of rhetorical vagueness to achieve effective and special communication purpose, and its subject is language in use. So, vague is used in a broader sense, which includes all the aspects, such as fuzziness, ambiguity or generality.
2) There are numerous dimensions included in vague rhetoric, besides stable rhetorical vagueness and temporary rhetorical vagueness classified by Han above, some indirect expression or ways of talking with implicature are also included, such as proverb, hedge, and indirect question answering, which are all characteristic in press conference language.

3) The major rhetorical vagueness discussed in this thesis can be divided into following categories: 1. stable rhetorical vagueness (vague nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, numbers); 2. temporary rhetorical vagueness (metaphor, euphemism, irony and rhetorical question); 3. hedge; 4. proverb and evasion.

In language use, there are a great deal of vague words and expressions which can be recognized easily, like words expressing rough numbers, characteristics of objects, and words with vague definition. These words are vague themselves and sometimes function as vague modifiers to the central words. Used under certain circumstances such as the press conference, these words can reach dual rhetorical effect, which is to not only make a speech brief and without loopholes, but also to avoid offending others by specific questions. The following are the most commonly used vague words in press conferences:

Case 1: 反之，在这个时候，金融为经济建设提供了大量的贷款。这些数字你们都知道：去年 11 月份贷款 4700 亿元，12 月份 7700 亿元，今年 1 月份 1.62 万亿元，2 月份 1.07 万亿元。（Premier Wen Jiabao, press conference, 2009）

(Interpreting: As a matter of fact, at this point and time, China’s banking sector has extended a large amount of credit to boost economic development. You all know the figures: in November last year, new loans stood at 470 billion RMB Yuan, in December last year 770 billion, in January this year 1.62 trillion, and in February, 1.07 trillion.)

Vague Rhetoric: Approximating number;
Rhetorical Effect: to improve language efficiency
Interpreting Strategy: Literal Interpreting;
Interpreting Effect: Vague → Vague;

Here, numbers are used to describe the amount of loan from the banking system. Although numbers here seem to be precise, it actually is not very precise, which means it is not necessary to give a detailed number in such a circumstance. For greater language efficiency in press conference, approximating numbers with vague information are applied. When interpreting, literal interpreting is employed, this not only keeps fidelity, but also maintains language efficiency. In English, similar usage
can also be found.

Case 2: 我深知这件事情的困难。我曾经讲过，今年恐怕是中国经济最困难的一年。难在什么地方？难在国际、国内不可测的因素多，因而决策困难。
(Premier Wen Jiabao, press conference, 2008)

(Interpreting: I know fully well how difficult this task is. I once said this year could be the most difficult year for China's economy. Why? Because there are a lot of uncertainties both internally and internationally. It is difficult to make decisions.)

Vague Rhetoric: Vague noun;
Rhetorical Effect: to improve language efficiency and flexibility
Interpreting Strategy: Literal Interpreting;
Interpreting Effect: Vague → Vague;

“不可测的因素” here is quite vague in meaning. We can say it is a kind of generosity. On the one hand, the factors influencing economic growth vary from different perspectives, so it is impossible to consider all possible reasons, and it is inefficient for them to be interpreted one by one in a press conference. Here, using general term leaves a large room for listeners to speculate. On the other hand, because of changeable international situation, no one can accurately foresee what specific factors will emerge to hinder economic development; therefore, it is quite appropriate to use language vagueness here. When interpreting, using “uncertainty” which is also a vague noun in English, can keep the particular communication effect, the efficiency and flexibility of language, and the original meaning.

Case 3: 我和我在座的同事们都懂得一个道理：只有把人民放在心上，人民才能让你坐在台上。（Premier Wen Jiabao, press conference, 2008）

(Interpreting: All my colleagues present here and I myself know very well that only when you have the people in your heart will the people support you in your office.)

Vague Rhetoric: Vague Verb-Phrase;
Rhetorical Effect: implicit suggestion, speaker's wisdom and humor;
Interpreting Strategy: Free Interpreting;
Interpreting Effect: Vague → Clear;

“坐在台上” is a phrase typical of Chinese custom and culture, the interpreter chose to interpret it as “support you in your office”, considering its vague implicature can confuse foreigners and there will be a loss of information if literally translated. Premier Wen's wisdom and humor is fully reflected when he uses such a vague phrase to give an implicit suggestion to all his colleagues, the government
workers, and advises them to have people’s needs in their heart. If “坐在台上” is interpreted as “have a seat in the stage”, in English, people will not be able to receive its implicature. Therefore, sacrificing its vagueness, interpreter applied free interpreting, and turned vagueness into clarity.

Case 4: 我们对中国农村的改革和发展是有长远考虑的，这可以划分为两个阶段：第一个阶段……第二个阶段，就是实行工业反哺农业、城市支持农村的方针，对农民“多予、少取、放活”。(Premier Wen Jiabao, press conference, 2005)

(Interpreting: I do have a long-term plan for rural reform and the development. It has two phases. In the first phase, ……Second, in the second phase, we should make industry nurture agriculture and the cities support the countryside. We should give more, take less, and liberalize the countryside.)

Vague Rhetoric: Vague Verb;
Rhetorical Effect: speaker’s wisdom and language brevity;
Interpreting Strategy: Explanatory Interpreting; Addition;
Interpreting Effect: Vague→Clear;

“放活” is also a Chinese verb with unique Chinese political image and style without a clear object. The interpreter added an object and explained the meaning of this vague verb. If not, the literal interpreting “let alive”, which did not embody the same vague information in western country, people will definitely find it difficult to understand. Here, language brevity has to be sacrificed for a clear rendition, or, communication can not go on.

Use of metaphors can be explained in two accounts: first, the relation and borderline between the symbolized and symbol is vague, and people may have different interpretation of the metaphor; second, using metaphors can replace direct answers to some questions, and produce particular rhetorical effect which can not be achieved when explicitly spoken out. [9]

Case 5: 如果说安倍首相去年 10 月访问中国是一次破冰之旅，我希望我 4 月份对日本的访问将成为一次融冰之旅。 (Premier Wen Jiabao, press conference, 2007)

(Interpreting: If Prime Minister Abe’s visit to China in October last year can be termed as an ice-breaking trip, then I hope my visit to Japan in April will be an ice-thawing journey)

Vague Rhetoric: Metaphor;
Rhetorical Effect: implicit information, politeness;
Interpreting Strategy: Literal Interpreting;
Interpreting Effect: Vague → Vague;

Here, the image of ice is employed to describe overall relationship in the past between China and Japan, which was at the deadlock. In English, ice also embodies similar vague information. “破冰” actually implies the breaking of deadlock, and “融冰” means improvement in Sino-Japan relationship. Using metaphor, premier did not explicitly point out negative sides of the relationship between two countries, but strategically rendered this implicature. This is also more polite and indirect in handling country to country relationship. With similar vague rhetorical effect the word “ice” brings, the interpreter just used literal interpreting to maintain this vagueness and leave room for people to interpret.

Case 6: 一、二月份，电力增长 12%，但是却有 25 个省、市、区发生拉闸限电的现象，这就反映经济生活这根弦绷得还紧。(Premier Wen Jiabao, press conference, 2005)

(Interpreting: In the first two months of his year, power generation increased by 12 percent. Yet 25 provinces, including autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the State Council, experienced blackouts. In the economy, the supply chain is overstretched.)

Vague Rhetoric: Metaphor;
Rhetorical Effect: implicit information
Interpreting Strategy: Free Interpreting; substitution;
Interpreting Effect: Vague → Clear;

“经济生活这根弦” here is a metaphor with Chinese cultural characteristic, and the specific reason of this overstretched chain, that is the economic supply, is not mentioned. If literal interpreting is used, people can not understand the internal relationship. Therefore, the interpreter expressed the implicit information while not affecting the overall situation, and replaced the word “生活” with “supply” which can be easily understood.

Euphemism is a way of talking to avoid unsound and inelegant talking, while replacing it with mild, better-sounding, vague and indirect meaning. [10]

Case 7: 你说中国的中东问题政策好像不那么清楚，我估计有可能是因为在你听发言人孔泉讲话的时候，在忙什么别的事情。(Former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, press conference, 2006)

(Interpreting: You said China’s position on Middle East is not that explicit. I guess you were doing something else when the spokesman Kong Quan was talking).
Vague Rhetoric: Euphemism;
Rhetorical Effect: politeness; implicit criticism;
Interpreting Strategy: Literal Interpreting;
Interpreting Effect: Vague → Vague;

Euphemism here is of a little ironic nature in that Foreign Minister tries to be
both polite and a little ironic. When saying "in the white of certain things" actually implies a
little bit criticism to the reporter, but is much more polite than saying "you are out
of your mind". The interpreter chose literal interpreting, which makes it easy to
understand the implicature.

Rhetorical questions often appear in press conferences. When a rhetorical
question is given, no answer is expected. But people can understand easily the
speaker's intention or position by using rhetorical questions. The speaker doesn't
speak out his position or opinion, but throwing a rhetorical question to the audience.
By doing so, special effect is achieved.

Case 8: 首先，中国政府及各有关部门十分重视产品质量和食品安全。你讲
到的“饺子事件”是一起刑事案件，中国有关部门正在继续进行调查、侦查，
努力在破案。我们也一直表示中日双方要继续来合作调查。我想问一下，日本
有没有食品安全问题经过相当一段时间的艰苦侦查至今还没有破案的案子？我想
日本警方是不会放弃努力，会继续追踪到底，哪怕需要更多的时间也要把它破
案，这也是中方的决心。我想这一点日方应该理解，而且应该继续同中方合作。
我还认为，中日双方应该在食品安全问题建立长久的合作机制。这有什么不好啊？
我还想讲一句，希望记者们不要误解，中国的食品安全不是百分之百的，
但我是经常吃了中国的速冻饺子去出席外交活动，去出席记者会的。（Foreign
Minister, Yang Jiechi, press conference, 2009）

(Interpreting: First, I would like to say that the Chinese Government and relevant
government departments take food quality and safety very seriously. The dumpling
incident you referred to is a criminal case. The relevant Chinese departments are
still conducting the investigation and working hard to crack the case. We believe
that China and Japan should continue to cooperate in the investigation. I wonder if
there are food-related cases in Japan too, which after a long time of investigation,
still cannot be resolved. I believe the Japanese police will not give up their efforts
and will pursue the investigation until the cases are resolved. That is what we are
determined to do on this specific case. I think we should have the understanding of
the Japanese side on this point and the two countries should cooperate on resolving
the case to ensure food safety. And I also believe it is important that our two
countries establish a long-term cooperation mechanism on food safety. Isn't this a
good idea? I would like to make a comment here which I hope the journalists will
not misinterpret. I can't say that we don't have any problems at all in the food in
China, but I often have some Chinese-made frozen dumplings before attending
diplomatic functions or press conferences.)

Vague Rhetoric: Rhetorical Question;
Rhetorical Effect: Politeness;
Interpreting Strategy: Literal Interpreting;
Interpreting Effect: Vague→Vague;

Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi did not invite an answer to his question. By using
the rhetorical question, the answer is evident. Yang proposed his opinion in a less
direct and offensive way. The interpreter can simply produce a literal interpreting so
as to keep the original vagueness and particular effect.

According to Jiang Youjing, hedges exist outside the main sentence, and function
as a complementary part to the expressed meaning. Hedges don't modify sentence
like vague adjectives, but under certain circumstance, hedges can produce unexpected
effect. [11] In press conferences, there are numerous hedges, such as "我认为"，"在我看来"，"据报道"，"一般说来"，"我怀疑"，"也许这不相关，但是” and so on. These
hedges can make expressions more prudent with maneuver. When interpreting, literal
interpreting can maintain vagueness and achieve the original effect.

There are roughly two ways to interpret vague rhetoric, which is to interpret
vagueness into vagueness, or realize mutual transfer between rhetorical vagueness
and clear information expression. Because of great similarity between Chinese and
English vague rhetoric, rhetorical vagueness is likely to be interpreted into vague
language in English language, and vague effect can also be maintained. In this
process, interpreting strategies can include literal interpreting, addition or
substitution. For those rhetorical vagueness resulted from differences in cultures,
customs, legal systems or other factors between China and western country, the
interpreter should select free interpreting or explanatory interpreting to transfer
vagueness to clear information so that his interpreting can make sense, so, from this
point, vague effect must be sacrificed to a proper extent. Therefore, interpreters
should strike a balance between the vague effect of speeches and the
understandability of the information when encountering vague rhetoric.

Vagueness exists in every language and Chinese scholars have done much work
on vagueness in Chinese after western research was introduced to China. As a
research area overlapping between vague language study and rhetoric study, rhetorical vagueness has also become an area of research Chinese scholars have begun to study. Based on studies in vague language, and several Chinese scholars' literature on vague rhetoric, the author introduced a working definition of rhetorical vagueness in this thesis, and then made a detailed classification of vague rhetoric, which was later used as a theory foundation. Several government press conferences are selected in a case study, aiming to study the interpreting strategy to corresponding vague rhetoric. The author proposed two ways to deal with rhetorical vagueness interpreting, which is to keep vagueness and mutual transfer between vagueness to clarity. While the research is still limited in that rhetorical vagueness is studied here as an expanded area, which only emphasizes on press conference speeches, the interpreting study still lacks a theoretical framework under which interpreting strategies are studied.

Notes:
[1] Joanna Channell, *Vague Language*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000, 6.
[2] Ibid., 7.
[3] Ibid., 8.
[4] 蒋有经: 《模糊修辞浅谈》, 北京: 光明日报出版社, 1991 年版, 第 20 页。
[5] 黎千驹: 《模糊修辞学导论》, 北京: 光明日报出版社, 2006 年版, 第 3 页。
[6] Pang Jianrong, *Pragmatic Analysis of Rhetorical Vagueness*. Bei Jing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2007, 8.
[7] 韩庆玲: 《模糊修辞论》, 济南: 山东文艺出版社, 2006 年版, 第 41 页。
[8] Ibid., 42.
[9] Pang Jianrong, *Pragmatic Analysis of Rhetorical Vagueness*, Bei Jing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2007, 15.
[10] 王杰希: 《汉语修辞学》, 北京: 商务印书馆, 2004 年版, 第 302 页。
[11] 蒋有经: 《模糊修辞浅谈》, 北京: 光明日报出版社, 1991 年版, 第 70 页。

**XIA Hao**  Master candidate in the College of Foreign Language and Cultures of Sichuan University, majoring in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Academic interests cover the fields of English Interpreting and translation.