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978-1-107-02844-9 - Elastic Language: How and Why We Stretch Our Words

Grace Q. Zhang

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

If we accept that science is all about probabilities and in the eye of science nothing is certain, then it should not be difficult to accept that our language may express all kinds of uncertainty and fluidity.

The title of this book is ‘elastic language’ (EL, exemplified by *probably* and *maybe*), instead of ‘vague language’ (VL). Misconceptions about VL’s nature and function have resulted in some negative attitudes (Overstreet and Yule 1997b). The conventional term ‘vague’ has a somewhat negative connotation; replacing it with ‘elastic’ offers instead a positive representation of what this type of language really is. For the convenience and continuity of discussion, in this book sometimes EL and VL are, where appropriate, used interchangeably, especially when referencing VL-related literature.

Words are slingshots with a rubber band, and speakers ‘stretch’ their words to serve communicative purposes (Zhang 2011). We stretch them in both clear and unclear ways. As Sperber and Wilson (1985/86: 161) state, ‘the linguistic meaning is generally ambiguous, it may be elliptical or vague’. Language is inherently vague (e.g. Channell 1994; Peirce 1902; Rowland 2007), but this is not a deficiency. It occurs even in so-called ‘precise’ contexts such as mathematical language (Rowland 2007) and legal language (Cotterill 2007; Crystal and Davy 1969). Strategic use of language is essential in successful communication, and being vague is one of many strategies.

VL is not ad hoc; it is a pervasive phenomenon and an indispensable part of our language (Russell 1923). Channell (1994: 196), one of the earlier VL researchers, states that VL is a considerable part of language use and that ‘we cannot, in any theory of language, treat it as the exception rather than the rule’. VL is unavoidable; for example ‘talking and thinking by means of “about”, “nearly” is a necessity’ (Guilbaud 1977: 126). Similarly, Stubbs states,

When we speak or write, we are rarely very clear, precise, or explicit about what we mean – and perhaps could not be – but are, on the contrary, vague, indirect, and unclear about just what we are committed to. This often appears superficially to be an inadequacy of human language: but only for those who hold a rather crude view of what is maximally efficient in communication. Being vague and indirect can have many uses. (Stubbs 1986a: 1)

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Stubbs suggests that using VL is actually our normal way of communication. It is not inadequate; on the contrary, it has multiple functions. This view is supported by Jucker, Smith and Lüdge (2003), whose findings based on conversational English data among university students are that vague expressions are more informative than exact numbers. For example, ‘many friends came to his birthday party’ carries more information than ‘twenty friends came to his birthday party’. *Many* implies ‘he is popular’; this implicature is not present with the use of *twenty*.

It is commonly considered counterproductive to talk about VL. Ruzaitė (2007: 1) observes that traditionally researchers clearly prioritised precision, and people ‘fetishise’ precision and treat VL as an excessive and unwanted feature. VL can be a source of ‘fascination for all of us who love languages and language learning’, but can also be a source of ‘frustration for those who would prefer meanings, like bars of soap, to hold still long enough for us to capture them’ (Hatch and Brown 1995: 60). Bolinger (1975: 205) says that ‘meanings are as elusive as a piece of wet soap in a bathtub’. VL is one of the ‘wet soaps’, and how well one can control it is a manifestation of one’s pragmatic competence (Fraser 2010). VL ‘plays a huge role in human communication’ (van Deemter 2010: 93), and without it no flexible and adequate communication could be achieved (Daitz 1956; Ullmann 1962). VL maintains versatile communication; for example, it can smooth over an embarrassing situation or evade certain sensitive questions.

For decades, linguistic studies have considered accurate language to be desirable, paying little attention to VL. The issue of vagueness is controversial and neglected (Ruzaitė 2007: 1) because it poses challenges to theories in linguistics. While some works on VL are insightful, they mostly focus on the nature and function of VL. An overarching theoretical framework to explain how and why VL works is lacking – especially a well-developed pragmatic account that captures the behaviours of VL adequately. In my other work (Zhang 2011), I provide a theoretical explanation of VL through the notion of elasticity, in that fluid utterances are stretched for various pragmatic purposes. A complete theory of language ‘must have vagueness as an integral component’ (Channell 1994: 5). Drawn on naturally occurring data, this book intends to develop a fully fledged elasticity theory to fill the gap in current VL studies.

1.1 A pragmatics-oriented approach

There is no categorical and fully agreed boundary between semantics and pragmatics, and this study does not attempt to find one. While there is an *interaction* between semantics and pragmatics (Levinson 1983: 372), the two fields have different focuses and priorities. Semantic and pragmatic meanings are different in that semantic meaning is ‘what is encoded in the language

1.1 A pragmatics-oriented approach

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itself, independent of any particular speaker or context of utterance', and pragmatic meaning is 'conveyed, or intended to be conveyed' by the use of a particular utterance in a particular context, which includes 'what is inferred as well as subtleties that do not affect truth and falsity, that is, the appropriateness of the mapping between utterances and states of affairs' (Birner 2013: 294). In this study, context is defined in the sense of Cruse, in that it is 'an essential factor in the interpretation of utterances and expressions' (2006: 35), consisting of 'previous utterances (discourse context), participants in the speech event, their interrelations, knowledge, and goals, and the social and physical setting of the speech event' (2006: 136). Context is used in a broad sense, including interactional context, situational context, and extra-situational context (Janney 2002: 458). The definition of pragmatics this study adopts is that of Kecskes:

Pragmatics is about meaning; it is about language use and the users. It is about how the language system is employed in social encounters by human beings. In this process, which is one of the most creative human enterprises, communicators (who are speaker-producers and hearer-interpreters at the same time) manipulate language to shape and infer meaning in a socio-cultural context. (Kecskes 2014: 21)

This definition stresses the interaction of meaning with language use, users, and social encounters, which is the position of this study.

The two research questions in pragmatics, according to Kecskes, are: (1) why do we choose to say what we say? (production), and (2) why do we understand things the way we do? (comprehension). Cruse states, 'a very rough working distinction is that semantics is concerned with the stable meaning resources of language-as-a-system and pragmatics with the use of that system for communicating, on particular occasions and in particular contexts' (2006: 2). In simplified terms, semantics focuses on language system and pragmatics on language use. Semantics deals with sentences and grammaticality, and pragmatics looks at utterances and acceptability (Chapman 2011). For example, as Chapman observes, semanticists and logicians explain vagueness in terms of logic and truth conditionality, while pragmatists introduce ideas of implicit and explicit messages and the gap between literal and intended meaning.

The modern use of the term 'pragmatics' can be traced to Charles Morris, who defines it as the study of 'the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable', and pragmatics as the study of 'the relation of signs to interpreters' (1938: 6). While the central topics of linguistic pragmatics are 'those aspects of meaning which are dependent on context' Cruse (2006: 3), pragmatics is 'the study of how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning in the interpretation of utterances' (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 1). Pragmatics does not involve truth-conditional meaning; it typically studies

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issues such as politeness phenomena, reference and deixis, implicatures, and speech acts, a breadth of focus that has led to its commonly being regarded as a ‘waste bucket’. Ariel (2000) calls it a ‘big tent’ to describe its heterogeneous characteristics.

There is a view that semantics and pragmatics cannot be separated (e.g. Ruzaitė 2007), and that the two are ‘inextricably tied together’ (Lakoff 1973: 474). However, this study sides with Channell’s argument that semantic constructs are ‘fleshless skeletons’, only coming alive when put into language use; hence ‘pragmatic rules are probabilistic, and semantic rules are categorical’ (1994: 29–30). Given that pragmatics looks at how contextual factors interact with the interpretation of utterances (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 1) and VL is essentially a pragmatic matter (e.g. Channell 1994; Sadock 1977), this study adopts a pragmatic approach in that the focus is on the intended meaning of VL contextualised in a particular discourse. Discourse in this study refers to language use relative to pragmatic and social situations, and to the language determining how people interact with each other. In particular, it includes previous and following utterances, where meaning is implied in relation to running texts, ongoing interactions, situations, communicative purposes and interactants.

This study is pragmatic in nature, primarily investigating pragmatic vagueness, as the truth-conditional meaning is less relevant in real-life communication. Particularly it looks at the interactional meaning between speaker and hearer, how a speaker conveys an intended meaning using VL, and ways in which this intended meaning serves moment-to-moment communicative goals.

1.2 Definitions

Two definitions are discussed at the outset: EL and elasticity (an in-depth discussion can be found in Chapter 3). It is difficult to reach a consensus, but the working definitions align this research with previous studies, and inform the following analyses.

1.2.1 Elastic language

What is EL? EL is fluid and stretchable. ‘Stretch’ is used here as a metaphor, referring to ways in which we adjust, modify, and manipulate our words to accommodate particular discursive needs. Its operation can be described as follows:

In Figure 1.1, A is an utterance. When stretched, it becomes utterance B. For example:

JOHN: What do you think about our new colleague?

MARY: Well, sometimes he is extremely charming, but other times he is a little bit odd.

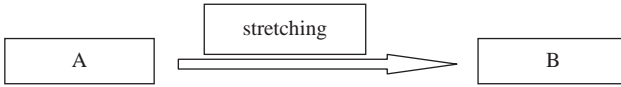


Figure 1.1 Stretching operation

When Mary describes her impression, she stretches to strengthen a favourable comment by using *extremely* and hedge an unfavourable comment by using *a little bit*. What enables Mary to do this is that our language is fluid and stretchable: that is, EL is an important part of communication.

The working definition of EL refers to language that inherently and strategically conveys fluidity and stretchability. EL carries non-specific and stretchable meaning, in that the speaker either cannot be more specific or (more often) strategically makes it less specific.

The definition of EL is developed from that of VL, which has been in use for decades; see Section 2.1.2 for details. Based on my previous work (Zhang 2011), the definition of EL in this study highlights the overlapping nature of language. While EL and VL are similar linguistic phenomena, the differences are twofold. First, they carry different connotations, with the term ‘EL’ seeming more positive and VL more negative. Second, they have different focuses: VL gives prominence to the uncertainty and under-specification of language, EL to its fluid and elastic nature.

1.2.2 Elasticity

Elasticity has a metaphorical origin and is related to the word elastic. The literal meaning of ‘elastic’ refers to something (e.g. a piece of string) able to stretch and resume its original shape. The metaphorical meaning of elastic adopted in this study is its general sense: the springy nature of language that makes it able to adjust readily to different contexts and communicative goals, rather than a specific process of stretching out and bouncing back. The term ‘elasticity’ aims to accentuate the positive and effective profile of EL.

Glinert (2010: 57–8) uses ‘elasticity’ in his study of political apologising, where it is described as stretching words like a rubber band. In my 2011 work, I propose that the concept of elasticity may be applied to VL as a strategic feature of VL. I define elasticity as VL that ‘can be stretched and negotiated to suit the moment-to-moment communicative needs’ (Zhang 2011: 573); elasticity is a manifestation of VL’s non-specificity, dependent upon context and communicative purpose, enabling language to stretch in multiple directions, upward, downward, and horizontally.

The use of elasticity aims to mitigate the negative connotation of the word vague, as vague words are often viewed as similar to ‘weasel words’ (e.g. Dobson 2010: 28), indicating a degree of disapproval: weasel words are

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commonly perceived to communicate a vague or ambiguous meaning. The term ‘elastic’ reflects the dynamic nature of linguistic expressions, and is free of the negative connotation associated with vague. Elasticity in this study refers to the tendency of utterances to be fluid, stretchable and strategic. ‘Fluidity’ is manifested as unspecific and overlapping, context-dependent and socially variable; ‘stretch’ refers to extending or modifying the scope or meaning of an expression, and is a technical term with no negative connotation. Stretchability is manifested as rubber-band-like and with multiple trajectories. Strategicness refers to an elaborate and systematic linguistic behaviour aimed to achieve communicative goals. In this study, elasticity is manifested particularly by the frequency, form and functions of the language, which will vary between different groups of speakers, among other variables.

This study introduces a new term, ‘stretch work’, referring to the way we treat the elasticity of language as a rubber band, capable of adapting to change or a variety of situations. The working of strategic elasticity is based on the elastic nature of language and communication. There are also other two coined terms: ‘elasticise’ and ‘elasticisation’. Elasticise refers to the act of realising elasticity to suit communicative goals, and elasticisation refers to the realisation of elasticity. For example, on the continuum between *red* and *not red*, in ‘his face is extremely red’ *extremely* stretches the degree of redness to the higher end. In ‘his face is kind of red’ *kind of* stretches the degree of redness to the lower end. *Extremely* and *kind of* elasticise the degree of redness; the elasticisation stretches in different directions on the continuum of redness.

In my other work (Zhang 2011: 579) I use the metaphor of a slingshot to describe elastic communication. It has three stages: stretch, aim/adjust, and release/hit. The ways in which the slingshot is stretched depend upon the communicative target. Language tends to be adjusted constantly in practice, and it is possible that the clarity of the target influences the clarity of the language: the clearer the target, the more accurate the language. This study adds that a correlation between target and accuracy of language may not always be the case: it is equally possible that the target is clear, but the language may be kept vague for strategic reasons.

1.3 The purposes of this study

For decades there has been a bias against VL. Channell (1994: 1) states that it is a commonly held view that “‘good’ usage involves (among other things) clarity and precision. Hence, it is believed that vagueness, ambiguity, imprecision, and general woolliness are to be avoided.’ As a result, linguistic studies tend to consider accurate language desirable, and pay less attention to VL. Research on VL tends to be somewhat non-mainstream, although the field has been drawing increasingly more attention in recent years.

1.3 The purposes of this study

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Systematic and theoretical research on VL is still somewhat lacking. Existing work on VL from pragmatic perspectives include that of Channel (1994), Cutting (2007), Ruzaitė (2007), and others. Channell's monograph is seminal and has been widely cited. As she puts it, the purpose of her book is more descriptive than theoretical (1994: 31). Cutting's work is a collection of essays covering topics such as vagueness and genre, the psychology of vagueness, and cross-cultural vagueness. Ruzaitė concentrates on approximators and quantifiers in British and American English in educational settings. These major works on VL focus on important areas, but there is still a need to conceptualise the VL phenomenon and the working of VL, to provide an underlying theoretical account integrating empirical evidence that will elevate its study to a new level.

The purpose of this book is to establish such a framework as a small step towards developing a broad and multi-layered account to explicate the use of EL. The theory is tested against empirical evidence, drawing on naturally occurring data from encounters between Australian Customs officers and passengers. This study is one of few attempts to look at the strategic manipulation of EL in tension-prone institutional discourse. It expands and refines Zhang's (2011) concept of elasticity by investigating how elasticity theory is confirmed by the empirical evidence. There are three specific research questions.

- 1 How is EL distributed?
- 2 What are the pragmatic functions of EL?
- 3 How does EL interact with social and speech factors?

To address these questions, three steps are taken. The first is to examine the linguistic manifestation of elasticity in terms of EL form and distribution to show what EL is used and how it is used; the second is to analyse the pragmatic manifestation of elasticity to show why EL is employed; and the third is to investigate the impacts of social (power and gender) and speech-related (speech events, speech genre and language competence) factors on the behaviour of EL. This should produce a rich and rigorous study of EL. The analyses occur at lexical, phrasal, discursive, and social levels. The quantitative analysis provides a general and macro picture of participants' preferences in using EL, offering a strong foundation for other discussion. As quantitative analysis alone may not reveal specific stretching strategies used, there is need for a qualitative analysis that will provide a detailed micro picture of how EL is stretched. As the frequency, form, and function of EL may vary across social groups, the theoretical framework of this study is verified by investigating the interactional mechanisms emerging from the data: for example, is it valid to claim that men are more confrontational than women? Will passengers use more evasive strategies than officers?

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This study uncovers what, how and why speakers employ EL and how hearers respond. It examines how inferred meanings are co-constructed in conflict-filled negotiations, and reveals stretch work in the linguistic realisation of EL and power plays in the process of resolving a situation. It investigates how communication games are played using EL: what elasticisation is, how it is produced, and, more importantly, what it does for each participant. The findings shed light on the pragmatics of EL. In particular, the tension-prone institutional corpus provides new resources, and the intercultural aspect of this study adds to its overall importance.

1.4 Organisation of the book

This book consists of ten chapters. This introductory chapter has set the tone, providing working definitions and research questions. Chapter 2 is a critical overview of existing literature on VL, including the two essential concepts of vagueness and VL. There are also conceptual comparisons between VL and other related phenomena such as hedging, implicitness, and indirectness. Chapter 2, informed by previous studies, provides linguistic realisations of EL and categories of EL function that are used in analysis in the following chapters. Chapter 3 is dedicated to a discussion of elasticity theory, including its principles, properties, structure, processes and mechanisms. Before presenting the theory, the chapter reviews Grice's (1975) maxims and the concept of 'loose talk' proposed in Sperber and Wilson's (1985/86; 1995 [1986]) work. Chapter 4 covers the mixed methods approach of this study, both quantitative and qualitative. It describes the data set and data analysis. Chapter 5 is an analysis of EL frequency and clustering, and Chapter 6 considers the pragmatic functions of EL. Chapter 7 looks at the impact of two social factors, power and gender, on EL. Chapter 8 discusses the relationship between speech-related factors and EL, including the differences between monologue and dialogue, drug and non-drug cases (level of severity), and L1 (first language speaker) and L2 (second language speaker). Chapter 9 is a general discussion of the findings of previous chapters. The book ends in Chapter 10 with conclusions and implications.

1.5 Summary

EL is indispensable in our communication, yet it does not get the attention it deserves. Two decades ago, Channell published her seminal book on VL, noting that 'there is as yet no major study of linguistic vagueness; and no generally agreed approach to it' (1994: 20). Two decades later, there has been increasing interest in the field, and a few major studies have emerged such as those of Cutting (2007) and Ruzaitė (2007). However, a theoretical framework

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is still not established. This study is a small step towards the goal of developing a theoretical framework of EL, and its use of the word ‘elastic’ is a deliberate ploy to reposition VL as a positive feature of language. It takes a pragmatic perspective on EL, viewing it through the lens of elasticity theory. EL inherently, deliberately and strategically conveys fluidity and stretchability. The concept of elasticity refers to the tendency of springy utterances that are fluid, stretchable and strategic. The purpose of this book is to explore the ways in which EL is stretched in terms of frequency of EL, its pragmatic functions, and the interaction between EL and social and speech-related factors.

2 Theoretical foundations

This chapter is an overview of the existing literature on VL to align this study with previous works and inform conceptual continuity, and to provide a source of the coding system for the linguistic realisation of EL and categories of pragmatic function adapted in the data analysis.

2.1 Vagueness and vague language

There are different focuses on the concepts of vagueness and VL. Drave (2002: 26) argues that it is necessary to make a distinction between the two concepts to represent different research traditions: VL is a natural-language concept and a concern of linguists, but vagueness is a logical concept and a concern of philosophers. This study adds that vagueness may also be a concern of semanticists, who study meaning using a formal semantic approach. The distinction is relevant when vagueness and VL are used as technical terms; the distinction may blur when the two concepts are used in a general sense.

Research traditions differ in their positions on issues relating to vagueness and VL. For example, there are two opinions about whether language is all vague. Based on a traditional and logic-based view, semantic vagueness refers to expressions whose meaning involves reference to a category with a fuzzy boundary (Crystal 2008: 23). Applying this definition, all language, particularly all category names, could be treated as inherently vague. This type of vagueness has an extremely broad scope, potentially including all categorisation except proper names. Zadeh (cited in Tong, Nguyen, Yager and Ovchinnikov 1987) proposes a *very* test to decide between fuzzy and not fuzzy: any word which can be modified by *very* is fuzzy. Ruzaitė (2007: 35) points out that the *very* test is only applicable to adjectives. One of my previous works, Zhang (1998), proposes other tests to distinguish four concepts: fuzziness, vagueness, generality and ambiguity.

Any reference that does not give a precise referent can be treated as vague. This also applies to cognitive-oriented approaches: for example, Sperber and Wilson (1995 [1986]) claim that indeterminacy is an inherent aspect of language and that no proposition can be entirely determined as to meaning.