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

Elastic language carries non-specific and stretchable meaning, as in 'He loves her, kind of'. It is used like a slingshot, targeting various strategic goals. Consolidating current research and charting new directions, this book develops a refreshing theory of elasticity, empirically attested by natural language data from tension-prone encounters between Australian Customs officers and passengers. The theory proposes three principles (fluidity, stretchability and strategy) and offers a systematic look at how elastic language, as a sliding scale, works to balance strengthening and weakening speech tones, to firm and soften a speaker's stance, and to reveal and evade the truth. The comparative analysis of forms, functions and context confirms that elastic language is fluid, stretchable and strategic. It serves both cooperative and competitive functions, and social and speech factors impact on its use. This book will appeal to students and researchers working in pragmatics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and communication.

- Proposes a new conceptual framework for vague language and hedging.
- Uses stimulating data from interesting situations to support arguments.
- Presents mixed methods research for data analysis, which will appeal to both quantitative and qualitative researchers.

DR GRACE Q. ZHANG is an Associate Professor at Curtin University, Australia. She was awarded a PhD in linguistics by the University of Edinburgh in 1996, and has published extensively on elastic/vague language.

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Grace Q. Zhang
Curtin University

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This book is dedicated to my parents
Shimin and Lanyin Zhang

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Preface

More than three decades ago, when I began my Masters study in China, I little knew that I was embarking on a research journey that would last for thirty years and more. During the search for my Masters topic, I happened to read an article written by the late Professor Wu Tieping, the founder of fuzzy linguistics in China. The article introduced into linguistic study the fuzzy set theory developed by Lotfi A. Zadeh in 1965. The refreshing ideas inspired me to start researching vague language, and my thesis discussed vague meanings in Mandarin Chinese. The topic was so fascinating that my PhD also focused on the semantics of vague quantifiers. Since then my interest has not waned: vague language is full of uncharted territories, and my extensive publications offer a map for the first ventures into this field.

The study of vague language as an area of enquiry is non-conventional and somewhat peripheral to traditional linguistic studies. There exists negativity towards the concept of vague language. John Sinclair mentioned in his Forward to Joanna Channell's 1994 book *Vague Language* that the title worried the series editors initially, as they were unsure if the intended readership would accept it (p. xviii). Sinclair explained that vagueness has negative connotations and teachers would normally not endorse vagueness as part of the repertoire of communication. However, they decided to use the title because, as Sinclair says, there is nothing shameful in mentioning vagueness, and our language allows us to avoid precision and committal: without vagueness our communication would be severely inadequate. In the introduction to her 2007 work on vague language, Joan Cutting mentioned that her colleagues used vague language to humour her, for example ending an email to her with 'see you whenever it is, if not before'. There is still some way to go before we fully appreciate the nature of vague language.

My long but fruitful 'vague' journey has been challenging and fascinating, and thoroughly enjoyable. I work hard to justify the legitimacy of my work by convincing people that vague language is an integral part of our language. The ability to use vague language is as important as, if not more important than, the ability to use other types of language (e.g. precise language). To put

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vague language on the linguistic map, and ensure it is understood and valued as it deserves, I continue to work, and to refine the topic. For instance, in this book the negative 'vague language' has been replaced with 'elastic language' to emphasise the real nature of this type of language and to resite it as a positive form. I hope this book is a small step towards staking a claim for the status of elastic language in linguistic studies.

Why and how do we stretch our words? This book attempts to answer the question by developing an elasticity theory to explain how stretching works, something lacking in the existing literature. Grounded in naturally occurring data in institutional (Australian Customs) settings, the book provides an account of the nature and function of elastic language. Participants in the data stretch language to negotiate and construct meanings, balance strengthening and weakening speech tones, firm and soften their stance, and adopt socially mandated roles in responding to a type of situation and their expected function in that situation. As a valuable resource, this book will be useful to students and researchers engaged in pragmatics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and communication.

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Conventional notations

. . .	unfinished sentence
all capital letters	stressed prosodically, emphasising the words
(pause)	a pause of more than two seconds
=	latching between utterances, which indicates speech or vocal noise concurrent with the previous one
underline	noted by the author for emphasis
italics	indicating a word or phrase that will be discussed
( )	situational comments, noticeable non-verbal activities
wo:::rd	prolongation of a sound, stretching the preceding sound: more colons indicate more stretch
1:2:3	episode 1, extract 2, speaking turn 3

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