



VAGUE LANGUAGE AS POLITENESS-SCALE LEVELER IN OPRAH WINFREY'S SHOWS

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores some pragmatic functions of vague markers from the perspective of politeness in formal and informal settings. The pragmatic value of vague markers lies in the capacity of making utterances more tentative and acceptable within the bounds of social and cultural norms and behavior. Vagueness serves as an effective tool to show lack of exactness and accuracy for the sake of politeness the appropriate level of which can only be determined in a specific situational context. Mastery of this language shows one's level of communicative competence which, in its turn, considerably contributes to the improvement of sociolinguistic competence, both being equally important in presenting the propositional content into a coherent whole. The aim of the current research is to demonstrate the pragmatic significance of linguistic and extralinguistic means of expressing vagueness and to study its communicative value and various manifestations through revealing the most striking features. The research lies in addressing the question of correlation between the pragmatic interpretation and semantic representation of vagueness in spoken communication from the politeness perspective. Vague language is viewed from a completely new angle in directive speech acts. Thanks to this approach, vagueness is analysed in light of form-meaning-use correlation act as a politeness-scale leveler, thereby allowing to draw a clear-cut demarcation line between its pragmatic interpretations in terms of the appropriateness, tentativeness and acceptability of polite behaviour in different situational contexts. Incorporating sufficient evidence from various reviews and TV Shows, this study is an attempt to demonstrate contextually-driven fluctuations in the illocutionary force of vague markers which may lead to different pragmatic interpretations due to both linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

Key words:

Vagueness, Face, Positive politeness, Negative politeness, Speech, Context, Maxim, Pragmatic value

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is an indisputable fact that the ability of mastering various techniques for the sake of politeness is an essential tool everyone is supposed to consider in the process of communication. People usually meet language barriers and it becomes difficult for them to understand contexts and be understood in different situations. The role of vague language is significant; hence, it considerably contributes to the escape of communication barriers since it gives further access to interlocutors to other alternatives which help them modify their speech in a way so that they can reach mutual understanding. Different vague language markers and their functions in contextually based situations enable both speakers and listeners to avoid misunderstanding, escape conflicts and give the right amount of information in case they are not willing to give a blow-by-blow account.

Vague language is an integral part of everyday discourse and has significant contribution to effective interaction. It has rich pragmatic value comprising inexplicit expressions that enable people to ease and enrich communication. The actuality of the paper is explained by the fact that vagueness is considered to be important aspect in linguistics. It is equally used in academic and everyday discourse, formal and informal settings; however, its semantic representation and pragmatic interpretation significantly vary especially when it comes to the right use of the language in a specific situational context. However, deciding on the appropriate level of vagueness is not as easy as it seems to be, particularly in speech acts of orders and requests. The speaker's unintentional overestimation or underestimation of polite behaviour may turn a request into an order or vice versa. A very polite request may sometimes be perceived as irony or sarcasm by the hearer if it is not appropriate or acceptable.

Over the years, the study of vague language has deepened and has long overdue position as a discourse-regulating device to make statements or claims more imprecise. To arrive at the research goals, the following objectives are put forward: to give a survey of existing theories on vagueness and to formulate a comprehensive approach to reveal its communicative-pragmatic significance in English discourse; to reveal and underline the possibility of the use of different vague markers in directive speech acts; to evaluate the basic definitions and features of the vague utterances viewed and analysed in light of polite behavior; to categorise vagueness based on pragmatic knowledge and methodology and identify its peculiarities in terms of pragmatic concepts of politeness and impoliteness.

The present research is, therefore, an attempt to show the importance of vague markers as effective politeness-regulating and speech modifying devices and to reveal their different pragmatic functions in contextually based situations. Studying vague language and its different functions more than four years, the emphasis is primarily put on Oprah Winfrey's Shows, from where thousands of examples are exported. Different reasons for the implementation of vague markers are proposed by Chrystal and Davy (1975), and Drave (2002). Herein lies the importance of the Cooperative Principle (CP) proposed by Paul Grice (1975) that is worth considering in the process of communication.

2. SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC PECULIARITIES OF VAGUENESS

Vague language is considered as a part of communication the appropriate use of which puts forward the level of one's communicative competence. Different vague language markers can be used in speech to show one's pragmatic competence as well and to express different degrees of certainty about the illocutionary force of a particular statement. The use of different vague markers makes speech less accurate in case the speaker is not well – aware of a certain conversational topic. In terms of truthfulness, vague language markers lessen the degree of truthfulness in speech making it far from reality. One of the scholars who has given a deep understanding of vague language is Joanne Chanell. According to Chanell (1994), vague language is a language which “can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition” (Chanell 1994: 20) and which is “purposely and unabashedly vague” (Chanell 1994: 20).

Vague language markers can serve as a guarantee to sound more polite - used for both transactional and relation purposes. The former helps the speaker to use appropriate amount of information, and has a significant contribution to obtain information and leads to an effective communication when specific information is lacking. As for the latter, it serves as one of the main tools of politeness, self-protection and can lead to an agreement between the speaker and the hearer. It is of great importance to take into account the relational function of the vague language markers in interpersonal communication. They can distance the speaker from facts and keep him/her away from being proven wrong later. Important part of the vague language worth taking into consideration are vague approximators. They can be used in different situational contexts to refer to times, dates, amounts and so on. Such vague markers are: about, around, so. The use of vague approximators mitigates the responsibility of speakers, thereby enabling them to express different degrees of uncertainty (Cutting 2007: 40-52). They can be used to modify the tone of speech and allow speakers to avoid imposing their own thoughts on others. Different vague markers can possess the following functions in a specific contextual situation: mitigation, self-protection, politeness, downtoning, help speakers give right amount of information (quantification – *some, many, much, few, little, several, a lot of, plenty of, and large amounts of*; possibility – *probably, might, maybe; uncertainty-somewhere, maybe, I think*; structural function – facilitating the structural flow of the exchanged information (repair, the so-called self-correction – *I don't know, I mean I guess; hesitation – I think, I don't know, I just think*); turn management (Sabet and Zhang 2015: 113-149).

(1)

Meghan: And then, it was, 'OK, intermission's coming, the lights are about to come on, everyone's looking at us again', and you have to just be on again.

Oprah: Yeah.

Meghan: And that's, I think, so important for people to remember is you have no idea what's going on for someone behind closed doors.

You have no idea. Even the people that smile the biggest smiles and shine the brightest lights, it seems, to have compassion for what's actually potentially going on.

Oprah: I know. The public is looking at you. And to think that you, earlier in the day, had said to Harry that you didn't want to be alive any more.

Meghan: Yeah. And just hours before, just sitting on the ... the steps in our cottage ...

(Meghan Markle Oprah interview, 2021)

As can be seen from example 1, while having a conversation with Oprah Winfrey, Meghan Markle uses vague markers *I think*, *it seems* and *about*. As for the vague marker *about*, it performs a modifying function, with the help of which the speaker modifies the tone of her utterance in order to sound more polite. Besides, it has a discourse regulating function since it regulates the process of conversation and keeps the speaker away from certain information. Another vague marker used in the conversation is *I think*. It helps the speaker reduce the imposition on others and express her own opinion. Here, it has a discourse management function. Obviously, Meghan expresses her opinion by pointing out one important thing: everything can happen behind closed doors. The speaker obviously, yet tentatively, expresses her opinion without any certain information. It indicates that she doesn't have any control of the situation. The use of *I think* helps her escape from conflicts and ease the smooth flow of communication. The clause-initial position of *I think* conveys a forethought and performs a tentative and mitigating function. Put it differently, it mitigates the responsibility of the speaker adding some extra uncertainty to the utterance and noticeably casting doubt on what is important to remember. Another vague marker used in the conversation is – *it seems*. It contributes much to avoid sounding too categorical or critical in what might be acknowledged as a fact by the vast majority of people. One interesting function is that it is also used as a protecting device to emphasize the contrast between the reality and the way it is perceived by the speaker. Another no less interesting function of the vague marker *it seems* is that it weakens the claim through an implicit evaluation of the speaker's commitment. In addition, the speaker can use it as a euphemism marker with the help of which she avoids sounding too harsh or blunt. One more function it may fulfill is the intensification of indecisiveness which makes the speech less direct or categorical. The speaker herself says something without sureness, which creates a clear-cut demarcation line between the reality and alleged action.

(2)

Oprah: So, you didn't have a conversation with yourself, or talk to your friends about what it would be like to marry a prince, who is Harry, who you had fallen in love with ... you didn't give it a lot of thought?

Meghan: No. We thought a lot about what we thought it might be. I didn't fully understand what the job was: What does it mean to be a working royal? What do you do? What does that mean? He and I were very aligned on our cause- driven work, that was part of our initial connection. But there was no way to understand what the day-to-day was going to be like, and it's so different because I didn't romanticise any element of it. But I think, as Americans especially, what you do know about the royals is what you read in fairytales, and you think is what you know about the royals.

(Meghan Markle Oprah interview, 2021)

In example (2), a conversation between Oprah Winfrey and Meghan, Oprah asks Meghan whether she has ever thought what it would be like to marry a prince. Meghan replies that she has never had a conversation with herself or with her friends about it. In addition, she says that she could never have imagined what day-to-day relationship with Harry was going to be like. In her answer Meghan uses the modal verb *might*, which lessens the degree of certainty in her speech keeping her away from further criticism. *Might* shows an unconfirmed assertion and is served as a vague possibility indicator that casts doubt on the speaker's words. Although it is used to soften the directness of her speech, the respective modal verb has one more interesting function that of counterbalancing. The word *might* creates a clash between what the speaker says and what the reality would be. It measures the level of the speaker's communicative competence and leads to a successful communication.

(3)

Ms. Winfrey: And I remember when you all first arrived at the White House, you said to the country that this is your house, and we're going to open this up as your house. And so when I saw all those Girl Scouts out on the lawn, I went, you all really did open up the house. (laughter)

Mrs. Obama: Yes, yes. That's been some of the most fulfilling things we've been able to do in the White House. It's really bringing people here who would never, ever get to set foot on that lawn and walk into those doors.(applause)

(Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey 2023)

Example (3) touched upon the first impressions Mrs. Obama had when she moved to the White House. While speaking about the first impressions and the most fulfilling things that they experienced in the White House, Mrs. Obama tentatively expresses her opinion by using the vague marker *some* with the help of *which* she is cautiously shielding herself from saying more than is needed. She skillfully avoids praising themselves for the things that had never been done in the White House before. The use of the vague marker *some* weakens the speaker's positive viewpoint about the praiseworthy action of opening up the house for the Girl Scouts. Controversial as it might sound, Mrs. Obama does enhance self-praise by using

the intensifying marker *really*, which accentuates the speaker's emphatic tone of singling out one important action that had been unprecedented in the history of the White House, that of bringing many people there who would have never imagined themselves walking into those doors. The same word performs the same function in Mrs. Winfrey's speech, but she expresses her commitment to a different proposition. If the use of *really* used by Mrs. Obama sounds rather "arrogant and conceited", it is acknowledged good-naturedly as a positive and humane act that deserves praise and acclamation without any reservation or constraint. As is seen from the analysis, the same marker may acquire different connotations, both positive and negative, depending on a number of extralinguistic factors, namely, the situational context, the relationships between interlocutors, the illocutionary force of the utterance, and many more.

3. VAGUE LANGUAGE AS EFFECTIVE POLITENESS STRATEGY

There are certain linguistic choices people make in the process of communication which can indicate the social relationship between the interlocutors in a certain conversational context. Goffman (1961) states that "all competent adult members of a society possess 'face' – the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Goffman 1961 in Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). In other words, everyone needs to look after their face and that of others in social interaction; that is mutually looking after each other's faces. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness falls into two major categories: positive politeness and negative politeness. When dealing with positive politeness, every individual has a desire to be liked and appreciated by others. Positive politeness has its own strategies which, in its turn, help the speaker seek agreement in different situations and avoid arguments. It includes the following strategies: noticing the hearer's interests, exaggerating interests, intensifying interest to the hearer, using in-group identity markers, seeking agreement, avoiding disagreement, being optimistic, including both the speaker and the hearer in the activity, and so on. In case of negative politeness, speakers show their reluctance and imposition on others and prevent their freedom of action. Negative politeness pervades the following strategies: being conventionally indirect, applying and hedges, being pessimistic, minimizing the imposition, apologizing (admitting the impingement, give overwhelming reasons, begging forgiveness), impersonalizing the speaker and the hearer (performatives, imperatives, passive and circumstantial voices, etc.) (Brown and Levinson 1987: 129-227). The pragmatic functions of politeness contribute much to the cross-cultural interaction as well which lies in the great accumulation of the thorough information about how speakers of different languages can interpret politeness strategies. Considering the importance of vague language from the pragmatic perspective, we may assume that it is closely connected to the Cooperative Principle (CP) proposed by Paul Grice (1975). He states that one of the main factors leading to a successful communication in any conversational context is the communicator's adherence to CP with its four maxims: quantity (make your contribution as informative as required, do not make it more informative than is required), quality (be truthful, namely don't say what seems to be false and that which you lack evidence for), relevance (make your contribution relevant) and manner (be clear, brief and orderly, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity) (Grice

1975: 41-48). The infringement of one of the maxims may lead to a complete failure. It is the speaker's responsibility to realize the proper use of vague markers concerning a particular conversational topic. When using vaguer markers than required, the speaker might show ignorance towards a certain conversation or even sarcasm. Besides, it can rise an argument among communicators which will definitely disrupt to ease communication. The infringement of the maxim of quantity, for example, can result in the infringement of the maxim of manner. The use of many vague markers can possess an ambiguous function, which makes the speech obscure. As regards the maxim of quality, the proper use of vague markers becomes significantly important. If the information lacks evidence or sufficient proof, there is a need to use different vague markers to avoid making assertive statements and further criticism. Vague language markers contribute much to reduce the force of utterance and avoid making imposition on others. When the communicators realize that the information they are exchanging is not accurate, they can make it relevant with the help of vague markers. Considering the importance of vague markers Drave (2002) believes "The major function of VL [vague language] is to tailor conversational contributions to the perceived informational needs of the other participant(s) so as to maintain and enhance the on- going relationship" (Drave 2002: 26). The major functions of vague language are as follows: filling lexical gaps (where a speaker cannot recall a word or where one does not exist in the language), filling knowledge gaps (memory lapse), emphasizing (and de-emphasizing) certain information, deliberately withholding specific information, conveying tentativeness, conveying an evaluation of, or expectation about, a proposition, maintaining an atmosphere of friendliness, informality or reference (Drave 2002: 25-27).

(4)

Lady Gaga: And they took care of me and we got all of the things lined up. And I have a very unorthodox, actually, set of pills that I take. But they—they saved my life. And I'm very grateful.

Oprah: Well, I think this is remarkable that you feel so open-hearted, vulnerable enough to share this. Was there a time when you were afraid of it getting out? Like Gaga's had a psychotic break, y'all.

Lady Gaga: You know, I think I was more scared of the psychotic break itself than I was about people knowing about it. I mean, when your brain, like, flatlines like that, I mean, it's – it's something I would never want to ever experience ever again.

(Oprah's 2020 Vision Tour)

As can be seen from the conversation in (4), Oprah is having a conversation with Lady Gaga. While talking about Lady Gaga's actions when she had a psychotic break and its detrimental effect on her mental health, Oprah Winfrey tries to express her personal opinion about that by saying *Well, I think*, which considerably makes the statement hedged, thereby keeping the speaker away from making imposition on hearers. She tries not to impose her

opinion or thoughts on others, but simply shows her estimation concerning a particular situation followed by a question. It also adds a certain amount of uncertainty showing that the speaker doesn't feel sure about what she claims. Another function this combination possesses is an anchoring function and is merely used to help the hearer be involved in face-to-face conversation and provide herself with a starting point to make her viewpoints and new perspectives much clearer to the audience. One more function it performs is the evasive function, that enables the speaker to avoid disagreement or even the audience's criticism. When speaking about the experience she had when her brain flatlined strongly, she says it is something without naming what it is exactly. The word something is considered a vague marker serving as a tool to help the speaker facilitate the flow of his speech. In addition, it performs a mitigating function as well giving access to the speaker to avoid being proven wrong later. Here, one can witness that the speech lacks precision; hence, by saying something people can imagine quite different things and not a specific thing. It has become apparent that the speaker violates maxim of quantity simply trying to avoid giving a detailed account. As stated above, one of the functions the vague marker something performs in speech is – filling the lexical gap. The speaker might not be able to recall the exact word which can be considered one of the reasons that makes the speaker apply that vague marker. By saying you know, Lady Gaga clearly asserts common ground. It is an example of positive politeness. It is used when the speaker wants the addressee to accept it as mutual knowledge or at least be cooperative with respect to the propositional content of her utterance.

Crystal and Davy (1975) put forward the following main reasons for vagueness: memory loss – the speaker forgets the correct word; the language has no suitable exact word or the speaker does not know it; the subject of the conversation does not require precision, and an approximation or characterization will do; the choice of a vague item is deliberate to maintain the atmosphere. These reasons can be considered the main reasons that make speakers vaguely express their thoughts or ideas (Crystal and Davy 1975: 11). It becomes the hearers' responsibility to put their focus on what is being said and handle specific terminology so that they can avoid misunderstanding or arguments. Mastering the vague language terminology will give access to communicators to advance further to acquire relevant skills for effective communication.

(5)

Oprah: I remember the first time I got called to do The Tonight Show. I was like, "My God—Johnny Carson!" We were jumping on the tables. The convention was your Johnny Carson moment. Did you dance a little hula?

Barack: I said, "This will be big."

Oprah: Did you start thinking about what you'd say?

Barack: The best move I made was to begin writing the speech that night. After I'd scribbled some notes, I wrote it in about three nights and sent it to the Kerry staff.

(Oprah Winfrey Interviews Barak Obama, 2004)

In example 5, while speaking about his actions, Barack Obama uses the vague marker *about*. The use of this vague marker in speech lessens the degree of certainty allowing the speaker to express his opinion tentatively. In the conversation, the vague marker *about* possesses a distancing function enabling Barack Obama to distance himself from accredited facts. Another interesting function is an evasive function; hence, it gives access to the speaker to keep himself away from further criticism and avoid being proven wrong later. One of the main factors that makes the speaker apply this vague marker might be a memory loss. On the one hand, the speaker might have forgotten the exact date. It helps the speaker regulate his speech and contributes to having a smooth conversation. On the other hand, as stated above, the subject itself doesn't require any precision. By using this vague marker, the speaker tries to make sure his words are not too far away from the reality. In case there was a need to give a blow-by-blow account, the use of the vague marker *about* might fail to provide sufficient and wanted information; this could probably result in failure of the conversation.

(6)

Oprah: You didn't feel a hole in your soul?

Jay-Z: I never looked at that. I guess I didn't want to deal with it. Because, you know, once I looked, I'd have to do something about it. And I guess I still had too much resentment and anger.

Oprah: In one of your songs, you wrote that you weren't sure if your father even remembered your birthday is in December.

Jay-Z: I believed that. When I was a kid, I once waited for him on a bench. He never showed up. Even as an adult, that affected me. So when my mom set up this meeting, I told her he wouldn't come—and the first time, he didn't. At that point, I was really done, but Mom pushed for another meeting, because she's just a beautiful soul.

(Oprah Interviews Jay-Z, 2009)

As can be perceived from example (6), while speaking about her personal life, Jay-Z uses the vague marker *I guess*. It can seem to be more informal expressing a greater degree of tentativeness. Besides, it shows that the speaker has some vague idea about the feelings and moments he experienced at that moment or he might not want to give any further detailed information. Regardless of the position of *I guess* in the utterance, it possesses a discourse management function which enables the speaker to sugarcoat doubt and distance himself from being proven wrong. On the one hand, it is used to reduce the illocutionary force of speech. On the other hand, he may give as much information as required without any detail. In that case, it indicates that the speaker follows the maxim of quantity by giving no more information than needed. One of the functions of the vague marker *I guess* is the softening function. It softens the tone of speech to establish empathy with the hearer. This function surely emphasizes the speaker's determinant communicative purpose which is fulfilled through apparently directing the speaker's behaviour and allowing her to behave in a way so

that she can escape conflicts and criticism. Another no less important function *I guess* performs in the conversation is conveying tentativeness. It is apparent that the speaker's speech lacks sureness; hence, the speaker himself might not know what he felt exactly at that very moment.

(7)

Barack: They become abstractions.

Oprah: Would you define what you're doing as a new kind of politics? I don't consider myself political, and I seldom interview politicians. So when I decided to talk with you, people around me were like, "What's happened to you?" I said, "I think this is beyond and above politics." It feels like something new.

Barack: I hope it's new. Many of the moments that become "history" happen when politics expresses our deepest hopes. Both of us grew up in a time when there were so many reasons to be cynical: Watergate, Vietnam... [10]

The contextual situation is as follows: Oprah is having a conversation with Barack Obama, who is being asked about a new kind of policy. Oprah starts her question with subjective *would*, which makes the way of questioning much more polite. When analyzing the question addressed to the president, it becomes apparent that the speaker herself takes into consideration the fact that she is talking to the president whose fame and wealth is quite different from those of hers. On the one hand, by asking *Would you define ...?*, Oprah simply tries to make no imposition on the hearer and politely seeking an answer. On the other hand, she could have used a statement instead of a question, which, in comparison with a question would not sound so polite. What's more is that the question can be accepted or rejected. Hence, it considerably depends on the speaker's willingness whether or not he wants to give a blow-by-blow account and reveal his deeds as a president. One of the vague markers the TV host uses in her speech is *I think*. By saying *I think* she simply tries to show her subjectivity through decreasing the weightiness of her imposition. In addition, the vague marker *I think* shows the speaker's own estimation concerning a particular issue, thus performing a modifying function. It modifies the speech by adding uncertainty to it and shows that the speech lacks sureness. Another no less important function *I think* possesses in speech is the evasive function that enables the speaker to avoid disagreement or even the audience's criticism. One more vague marker used is *something*. When expressing her own opinion, Oprah says that it feels like *something new* without naming what it is exactly. As stated above, one of the reasons that makes the speaker use that vague marker can be a memory loss. The speaker might not be able to recall the exact thing in order to specify everything. Another reason for the use of the vague marker *something* can be as follows: the language lacks certain terminology with the help of which the speaker could name that thing. In response to Oprah's question, Barack Obama starts his speech with *I hope* which is an example of

positive politeness simply showing his optimistic views about the policy hoping it will be accepted as something new.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper an attempt is made to disclose and examine the pragmatic nature of vague markers, more specifically its illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect on the target audience, particularly when analysed as a politeness-regulating means the great importance of which lies in the following aspects:

- Vague markers help interlocutors avoid criticism, arguments and misunderstanding, and foster the natural flow of spoken communication.
- Different properties of vague language enable interlocutors to sound more polite in the process of communication without either changing the main content of utterances or digressing from the main topic being discussed.
- Vague markers largely used to express different degrees of uncertainty and inaccuracy may effectively function as politeness-regulating and speech-modifying means to shield authors or speakers against the threat of being proven wrong by allowing for alternatives, and enhancing the validity of authors' and speakers' claims in the eyes of their discourse communities.
- The realization of different vague markers contributes considerably to enhanced communication giving some hints for the sake of politeness.
- The marker *well* has a widespread use and can be applied in different interpersonal communication and serve for different purposes, yet it may fail to draw a clear demarcation line between positive and negative politeness on the one hand and between implicitly expressed polite and impolite directive speech acts on the other hand.

When applying different markers related to vagueness it is vitally important that interlocutors decide on the right amount of uncertainty or imprecision of information in order to achieve a right perlocutionary effect on hearers. Any arbitrary or inadvertent choice may lead to a clash or mismatch between the illocutionary force and the perlocutionary force which may provoke various communication problems.

Vagueness has a rich pragmatic value. The appropriate use of different vague markers shows one's communicative competence which, in its turn, considerably contributes to the enhancement of sociolinguistic competence.

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