A Theoretical Thinking of Semantic Blurriness^{*}

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Language is a special tool for human communication. Blurriness is one of the basic attributes of natural language, and it is the objective reflection of language blurriness. Linguists believe that semantic blurriness exists in people's life widely, although there is not a uniform definition. It is generally agreed that blurriness refers to the boundary or the scope of a concept that is not clear. In this paper, the author analyzes the origins of semantic blurriness from the relations between subjective and objective world, and then sums up three basic features of semantic blurriness through the combination with real life materials. Finally, from the perspective of pragmatics, the author follows the politeness principle and cooperative principle, and subsequently summarizes the pragmatic functions of semantic blurriness. Moreover, the significance of the further study of the semantic blurriness is that it helps the nature and social science to promote and develop. Besides, it also helps human beings to know themselves better.

Keywords: semantic blurriness, semantic feature, pragmatic functions

Introduction

In linguistics, the blurriness of language has been regarded as a basic attribute of human natural language. It is objective and difficult to avoid in a complex language system. The blurriness of language lies in the meaning and scope of the word, and it is often without a precise boundary, but according to the specific context, the speaker and the recipient's cognition. Because of the continuous development of human knowledge, language has been given a new meaning, and this process is also the human language system moving forward process. Its process of development must be from the initial word which has a single meaning to multiple items. It is this development that makes the language rich and delicate. Even so, many times if people want to express the content, they might still say "I do not know how to describe it", or "At this moment the mood cannot be expressed by language". This expression is the context of the rhetoric, which deliberately blur the speaker's language to achieve the purpose of imagination. Sometimes the language symbol is not rich enough, for the meaning of the expression cannot be used to express the language accurately. Thus, the language still has a broad space to develop. Only the existence of semantic blurriness can meet the needs of the continuous development of language.

People should firstly figure out what is blurriness before we study the blurriness of language. Linguists and

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philosophers have different views on what it is. But the consensus is that blurriness refers to that the language of the object is not clear, and the boundary of the scope is uncertain. It is of great significance to study blurry language because: (1) It is helpful for the research and development of natural science. Traditional artificial intelligence has great advantages in dealing with information, but it also shows great limitations in several aspects. For example, in the process of handling information, the computer can simulate the human logical thinking, but it cannot imitate human's blurry thinking. Traditional artificial intelligence can not formalize all the problems, like the understanding of blurry language. Because of the limitation of understanding blurry language, it is difficult for traditional artificial intelligence to get rid of the dilemma. If we enter an ability in the machine to enable it to follow the imprecise process of action, we can expect the machine to complete the task. In order to complete the task, it is necessary to study the blurry language deeply. (2) It is helpful for the research and development of social science. In order to solve the problem that the traditional artificial intelligence can not simulate the blurry thinking of human beings, people have strengthened the research on the thinking science, especially the study of blurry thinking. In order to study blurry thinking deeply, it is necessary to study blurry language; it is helpful in the further study of blurry thinking to study the blurry language. The research results of blurry language will have a greater impact on some of the related disciplines, such as lexicography, etymology, grammar, pragmatics, rhetoric, aesthetics, literature, pedagogy, psychology, and other social sciences. (3) It helps to improve the study of language itself. In the past, people tend to ignore the blurriness of language. To some extent, it restricts the further study of language. With the development of artificial intelligence and robotics, it is urgent that blurry language can be translated into machine language. This requires people to make an intensive study of blurry language, which will enhance people's understanding of natural language. As a matter of fact, the blurriness of language is ubiquitous in phonetics, semantics, and grammar. Like the clarity of language, blurriness of language is the natural attribute of language; they are in language together. For example, from the perspective of phonetics, the boundaries between vowels and consonants are not very clear, like "semivowel" belongs to vowel or consonant. Grammatically, there are not clear boundaries between morphemes and words, words and phrases, national words and function words, simple sentences and complex sentences. As for the blurriness of semantics, it is more common. We cannot turn a blind eye to these vague phenomena in language, so we must make a thorough and careful study. Only in this way can we understand the language, and then we can use them more accurately and profoundly.

The Origin of Semantic Blurriness

The fundamental reason for semantic blurriness lies in the uncertainty of the boundary or nature of things. When people use language symbols to express this uncertainty, it is bound to make semantics blurriness. Specifically, it is mainly embodied in the general relationships among objective things, the continuous movement of objective things, and the needs of human thinking and communication which determine the blurriness of semantics.

General Relationships Between Objective Things

Everything in the world is complicated. Although from the whole history of development, the objective world of mankind and its own understanding are increasingly deep. There is no doubt that there are some limitations in the different stages of development. Even in today, we can not say that we have reached a clear

point to the whole world and ourselves. Therefore, people in the verbal communication inevitably use some blurriness language to express their understanding of the objective world and their own what are not very clear. Taking the language itself, until now, how many languages are there in the world, it is still difficult to have a precise statistics. The language workers can only use blurry words such as “there are now more than 2,780 languages around the world” or simply “there are around two thousand languages in the world” and so on.

Continuous Movement of Objective Things

All the works of science prove that everything in the material world is in constant motion and ceaseless change, which is the inseparable nature of the material. Movement is absolute; stillness is a certain stage of the development of things in a certain period of time and has the quality of stability, and it is relative and temporary. In view of this, the division of the state or the nature of things is always based on the incessant motion. People usually use limited discrete model to describe the continuous process of unlimited development. This will inevitably lead to the blurriness of the transition on the time order and of the transition between historical stages of development. For example: “Juvenile” and “Youth,” these two concepts represent the life of the growth process of the two stages; although there is a qualitative difference between them, there is no clear boundaries. “Slave society” and “feudal society” represent two kinds of different social forms in the history of the development of human society. As the feudal society was gradually nurtured by the slave society, it is difficult to draw a clear demarcation line between the two social forms.

Needs of Human Thinking and Communication

Language is the tool of thinking and the material shell of thinking. The concept of the form of thinking is expressed by words, judgments, and reasoning is expressed by the sentence, the results of thinking must be reflected in the language. Thinking is difficult to carry out without language. However, language does not reflect all the results of thinking. Both the blurry thinking and the accurate thinking are the reaction of the human brain to the objective world. When the objective things itself is in a relatively simple or stable character, people can grasp the essence of the object and define its extension through the precise thinking. When the objective things itself is relatively complex, it is only by blurry thinking to reflect the object things of its uncertainty, then gradually achieve the rational understanding of blurry objects. Zhang Qiao (1997) thinks that the origin of blurry language is the blurry of human thinking. For example, when the doctor gives bad news to the patient, when politicians discuss the sensitive issues, when the diplomats discuss the international affairs, they almost use blurry language. The blurry thinking focuses on regarding the objective things as a whole, sketching an outline of the things in a similar way, making a comprehensive description, and drawing an approximated conclusion.

Basic Features of Blurry Meanings

Uncertainty

The biggest feature of blurry language is the uncertainty. Because it is difficult to define a clear boundary of the nature and status of objective things, the denotative of words used to describe the nature and status of the objective things fuzzily. We say that one word’s extension boundary is unclear, not meaning that all of its boundaries are not clear. As a matter of fact, although the extension of the boundary is unclear, the center of the blurry words is clear. For example, the boundaries of “red”, “orange”, and “purple” are not clear, but the center of

“red” is clear, so people can say that the wall of the Tian’anmen tower is red with no hesitation. In practical application, it is not easy to define whether some objects belong to the scope of blurry words or not. For example, “good” is a blurry word, and its extension is uncertain. Like “The weather is good”, “He is a good man”, and other expressions, it is difficult to describe how good in detail. The most common words such as “morning”, “evening”, “noon”, “Youth”, and so on are blurry language. In some adverbs what show measure, scope, and procedure, blurry language also has uncertainty. Blurry words such as “about”, “around”, “almost”, “very”, “nearly”, “roughly”, and “a little” are uncertain, too. The uncertainty of blurry language is also an inevitable reflection of objective things in language. Because of the existence and development of things themselves in the scale, level, speed, etc., it is hard for people to define a clear boundary.

Relativity

The place of semantic blurriness is not absolutely blurry. It is not independent, but it always depends on the clarity and certainty of meaning. The size of the semantic blurriness of a linguistic unit is compared with the accuracy of the semantics of the linguistic units. Let’s compare “She scored 589 points in the college entrance examination this year” with “She scored more than 580 points in the college entrance examination this year”. The former is accurate, the latter is blurry. But if the latter compares with “She scored more than 500 points in the college entrance examination this year”, its semantics are more clear. What’s more, a male with 1.6 meters can be said shore, but can not be said to a female who is with 1.6 meters. There are many high buildings in Shanghai, but there are mostly low buildings in Suzhou, the ancient city. Therefore, in Shanghai, more than 30 layers are called high-rise, but in Suzhou, buildings more than 10 levels will be regarded as tall. The relativity of blurry language itself is also reflected in the fact that it is sometimes obviously influenced by subjective consciousness. For example, for the same thing, a person thinks it is “beautiful”, but others think that it is “ugly” because of age, identity, habits, mentality. Professor Wu Tieping (1999, p. 67) once said, “The old man or the pedestrian feels that it is far from the east to the west of Beijing, but the travelers around the world feel that Shanghai is close to Tokyo”. Therefore, many blurry languages can come to different conclusions according to different individuals, places, and time. It is the relativity of blurry language.

Duality

Terminology and daily expression. The terminology is clear while the daily expression is blurry. From a certain point of view, the lexical system is composed of the vocabulary system of subject terms and the vocabulary system of daily language. Generally speaking, the meaning of the lexical system is clear, such as light year, celestial body etc, but the meaning of daily expression is mostly blurry. These two vocabulary systems are both distributed and closely related in language use. Sometimes the same meaning of the same word has two types of variants as discipline and everyday language. For example, the Chinese calendar of “spring”, “summer”, “autumn”, and “winter” has artificially made a clear division (strictly speaking, the provision also exists a certain blurriness). However, the alternation of four seasons in natural phenomena is a gradual transition, and there is no clear boundary between them. Thus, people in the daily life of the understanding of the four seasons tend to have blurriness.

Original meaning and extended meaning. This part can be divided into two situations. Firstly, the original meaning is clear while the extended meaning is blurry. This kind of situation is generally the original meaning

which has the clear specialized terminology in the discipline, but the extended meaning is the blurry in daily language. For example: “Hardware” and “software” are terms in computer science. “Hardware” refers to a component of a computer system, which is a general term for the various components and devices that make up the computer. But now it usually refers to the material equipment object conditions. “Software” refers to the computer program for calculating, judging and processing information. It is usually divided into two categories: system software and application software. Now it usually refers to the main conditions of personnel.

Secondly, the original meaning is blurry while the extended meaning is clear. Generally speaking, this situation is the original meaning of the everyday English with blurriness, but the extended meaning is a clear technical term or used for specific reference. For example: “Negro” originally refers to the skin of black people, extended to black people, or used in some historical contexts, such as in the name of the United Negro College Fund and the Negro league in sports. The original meaning of “potbelly” is a large round unattractive stomach that sticks out, extended specifically to pregnant people.

Real number and imaginary number. The real number is clear while the imaginary number is blurry. This kind of situation is related to numerals. In general, a numeral represents the exact number, its meaning is clear. But when a numeral represents the imaginary number, it is blurry. For example, the meaning of the word “half” has both a precise and a blurry side. When the “half” means “1/2”, it is the precise language, such as “half a foot of cloth”, “half catty oil” etc. When “half” means “the two parts roughly equal to each other”, it is a blurry language. For example, “A beam of exhausted sun in the water paved. Half the river greenish and the other half red” (Bai Juyi, *Chant of the Twilight River*). The “half” in this example does not mean the exact concept of “1/2”. Most of the words combined with “half” are blurry. For example, “half a lifetime” refers to the life time before or after middle age. “Half of one country” refers to the preservation or loss of part of the land; “half of something” means one aspect or one section. The semantics of “half” in these words are blurry.

The Pragmatic Functions of Blurry Meaning

Grice (1975) proposed cooperative principle. They are:

Maxim of quality: try to make your contribution one that is true.

Maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

Maxim of relevance: make your contribution relevant.

Maxim of manner: be perspicuous.

But in real life, people often violate the above maxims on purpose. For instance, the sentence “President Xi’s visit to America is quite successful” can often be seen in news. Obviously it does not follow the maxim of quantity. We do not know what kind of concept of “quite successful”, but it helps to maintain good social relations between the two sides, and communication can continue in peace and friendship to realize the purpose of communication. Successful communication can’t be separated from semantic blurriness, which can improve the effect of language expression and enhance the flexibility of language expression. However, the violation of the cooperative principle of Grice can help us to achieve semantic blurriness. The purpose of this intention is to attract the attention of the listener, to understand the implied meaning, to consider his intention to violate the principles. The pragmatic functions of blurry words in *vague language* by British linguist Joanna Channell (1994)

are summarized as follows: (1) giving right amount of information; (2) deliberately withholding information; (3) using language persuasively; (4) lexical gaps; (5) lacking specific information; (6) displacement; (7) self-protection; (8) power and politeness; (9) informality and atmosphere; and (10) women's language. The pragmatic functions of blurry language what Channell concluded are detailed. Here we summarize the pragmatic functions of blurry language as follows.

Improving the Accuracy

The use of blurry can improve the accuracy of language expression. Blurriness and accuracy are not contradictory, absolute, but coexist. The use of blurry language seems to be contrary to the desire of people in communication, but it does not affect people's normal communication, it can improve the accuracy of language expression. The use of blurry language in conversation is not a violation of the cooperative principle, but rather a relay of the principle. For example: He is more or less six feet tall. The sentence does not indicate that his exact height, and in the absence of his accurate height, he can only use more or less; this vague language provides a range of roughly credible quality. Another example is the news reports, which can be described as "accurate". But only a little attention, we can find a great number of blurry languages, which is decided by the news of the accuracy, simplicity and effectiveness. For example: "There are over 4,000 archeological sites in Mesa Verde National Park, and approximately 600 are cliff dwellings. These homes were beneath towering alcoves of rocks, some carved into vertical cliff faces hundreds of feet high. They range in size from one-room house to villages with nearly 200 rooms." Here, it is difficult for the reporter to find out exactly how many sites are there. However, the reader will not deny that such statement is correct.

"In the east-central coal-mining region, where nine mines have been struck, at least 3,000 miners blocked roads and rail road tracks and clashed repeatedly with riot police on daylong confrontations. Two dozen miners were arrested. The Christian Science Monitor, August 11, 1987." Here, it is difficult for the reporter to figure out exactly how many people are there in the activity.

Enhancing the Flexibility

It helps to enhance the flexibility of language expression. Verbal communication is often influenced by the subjective and objective factors, such as topic, content, object of communication, language environment, and so on. Sometimes in order to create a harmonious atmosphere of communication, to leave a buffer room to both sides of the language communication, the speaker often avoids the words being too straight. Because the blurry language can increase the flexibility of language expression, it has become the main tool for people to realize their communicative purposes. Channell cited the example of someone who introduced a woman and said, "She is about 29 years old". This sentence actually conceals the exact age of the lady. When Channell asked the speaker why he didn't say "30 years old" directly, but said "29", the answer was that women usually don't like to be said to have reached the age of 30.

In the international business negotiations, it is inevitable that it appears the scene of fierce debate, even deadlock. When the negotiations are in conflict with the two sides, but the situation is not suitable to say, people often need to deliberately use blurry language in order to leave the necessary room for convolution. For example:

"I am afraid that the proposal you put forward just now is not up much".

"I agree with most of what you said, but..."

“The price is a little bit higher. Could you cut it down a little”?

In the above sentences, “is not up much”, “most”, and “a little” are all blurry expressions. They have denotative meanings, but they do not have definite boundaries so that they can be understood flexibly.

Augmenting the Effectiveness

The effectiveness of verbal communication can be improved. Information delivery requires not only accurate and flexible, but also requires rapid and savings to the greatest possible. In daily communication, the use of vague language to improve the efficiency of language expression is very common. American Professor J. Goguen (Zhao & Mao, 2000) once said

The uncertainty of expression is not a bad thing, but a good thing. It can delivery enough information with less price, and can make an effective decision to complicated things. That is to say, uncertainty is helpful to enhance the efficiency. (pp. 88-91)

For instance, when you meet someone in the street, he maybe ask what you are doing recently. You answer that you are writing something. It is enough, and you don't need to tell him the detail things, for the more information will be prolix. Thus, people need to resort to blurry language. For example:

“More than 40 developing nations, most within the past several months, have turned to education to combat acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The campaigns use radio, television leaflets, classroom discussions, and other method to inform women men and children how to protect themselves from Aids. The Christian Science Monitor, May 1, 1987”.

This news uses the blurry language. It uses few words to describe the situation of developing countries to propagandize and prevent acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

Making the Language Vividness

It can also make the language euphemistic, polite, and decent. In the process of communication, especially some sensitive and stimulating topics, the use of blurry language can avoid embarrassing. In the perspective of pragmatic, the use of blurry language is mainly based on the “Politeness Principle”. Following Grice's presentation of the CP, Leech (1983) puts forward six maxims of the Politeness Principle which runs as follow.

Maxim of Tact (in directives and commissives)

- (a) Minimize cost yo other
- (b) Maximize benefit yo other

Maxim of Generosity (in directives and commissives)

- (a) Minimize benefit to self
- (b) Maximize cost yo self

Maxim of Approbation (in expressives and assertives)

- (a) Minimize dispraise of other
- (b) Maximize praise of other

Maxim of Modesty (in expressives and assertives)

- (a) Minimize praise of self
- (b) Maximize dispraise of self

Maxim of Agreement (in assertives)

(a) Minimize disagreement between self and other

(b) Maximize agreement between self and other

Maxim of Sympathy (in assertives)

(a) Minimize antipathy between self and other

(b) Maximize sympathy between self and other

Briefly, this principle requires speakers to “minimize the expression of impolite belief”. These maxims can help to explain, among other things, why certain forms are more acceptable than others. In British culture, for example, the Politeness Principle probably accounts for the use of “white lies” in conversation. For instance, if someone invites another person to a party and that person wants to decline the invitation, rather than saying “No, I don’t want to come”, that person might pretend to have another engagement and say “Thank you, but I’m going out that night”. Then the host will probably “get the message” and stop inviting. This belongs to a successful verbal communication.

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