

A Study on the Meta-Pragmatic Awareness of Foreign Ministry Spokesperson from Markedness Degrees of Pragmatic Vagueness

Siyuan Liu^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

Email Address

Liusiyuan_Sally@163.com (Siyuan Liu)

*Correspondence: Liusiyuan_Sally@163.com

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Abstract:

This study explores the meta-pragmatic awareness of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson by analyzing markedness degrees of pragmatic vagueness in his 2023 regular press conference remarks. Diplomatic language strategically balances precision and ambiguity to convey national stances while managing geopolitical sensitivities. Focusing on XI's discourse, the research identifies how pragmatic vagueness—marked by indirectness, hedging, and context-driven adaptability—reflects varying levels of markedness, thereby signaling his meta-pragmatic awareness in navigating diplomatic communication. By categorizing markedness levels, the study reveals how Wang calibrates ambiguity to align with diplomatic objectives, mitigate confrontations, and maintain policy coherence. Findings demonstrate that intentional vagueness serves as a tactical tool, where higher markedness correlates with heightened sensitivity or strategic evasion, while lower markedness reflects routine diplomatic rhetoric. This analysis underscores the role of meta-pragmatic awareness in shaping diplomatic narratives, emphasizing how marked linguistic choices mediate between national interests and international discourse. The study contributes to understanding the strategic use of vagueness in diplomatic contexts and highlights the interplay between linguistic markedness and pragmatic competence in public diplomacy.

Keywords:

Pragmatic Vagueness, Meta-pragmatic Awareness, Markedness Theory, Diplomatic Discourse

1. Introduction

1.1. Research object

The research object of this study is remarks of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson on the regular press conference. Diplomatic language is a special language, facing the questions of journalists from all over the world, it is a language

tool to embody a country's foreign policy and defend a country's interests. In the practice of diplomatic work, the accurate and appropriate use of diplomatic language is a basic requirement for every diplomat [1].

1.2. Research objective

Diplomatic language is characterized by the unity of accuracy and vagueness [1]. This study will focus on the pragmatic vagueness of spokesperson's remarks on the regular press conference held in 2023, which is a regular strategy utilized by Foreign Ministry spokesperson.

It aims to investigate the degree of foreign ministry spokesperson's meta-pragmatic awareness based on his markedness degrees of pragmatic vagueness in his remarks in regular press conference.

2. Literature review

2.1. Pragmatic Vagueness

The study of pragmatic ambivalence began with Leech, Brown & Levinson [2,3]. Later, scholars at home and abroad may be interested in grammatical ambiguity, such as Jiaxuan Shen, Anshi Shi, Blackburn, Fredsted, or some researches on pragmatic ambivalence, such as Thomas, Zhaoxiong He et al. [4]. It can be seen that pragmatic ambiguity has many synonyms that are mixed and switched. For another example, Ziran He mainly discussed the "unclear" and hedges (such as sort of) of various meanings. Dongming Yu compared grammatical ambiguity and pragmatic ambiguity [5]. Grammatical ambiguity belongs to the grammar-semantic category, while pragmatic ambiguity is a pragmatic category. Guojin Hou presented the concept of "pragmatic vagueness", which refers to any kind of vagueness that are driven by meta-pragmatic awareness and serve specific pragmatic intention [6].

2.2. Diplomatic discourse

As early as 2006, taking a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, Bhatia, A. took a study of political press conferences, allows a closer look at diplomatic talk to communicate political differences in a positive way to smooth out socio-political and ideological discrepancies that often divide prominent political figures [7].

Chinese diplomatic discourse has gained more and more attention in the last few years.

Appraisal system or appraisal theory has become one of hot issues. Based on a corpus of 98 political texts issued by Chinese governing bodies from 2000 to 2018, Li, T., & Zhu, Y. adopts Appraisal System to analyze the lexical items that indicate attitudes towards China and other countries with a view to revealing the ways in which China and other countries are appraised in Chinese political discourse [8].

Drawing on the engagement system within appraisal theory and the interpreting case of the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's press conference in March 2018, Li Xin conducts a systematic study of the interpreter's engagement choices compared against the source text engagement profiles [9,10].

Besides, addressee is also worth discussion. Tang, L. explores the putative addressee in the persuasion of diplomatic discourse by adopting White's recent proposals as to putative reader/addressee positioning to specifically examine China's

communication efforts through South African English-language newspapers in the new era [11].

2.3. Summary

The study of pragmatic vagueness began with Leech, Brown and Levinson, and was elaborated and developed in Thomas' *Meaning in interaction*. And pragmatic vagueness has already get combined with diplomatic discourse in previous studies [12]. However, less studies have investigated the meta-pragmatic awareness of Foreign Ministry spokesperson especially Mr. Wang, who is a wise and clam Foreign Ministry spokesperson, hence this study is worth investigating.

3. Research design

3.1. Research questions

(1) What kind of pragmatic vagueness strategies does Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson adopt?

(2) What's spokesperson's markedness degrees of pragmatic vagueness in his remarks on the regular press conference?

(3) What's the degree of spokesperson's meta-pragmatic awareness?

3.2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is the markedness degrees of pragmatic vagueness proposed by Guojin Hou.

Speech communication can be divided into literal talk and loose talk, and literal talk can be divided into non-metaphorical utterance and metaphorical utterance. Non-metaphorical utterances include five kinds of pragmatic vagueness, approximation, fuzziness, generality, ambiguity and ambivalence and so on, while a metaphorical utterance includes four kinds of pragmatic vagueness such as metaphor, meiosis, irony and hyperbole and so on. Since loose talk doesn't express its original meaning, its expression must be vague. Therefore, both kinds of vagueness in loose talk can be regarded as pragmatic vagueness[13].

Hou Guojin integrated the degree assessment of meta-pragmatic awareness on the basis of He's classification.

Hou divided speech communication into unmarked item and marked item. In general, the meta-pragmatic awareness of the literal talk is in a state of none or low, which can be called "unmarked item". In contrast, the degree of meta-pragmatic awareness of loose speech is in a state of possessing or possessing a high degree, which can be called "marked item". According to the level of meta-pragmatic awareness, "unmarked item" can be divided into the subclasses: "unmarked" and "weak marked", and "marked item" can be divided into two subclasses: "weak to medium mark" and "medium to strong mark".

Assuming that the effort of the recipient in reasoning the utterance is (X), and the degree of meta-pragmatic awareness of utterance D is set as 1 (the default value), according to the above reasoning, when the effort of the recipient in the utterance is equal to, slightly greater than, or much greater than N (the default value), then the token value of utterance D can be represented by (1), (2), (3) respectively: (1) If X is equal to (=) N, MPA = 1, D is U (unmarked expression); (2) If X is slightly greater

than ($>$) N, $MPA > 1$, D is M^- or M^+ (weakly or medium mark); (3) If X is much greater than ($>+$) N, $MPA >+ 1$, D is M^{++} (strong mark) [6]. (Table 1)

Table 1. The markedness degrees of pragmatic vagueness by Hou.

Speech Communication	Unmarked item (literal talk)	Unmarked (U) (no or low MPA)	
		Weak mark (M^-) (have or low MPA)	
	Marked item (loose talk)	Weak to medium mark (approximation, fuzziness, generality, ambiguity, ambivalence etc.)	Weak mark (M^-) (have or low MPA)
			Medium mark (M^+) (Medium MPA)
		Medium to strong mark (metaphor, meiosis, irony, hyperbole etc.)	Medium mark (M^+) (Medium MPA)
			Strong mark (M^{++}) (high MPA)

Since this study mainly focuses on the phenomenon of pragmatic vagueness, which is equal to loose talk, this study only adopts the framework of marked item in this classification.

3.3. Data collection and processing

The corpus of this article comes from the website of the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China. The corpus of spokesperson's regular press conference is collected from January 9, 2023 to December 22, 2023, and other spokespersons' answers to the press conference and press conference without notating a spokesperson are excluded. A total of 114 records of spokesperson's regular press conference are collected. In each record, the questions and answers that do not use the pragmatic vagueness strategy to answer questions will be eliminated, and the questions and answers that use that strategy will be collected.

In this study, we will classify spokesperson's answers to journalists' questions at the regular press conference by using a Hou's framework and mark the meta-pragmatic awareness levels respectively. After marking all the answers with pragmatic vagueness strategies, the meta-pragmatic awareness level of spokesperson was statistically analyzed, and the overall meta-pragmatic awareness of spokesperson will be concluded.

4. Results and discussion

The pragmatic vagueness discussed in this study are any kind of vagueness that are driven by meta-pragmatic awareness and serve specific pragmatic intention [6]. The discourse of the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry serves a specific diplomatic purpose and represents the diplomatic attitude of the whole country, which contains different degrees of meta-pragmatic awareness. The following part will analyze the pragmatic vagueness strategy spokesperson adopted in answering reporters' questions at the regular press conference and the level of his pragmatic vagueness markedness to judge the degree of his meta-pragmatic awareness.

4.1. Non-metaphorical utterances

In non-metaphorical utterances, the pragmatic vagueness strategy spokesperson adopted mainly focus on the following three aspects: approximation, fuzziness and generality.

4.1.1. Approximation

(1) Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on December 8, 2023

路透社记者：。。。。。。此外，台湾“外交部”今天表示，对于结束与台湾关系转向中国的拉美国家，中方没有履行承诺。外交部对此有何评论？

Reuters:And Taiwan's foreign ministry today also said that China has failed to live up to the promises it made Latin American countries that ended ties with Taiwan in favor of China. Does the foreign ministry have any comment on that as well?

汪文斌：首先我要纠正你一个错误说法，台湾是中国的一部分，不存在什么“国防部”“外交部”。。。。。。关于你提到的第二个问题，我想说的是，中国和拉美国家之间的正常友好关系不断深入发展，相关互利合作正在**积极推进**。。。。。。

Spokesperson: First of all, I would like to correct you that Taiwan is part of China. There is no so-called "defense ministry" or "foreign ministry" of Taiwan. On your second question, let me say that the normal, friendly relations between China and Latin American countries are deepening and our mutually beneficial cooperation is **making positive progress**.

In this example, the journalist asked about the relations between Latin American countries and China and Taiwan province, and spokesperson answered that the mutual cooperation between China and Latin American countries is "making positive progress", which is a pragmatic vagueness strategy. Spokesperson's answer is a rough description of the specific degree of cooperation between China and Latin American countries, to what extent it has been progressed, a little or huge progress promotion, haven't been clearly stated. It is also not clear whether China is actively promoting it, or the Latin American countries are actively promoting it, or both sides are actively promoting it. The degree of cooperation is only generally informed with "positive", so that the effort that the listener need pay to infer the speaker's discourse is greater than the default value, so $MPA > 1$, his discourse can be marked as M +, hence spokesperson's meta-pragmatic awareness here can be manifested as medium level.

4.1.2. Fuzziness

(2) Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on December 7, 2023

《纽约时报》记者：今年以来，欧洲对与中国有关的安全问题表达了越来越多的担忧。中方是否认为，在安全和乌克兰问题上，欧方在追随美国的观点，而不是从自身利益出发作出判断？

The New York Times: Europe has been expressing more concern this year about security issues in connection with China. Is Europe following America's views on security and Ukraine instead of assessing Europe's own interests? What is China's view?

汪文斌：中方始终从战略高度和长远角度看待中欧关系。我们视欧洲为全面战略伙伴和多极化世界中的重要一极，支持欧方坚持战略自主，同中方一道践行真正的多边主义，为维护世界和平、促进共同发展、应对全球性挑战而携手努力。

Spokesperson: China always views its relations with Europe from a strategic height and long-term perspective and sees Europe as a comprehensive strategic partner and an important force in a multi-polar world. We support the EU in upholding strategic autonomy, working together with China to practice true multilateralism and jointly

striving to safeguard world peace, promote common development and tackle global challenges.

In this example, in response to a journalist's question about how China sees the European side following the views of the United States, the two abstract words "strategic height" and "long-term perspective" are used to vaguely answer the question. The range between "strategic height" and "long-term perspective" is blurred, hence it can be classified as fuzziness in pragmatic vagueness. The effort required by the listener to understand the "strategic height" and "long-term perspective" is slightly greater than the default value, so $MPA > 1$, spokesperson's discourse can be marked as M-, and his meta-pragmatic awareness can be regarded as weak level.

4.1.3. Generality

(3) Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on December 22, 2023

半岛电视台记者：最近一段时期，以色列当局不断以市政建设为由没收被占领土，尤其是东耶路撒冷巴勒斯坦人的土地，这种做法违反国际法，并且直接成为巴以冲突加剧的导火索，破坏和平，也破坏了“两国方案”的可能性。请问中方对以色列上述行为持何立场？作为联合国安理会常任理事国，中国可以采取哪些措施来制止以色列这些违反国际法的行为？

Al Jazeera: Lately, the Israeli authorities have been confiscating occupied territories in the name of urban development, especially the Palestinian-owned land in East Jerusalem. Such practice violates international law and has become a fuse directly causing the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which undermines peace and sabotages the possibility of the two-state solution. What is China's position on Israel's acts? As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, what measures can China take to stop these acts of Israel which violate international law?

汪文斌：中方一贯反对以色列在巴勒斯坦被占领土上兴建定居点，反对单方面改变耶路撒冷地位和历史形成的现状的行为，始终认为耶路撒冷地位问题应根据联合国有关决议，由有关各方通过谈判来解决。。。。。。

Spokesperson: China opposes Israel building settlements on the occupied Palestinian territory. China opposes unilateral change to Jerusalem's status and status quo shaped by history. We believe that the issue of Jerusalem's status should be settled through negotiations by parties concerned in accordance with relevant UN resolutions.

In this example, when asked what measures China could take to prevent Israel from violating international law, spokesperson did not directly answer the question, but said that "parties concerned" should settle it through negotiations, which is a typical pragmatic vagueness strategy of referring to ambiguous subjects and making diplomatic language appear more objective, politer, and more appropriate. This pragmatic vagueness strategy can be classified into generality. The expression of "parties concerned" is a general expression of countries involved in this issue, which needs to be inferred by the listener and belongs to the generic scope of generality [14]. The effort required by the listener to understand spokesperson's discourse is greater than the default value, so $MPA > 1$ and his discourse can be marked as M+, where spokesperson's meta-pragmatic awareness can be manifested as the medium level.

4.1. Metaphorical utterances

Spokesperson seldom adopted metaphorical utterances, the pragmatic vagueness strategy adopted by spokesperson mainly focus on the usage of metaphor.

4.2.1. Metaphor

(4) Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on December 22, 2023

总台央广记者：日前，在中国同尼加拉瓜复交两周年之际，习近平主席同奥尔特加总统通电话，两国元首宣布中尼正式建立战略伙伴关系。这是今年中国与拉美国家“朋友圈”不断扩大、走深的收官之作。请问发言人能否进一步介绍中尼、中拉合作的有关情况？

CCTV: President Xi had a recent phone call with President of Nicaragua Daniel Ortega ahead of the second anniversary of the resumption of diplomatic relations. The two heads of state announced the establishment of strategic partnership between the two countries. This marks a capstone of China's effort this year to enhance friendship with Latin American countries. Can you share more details of China's cooperation with Nicaragua and with Latin American countries?

汪文斌：。。。。。。中方始终认为，拉美不是各种势力相互争斗的“竞技场”。我们尊重拉美各国自主选择符合自身国情的发展道路的权利，支持拉美国家联合自强、用拉美方式解决拉美问题。。。。。。

Spokesperson:China always believes that Latin America is not **a wrestling ground** between different forces. We respect Latin American countries' right to independently choosing development paths that suit their national conditions, and supports Latin American countries in seeking strength through solidarity and addressing issues in the region through Latin American ways.

In this example, when answering the cooperation between China and Latin America, spokesperson did not directly clarify the present condition of Latin American countries, but used metaphorical pragmatic vagueness to describe it. He compared Latin America to “a wrestling ground”, suggesting that some countries were using the region as a platform for their force struggle, regardless of their own national interests and security. The use of the metaphor needs to be inferred by the listener, whose effort to infer spokesperson's utterance is much greater than the default value, so $MPA > +1$, where his discourse can be marked as M^{++} , hence spokesperson's metapragmatic awareness can be manifested as a strong level.

5. Conclusions

The pragmatic vagueness strategy that spokesperson adopted mainly focus on generality, then fuzziness and approximation in non-metaphorical utterances, while in metaphorical utterances, the most frequently used strategy is metaphor. Hence the markedness degrees of pragmatic vagueness of spokesperson mainly can be marked as medium mark with little weak mark and strong mark.

The findings show that Foreign Ministry spokesperson possess a certain metapragmatic awareness, most of which can be regarded as medium level, a small part of which can be regarded as weak level, and another small part can be regarded as strong level. In general, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson has a moderate metapragmatic awareness in diplomatic occasions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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