

A Study on the Interpretation Strategies of Diplomatic Vague Language from the Perspective of Relevance Theory: A Case Study of the Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2024

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Abstract: Vagueness is an intrinsic property of natural language and a typical feature of diplomatic discourse. As China's diplomatic engagements expand alongside its development as a major country, diplomatic interpreting, a core part of cross-cultural communication, exerts a direct impact on national interest delivery and international image building. Due to the strong political sensitivity of diplomatic language, spokespersons frequently adopt vague wording to reconcile stance formulation and communicative flexibility for safeguarding national interests and core positions, yet such usage poses tough challenges for interpreters. Relevant existing studies are insufficient in contextualized research on diplomatic vague language interpretation, hence this thesis adopts qualitative and case study methods based on China's 2024 MFA regular press conferences to analyze its interpreting under Relevance Theory. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, interpreting constitutes an ostensive-inferential communication process requiring interpreters to deduce implicit communicative intentions from contextualized ostensive behaviors and abide by optimal relevance to deliver effortlessly comprehensible target-language expressions. The paper categorizes frequently-used vague language into demonstratives, subjective adjectives, abstract nouns and hedges (the most widely applied). Three interpreting strategies are summarized: vague-for-vague translation, precise rendering of vagueness and omission, facilitating audiences' optimal relevance and accurate comprehension of diplomatic intentions. This research offers practical interpreting guidance, advances interdisciplinary integration of pragmatics and interpreting, and broadens research coverage for both diplomatic vagueness and Relevance Theory's application.

1. Introduction

This chapter functions mainly as an introductory section, setting out the research background, significance and core questions of the present study. It will also provide an overview of the thesis's organizational framework.

1.1. Research Background

Diplomatic language embodies a country's core interests and complicated political negotiations, and it features subtlety and implicitness that leave room for flexible interpretation. As a core component of diplomatic communication, vague language can not only state a country's bottom line, but also leave flexible room for follow-up diplomatic exchanges. It is a key way to deal with sensitive issues and avoid diplomatic risks. Using vague language in the appropriate way can directly tie to the effectiveness of diplomatic communication and the preservation of countries' interests. Vague language was used quite frequently at the 2024 regular Press Conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which requires interpreters to grasp the implied intentions behind the words rather than word-for-word translation.

L.A. Zadeh put forward the “vague set theory” back in 1965[6]. Since then, studies on vague language have developed into a pattern of influence across different subjects. However, specialized research on diplomatic interpretation scenarios in specific years still has some limits. For one thing, some studies use mixed language materials from several years, so they lack timeliness. For another, most strategy analyses only stay at the language level. They fail to explain the inner working principles by linking them with the hot issues of that year. Qu Lizi pointed out that the use of diplomatic vague language is closely related to the international order and issues of a certain period[10]. Research that is separated from the specific context of a year can hardly reflect the real essence of diplomatic practice. 2024 was a key year for great changes in the international situation. It involved hot topics like the "Global South" and "Unilateralism". The use of vague language showed some new traits during this time. Relevant research on interpretation is badly in need of further development. At the same time, Deng Yiting confirmed that relevance theory can explain the interpretation of diplomatic vague language[7]. But most existing applications focus on general scenarios. They are not connected to the practical needs of the year 2024.

The press conferences held by the Chinese government are important platforms for the world to understand China. Their language is closely linked to national image and interests. This means that vague language needs to be used in a more flexible way [1]. In such situations, vague language can improve communication efficiency, ease tense relationships, safeguard national interests and protect confidential information. However, interpretation faces two big challenges. The first challenge is the uncertainty caused by the flexibility of vague language. The second one is the barriers brought by the differences in context and culture between the two sides of communication. These factors all show that this research is necessary.

1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

Purpose of this study: How to use the first-hand materials from the 2024 Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conferences to establish an analytical framework suitable for the interpretation of diplomatic vague language from the perspective of Relevance Theory, and summarize interpretation methods that conform to the diplomatic reality of that year.

In terms of theoretical implications, the present study holds significance on two fronts. For one thing, we seek to verify how effectively Relevance Theory can account for diplomatic interpreting by leveraging actual 2024 cases. Such an approach not only adds a timely dimension to cognitive pragmatics and translation research, but also answers the demand for “yearly contextual adjustment” emphasized in recent academic discussions. Taking Zhang Bingqing's 2023 argument as an example, the scholar pointed out that strategies for diplomatic interpreting should be adjusted according to the annually changing contextual factors[12]. Additionally, organizing the categorization and occurrence frequency of vague language within this year-specific dataset helps gather more tangible empirical data for associated academic areas. For another, applying Relevance

Theory to the analysis of diplomatic vague expressions effectively broadens its practical scope in cross-cultural diplomatic settings. This practice aligns with the “ostensive-inferential” communication framework initially put forward by Sperber and Wilson[5], while also offering a basis for comparative studies spanning multiple years in the future.

From a practical standpoint, this research can offer a yearly targeted case resource for interpreting instruction and diplomatic interpreting practice. It can also assist interpreters in tackling the common challenge of vague language in high-profile issues, thus preventing diplomatic misunderstandings arising from inadequate interpreting strategies[12]. Zhang Bingqing argued that a diplomatic interpreter’s competence in handling vague language may directly impact cross-cultural communication outcomes[12]. Meanwhile, the interpreting cases from Premier Li Keqiang’s press conference during his trip to Germany also show that applying contextually suitable vague language interpreting techniques can notably boost communication efficiency. The strategies explored in this study can provide actionable guidelines for interpreters, particularly regarding 2024’s major topics like “South-South Cooperation” and “Mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” helping to raise the professionalism and precision of diplomatic interpreting in real scenarios.

How to deal with such practical issues with sound strategies? Especially for the key topics of 2024, such as “Global South Cooperation” and “mediation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict”, these strategies can help interpreters more accurately and professionally grasp the methods of handling vague language to reduce diplomatic misunderstandings caused by expression deviations.

1.3. Research Questions

In the 2024 regular press conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, what kinds of high-frequency vague language appear, and what are their distribution features?

How can Relevance Theory guide interpreters to explain and convert different types of vague language in this year’s real language materials?

According to the case studies of the 2024 hot topics, what are the adaptability features of the interpreting strategies for diplomatic vague language, and what kinds of situations these strategies apply to?

1.4. Research Structure

This thesis is structured into six distinct sections. The introductory chapter elaborates on the background and purposes of the present research. The literature review section organizes existing academic findings and identifies gaps in current studies. The theoretical framework part sets out the core notions of Relevance Theory and its guiding significance for this research project. The research methodology chapter clarifies the procedures of corpus construction and specific research steps to be taken. The case analysis section picks real-world examples from the 2024 press conferences of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrating how interpreters address vague language in practice. The concluding chapter summarizes key research outcomes, points out limitations of the study, and proposes directions for future exploration.

2. Literature Review

This chapter introduces the definition and classification of diplomatic vague language, the application of Relevance Theory in interpretation, and the research trends of diplomatic vague language interpretation.

2.1. Vague Language and Diplomatic Vague Language Research

The core feature of vague language lies in indeterminate semantic boundaries, a core definition put forward by Channell [2], who summarizes three standard criteria for identifying deliberate vague expressions. From a pragmatic perspective, domestic scholars further distinguish unintentional semantic vagueness from strategically deployed pragmatic vagueness, whose core difference lies in speakers' communicative purposes [9]. In diplomatic contexts, vague language is defined as "a strategic linguistic choice serving specific diplomatic purposes". It is essentially different from the unintentional vagueness that occurs in daily communication.

Scholars at home and abroad hold diverse classification frameworks for vague language. Lakoff divides hedges into two types: variation and approximation[4]. Domestic scholars have also proposed targeted classification systems suited to diplomatic discourse. Deng Yiting constructs a four-category typology covering modifiers, demonstratives, abstract nouns and subjective evaluative words[7], while Qu Lizhen further elaborates the lexical and syntactic classification standards of diplomatic vague expressions[10].

Among these classification methods, the four-category division proposed by Deng Yiting — including modifiers, demonstratives, abstract nouns and subjective evaluative words — is consistent with the actual linguistic data[7]. It is also highly compatible with the usage features of vague language in 2024, thus providing direct reference for this paper. Qu Lizhen further confirmed the key role of abstract words and subjective adjectives in expressing diplomatic positions[10]. The classification method at lexical and syntactic levels put forward by Gile provides a supplement for analyzing complex vague expressions in 2024 diplomatic discourse[1].

2.2. The Application of Relevance Theory in the Field of Interpreting

Relevance Theory was put forward by Sperber and Wilson in 1986[5]. Its core viewpoint is that verbal communication is an ostensive-inferential process, and the key to successful communication lies in achieving optimal relevance. Later, Gutt applied this theory to translation studies, holding that translation is a communicative activity based on interpretive resemblance[3].

Existing studies show that interpreters should mobilize contextual assumptions to deduce speakers' communicative intentions, and Relevance Theory serves as an effective guide for interpreters' comprehension. Deng Yiting also confirms that this theory can well explain the cognitive process of understanding diplomatic vague language[7], and relevant authentic cases have demonstrated the practical value of Relevance Theory.

However, most current studies focus on general scenarios. They lack specialized analysis for the specific situation in 2024, which leads to a disconnection between theoretical exploration and practical application.

Current research has two directions. One is to examine translation strategies based on Skopos Theory and Functional Equivalence Theory[8][14], and the other is to conduct empirical studies with corpora[11].

Zhang Bingqing points out that existing strategies are overly broad[12]. They cannot be adjusted according to specific scenarios, so professional interpreters only choose methods based on "field characteristics". Qu Lizhen proceeds from the Cooperative Principle and finds that when dealing with vague expressions, interpreters need to take both the original meaning and target language habits into account. Overly literal translation will lead to the breakdown of communication[10].

Both types of research share the same limitation: the cases adopted lack clear chronological information, and the data fail to cover the annual hot-button issues. Gile put forward two strategies, namely "vagueness resulting from vagueness" and "clarity resulting from vagueness"[1]. The present study takes these two strategies as its basis and revises their applicable modes in light of the

prominent diplomatic topics of 2024.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter explains the core concepts and guiding logic of relevance theory.

3.1. Core Concepts of Relevance Theory

Ostensive-Inferential Framework: In the 2024 diplomatic exchanges, speakers adopted vague expressions to convey intricate intentions in an ostensive way. Interpreters are required to deduce these intentions by integrating contextual assumptions specific to that year, including developments of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and cooperation among the Global South. They then need to perform re-ostension in the target tongue, enabling the audience to finish the inferential procedure. Deng Yiting highlighted that throughout this process, interpreters have to grasp both the superficial vagueness of linguistic expressions and the clarity of core intentions beneath[7]. Certain 2024-specific diplomatic topics, such as “opposition to unilateralism” and “nuclear non-proliferation initiatives”, offered crucial cognitive hints for the deduction of communicative intentions.

Principle of Optimal Relevance: Relevance Theory posits that relevance equals contextual effects divided by processing effort. When interpreting vague utterances within 2024 diplomatic communications, the principle of optimal relevance requires interpreters’ renditions to enable audiences to grasp core official stances with minimal cognitive cost while retaining the necessary degree of semantic vagueness. As an example, during a May 2024 response addressing Japan’s pledges on the non-proliferation treaty, a Chinese term signifying compliance was translated as “abide by”. This rendering accurately communicated China’s official position without excessive interpretive amplification.

Dynamic Contextual Assumptions: When dealing with 2024 diplomatic content, interpreters must take the initiative to activate dynamic assumptions about the current context. These assumptions include such characteristics as the actual state of bilateral relations, the sensitivity of topics and the speaker’s expression style. This view is consistent with the "context-sensitive interpreting strategy" proposed by Zhang Bingqing [12].

3.2. The Guiding Logic of Relevance Theory for Interpreting Vague Language in Diplomacy

Relevance Theory offers a rational analytical framework for reconciling “vague linguistic forms” and “explicit communicative intentions”. Interpreters first have to deduce the communicative functions of vague expressions by integrating the specific contextual premises of 2024. Next, they need to choose suitable conversion approaches according to the cognitive backgrounds of target-language recipients — including preserving linguistic vagueness, clarifying core meanings or employing omissive translation techniques. Ultimately, interpreters must make sure that the target-language renditions comply with the diplomatic discourse norms of that specific year. They also need to help the target audience attain equivalent contextual effects as the source-language audience, with the least amount of cognitive effort invested. This line of reasoning has been indirectly confirmed by the research findings of Qu Lizhen [10].

4. Research Methods and Language Materials Source

This chapter introduces the sources of the material, which follows the four principles of timeliness, representativeness, typicality, and authenticity and conforms to academic norms. The method of "qualitative analysis+case verification" is adopted, and the corpus annotation,

multidimensional case analysis, and strategy extraction and verification are carried out.

4.1. The Source of Language Material

The linguistic dataset adopted for this research is directly extracted from official press conference transcripts released on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website throughout 2024. Four core criteria were taken into account during the process of data screening. First comes timeliness: we concentrated on press conference content spanning from January to December 2024, ensuring the dataset mirrors the key topics trending in that specific year. Second is representativeness: the collected materials include remarks delivered by leading spokespersons like Wang Wenbin and Mao Ning, covering a diverse range of linguistic styles. Third is typicality: we attached special importance to high-frequency major topics, such as cooperation with the Global South, which usually provide abundant analytical samples for research. Fourth is authenticity: all selected data are original texts and official translations, with no form of secondary modification involved. This approach to data selection aligns with the principles put forward by scholars including Deng Yiting and Zhang Bingqing[7,12]. In the meantime, it also complies with the common practice in international academia of prioritizing official records in relevant research fields [1].

4.2. Research Methods

This study adopts a mixed-method approach of "qualitative analysis plus case verification", which consists of three steps as follows:

Language material annotation: Label examples of vague language according to four criteria, and calculate their usage frequency and proportion.

Case analysis: Select typical cases and analyze the interpretation process from four dimensions—namely "contextual assumptions, intention inference, strategy selection and effect verification"—with an additional dimension of "hot topic adaptability".

Strategy refinement: Summarize context-adaptive strategies, clarify their applicable scenarios based on multi-case comparisons, and verify their rationality by combining the principle of optimal relevance.

5. Case Analysis of Interpreting Vague Language in Diplomacy at the 2024 Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Domestic translation textbooks generalize three mainstream methods for cross-linguistic vague expressions: reservation, explicitation and omission [13], which lay a foundational framework for the three interpreting strategies summarized in this paper. This chapter, the core of the paper, proposes three Relevance-Theory-based strategies for interpreting diplomatic vague language, illustrated with 2024 Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference cases. The “retaining vagueness through vagueness” strategy keeps original vagueness when the target audience has relevant contextual knowledge, helping maintain diplomatic flexibility. The “clarifying to eliminate vagueness” strategy explains vague expressions that may cause cognitive barriers or convey clear intentions, reducing audience burden. The omission strategy cuts redundant or contextually implied vague elements, aligning with English conciseness. The core goal of these three strategies is to achieve optimal relevance.

5.1. Interpretation Strategies Guided by Relevance Theory

The following examples analyze three interpretive strategies of handling vague language in

diplomatic communication under the guidance of Relevance Theory, and add specific cases from 2024.

5.1.1. Vagueness-for-Vagueness Strategy

In diplomatic interpreting, if keeping vagueness helps the audience accurately understand the speaker's intentions, and they already have basic 2024 background knowledge (e.g., this year's hot topics), interpreters can directly preserve the original vague expression. This helps maintain the flexibility of diplomatic attitudes.

Case 1:

Source Utterance Paraphrase: Regardless of how the international landscape changes, China will always stand firmly with the Global South and take root among Global South countries.

Official Target Translation: No matter how the international situation evolves, China will always care for and be rooted in the Global South.

Analysis: The vague description of fluctuating international conditions encapsulates all unpredictable shifts in global geopolitics throughout 2024. Meanwhile, the concept of the Global South had reached broad international consensus by 2024. Retaining the original vague wording through consistent official translation allows audiences to instantly grasp China's diplomatic stance without extra cognitive burden, thereby realizing optimal relevance.

Case 2:

Source Utterance Paraphrase: China supports all efforts made by the international community to advance a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement to the Palestinian question.

Official Target Translation: China supports all efforts by the international community to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian issue.

Analysis: The indefinite quantifier "all" and the three vague evaluative adjectives "comprehensive, just and lasting" reserve flexible space for various peace-promoting initiatives. Given the continuous Palestinian-Israeli tensions dominating global diplomatic agendas in 2024, international audiences hold sufficient contextual assumptions about this topic. Retaining such vague lexis delivers China's principled yet flexible diplomatic position without increasing cognitive costs for recipients, fully complying with the Principle of Optimal Relevance.

5.1.2. Explicitation-for-Vagueness Strategy

When speakers use roundabout expressions or culturally specific language, direct word-for-word translation may confuse audiences unfamiliar with 2024's context. In such cases, interpreters should proactively explain the information. This is especially common with culturally specific vague expressions, metaphors, or key popular topics. If a vague expression requires excessive mental effort or the audience lacks relevant background knowledge, retaining ambiguity hinders communication. Interpreters must accurately convey the actual meaning rather than preserving the original vague form.

Case 1:

Source Utterance Paraphrase: The so-called "freedom of the press", similar to the politicized notions of "democracy" and "human rights", is merely a tool for the United States to uphold its hegemony.

Official Target Translation: "Freedom of the press", like the so-called "democracy" and "human rights", is merely a tool used by the United States to safeguard its own hegemony.

Analysis: The vague mitigating phrase in the source text carries a clear critical implication against U.S. instrumentalization of universal values, a frequent point of diplomatic friction in 2024. The interpreter renders the vague dismissive marker into the unequivocal adverb "merely", which

foregrounds negative evaluative connotations, directly conveys China's critical stance and lowers audiences' cognitive processing costs. Explicitation removes potential semantic confusion and generates equivalent contextual effects for cross-cultural recipients.

Case 2:

Source Utterance Paraphrase: Senior officials from the Japanese Prime Minister's Office have publicly claimed that Japan should acquire nuclear weapons, which constitutes a severe provocation to the post-war international order.

Official Target Translation: Senior officials of the Japanese Prime Minister's Office have openly claimed that Japan should possess nuclear weapons, which is a serious provocation to the post-war international order.

Analysis: Vague descriptive phrases referring to open provocative remarks are clarified via precise English lexical choices in interpreting. Explicit rendering strengthens the gravity of Japan's nuclear rhetoric, a highly sensitive diplomatic topic in 2024. This explicitation eliminates ambiguous interpretations and enables global audiences to rapidly identify the core critical stance delivered by Chinese spokespersons.

5.1.3. Omission Strategy

If the meaning of vague expressions in the source language is already reflected in the contextual information of 2024, or retaining these expressions would cause redundancy in the target language, interpreters may omit such expressions as appropriate. This strategy applies to vague language with semantic redundancy or strong contextual dependence.

Case 1:

Source Utterance Paraphrase: China is an inherent member of the Global South. We share a collective history of resisting colonialism and hegemonism, as well as a common mission of development and rejuvenation.

Official Target Translation: China is a natural member of the Global South, as we share a common history of opposing colonialism and hegemonism, and a common mission of development and rejuvenation.

Analysis: The repetitive vague collective modifier in the source text serves rhetorical emphasis in Chinese diplomatic discourse. Nevertheless, duplicated vague qualifiers sound cumbersome in formal English interpreting. Selectively omitting the redundant collective adjective streamlines sentence structure while preserving the core implication of shared identity, conforming to the concise stylistic conventions of Anglo-American diplomatic writing.

Case 2:

Source Utterance Paraphrase: Advancing the implementation of the two-state solution constitutes the fundamental path to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Official Target Translation: Implementing the "two-state solution" is the fundamental way to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Analysis: The source text adopts an abstract four-character vague nominal phrase to express the meaning of a fundamental solution. Against the backdrop of Middle East peace negotiations in 2024, the implication of this vague phrase is universally recognizable to international audiences. The interpreter condenses the layered vague nominal construction into the concise noun phrase "fundamental way", cutting redundant vague semantic layers and aligning with the succinct register standard of official diplomatic interpreting output.

6. Conclusion

This research on 2024 diplomatic vague language yields two core research conclusions:

dominant vague usages fall into defensive and indicative categories, followed by abstract nouns and subjective adjectives which fit the annual diplomatic keynote of “adapting to changes”, and the discourse concerning the Global South witnesses a notable rise in abstract word frequency compared with the data from 2022 to 2023; meanwhile, guided by the ostension-inference model, interpreters need to strike a balance between contextual influence and cognitive burden, replenish flexible contextual assumptions and guide target audiences to reach optimal relevance in comprehension. Nevertheless, the present research is confined in three aspects: its corpus excludes authentic discourse from bilateral negotiations, international summits and other vital diplomatic occasions, the discussion is limited to a single language without cross-linguistic comparison, and relevant interpreting strategies are merely concluded from textual analysis without adequate empirical validation. Accordingly, follow-up studies can enrich research corpus with on-site audio records from diversified diplomatic contexts, introduce multilingual contrastive analysis to dig into linguistic individualities, adopt empirical approaches including interpreter interviews and audience cognitive tests to examine the practical efficacy of summarized strategies, and launch longitudinal cross-year research to trace the developmental rules of diplomatic vague language and matching interpreting tactics, so as to furnish systematic theoretical and practical references for long-term diplomatic interpreting work.

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