



Problems That Lead to the Failure in Language Communication

Shenghua Yan

Foreign Languages School, Lanzhou University of Technology, Lanzhou 730050, China

E-mail: yanhua30@sina.com

Abstract

A language is the most important tool for communication, yet misunderstanding of language often occurs in our daily communication. This paper illustrates some problems that lead to the failure of language communication and points out that it is necessary to avoid such problems for an effective and clear communication.

Keywords: Communication, Language, Understanding, Vagueness, Ambiguity, Word

A language is defined as “a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings.” (Webster’s, 654), and “is a tool for communication” (Emmet, 22). In most common use of language, these signs are the words which we employ in such a way that they may communicate ideas or feelings. Communication, that is, the conveyance of an idea or emotion from one to another, relies largely upon language, and rightly so, as it is a powerful tool when employed correctly. However, misunderstandings in communication occur when two people have a different understanding of their language, or they use language in such a way that it results in communication which is unclear or vague.

1. Vagueness in languages

Vagueness has been observed to occur widely in language use, but what is vague language? People have different beliefs about it. For example, Crystal and Day (1975) call vagueness as imprecision, and they state “lack of precision is one of the most important features of the vocabulary of informal conversation”. Vague language is prevalent in our daily life, but it was often neglected or misunderstood by people. In our daily life, we may notice that the use of vague language is also frequent. For example, when someone asks for our opinions about something, we may give a reply with “*it is fine. It is ok. It is not bad*” or “*it is pretty good*”. Here, “*fine, ok or not bad*” and “*pretty good*” are both typically vague expressions, since the reply can not be decoded quite clearly. With such vague replies, we response for some particular purposes, probably we don’t want to declare our positions, or it’s difficult for us to speak out our opinions, since we are not in favor of giving the negative opinions directly in “face to face” conversations. In this way, vague utterances appear.

Furthermore, vague language is widely used in newspapers, magazines, political statements, law documents, even advertisements. We may use vague language to mean different things or for different purposes, and vague language becomes an important tool in communicating thoughts and feelings to each other and it is also the important part of the language production of every speaker and writer, so in our lives we need not only precision but also vagueness. Vagueness and precision play the same important roles in our communications, just as Dr. Channell shows: ordinary language leaves room for people to be vague, to avoid precision and the commitment associated with it; in fact, if people did not have access to vague language, their range of communication would be severely restricted. Speaker makes an unhedged statement about a phenomenon of which his or her knowledge is vague. The speaker’s uncertainty is not explicitly encoded. On the other hand, problems of unclear understanding in communication, more often than not appear in vague language. The problem of communication which is unclear or vague is one which results from the use of words for which the “range of application is not clear” (Hospers, 22). One could also say that something which is vague is that which lacks precision. Expressions like *kind of, somewhat, more or less, about, around, roughly, and many more...* lead to vague language. This type of vagueness results from statements or words which are not quantifiable. For instance, the phrase “He is fairly heavy” does not communicate a precise weight or condition of the person. A person who weighs 80kg may be considered by some to be “fairly heavy”, yet to another, or even to the same person, one who weighs 120kg may fit the same description. Similarly, the words “very” and “quite” are not precise enough to convey a clear image to the listener. A more precise description would be “He weighs 120kg” or “He is unhealthily heavy”. One conveys a precise mass, the other, a condition. One could also say that words which are vague are those which have several criteria for application. In such a case, a word may be applied correctly (filling criterion A for instance), but yet the other criteria (B and C do not apply). For example, take the word ‘books’. One could set several possible criteria: 1. Paper bound together; 2. A textual narrative and 3. A major division of a literary work. If one was to say to another: “She is coloring in one of the books,” applying in this case criterion 1, they would be correct to do so, as there are bindings of paper, or books, intended for that purpose. Yet, it will cause some surprise if one was to understand this as an application of either criterion 2 or 3. To be coloring in either of the other ‘books’

would seem absurd. Yet vagueness must not always be a problem - such words are often necessary. It is when words which are vague are used and understood as though they were precise that problems arise. In these cases, this characteristic of language can indeed hinder effective communication.

2. Ambiguity in languages

Another similar problem arises in the use of words. It is known as ambiguity. Ambiguity has traditionally been identified where a sentence or word has two or more competing but distinct meanings attached to it. This problem exploits the multiple definitions or meanings of words to cause a misunderstanding. Words often have both a descriptive and evaluative meaning which when confused; result in "an instance of the most common and most dangerous form of ambiguity." (Wilson, 37). If somebody says "That is a crooked man", it could be concluded that a) It is a man who has bad posture, such that it is not straight or b) It is a man of no morals. If one who uses the phrase intends the first meaning, but a listener understands the second, an unfortunate misunderstanding could take place. In cases of ambiguity, there is always confusion as to how the word is employed. However, words with multiple meanings do not always cause problems of communication - there isn't always confusion as to how the word has been employed. For instance, if one says it is "cold outside", one doesn't take the outdoors to be impersonal. Rather, most sensible people would comprehend that the temperature outside is low. Thus, ambiguity can cause problems of communication, but only when there is confusion about the use of the word.

3. Misunderstanding of languages

Communication, which is the "system of verbal gestures by which a speaker points out a reality to a listener" (Church, 126), requires that the two parties involved have a similar understanding of the language. Such a problem arises when two people speak a different language, but the same thing can occur on a smaller scale if people have a slightly different understanding of the same language. This is because we "tacitly assume that the other person (the listener) is identical to us" (Chomsky, 21) in their use of language. This often is as a result of a speaker and a listener (or writer and reader) who use certain words in a different manner. It is necessary, for communication not to be impeded, that the second individual has the same understanding of a word as the first. When this is not the case, communicating an idea as intended can be quite difficult. For instance, if the speaker is from the north, speaking to a listener from the south, and says "It is warm today", the listener could be quite surprised at the exact temperature. This statement is not only vague; the two parties involved also have a different impression of how the word 'warm' is to be used. One will "not succeed in communicating ... unless (they) have first made it quite clear exactly how (they) intend to use the words." (Emmet, 23). If such a declaration of intent is not made, the communicated information may not be clear and the impression which a listener receives could indeed be false.

4. Essential meaning of a word

One may ask why the meanings of words are so often left to question in communication. However, communication "does not require 'public meanings' any more than it requires 'public pronunciations'" (Chomsky, 21). This is known as the fallacy of essential meaning. It is not unusual for one to be concerned that they have not discovered the 'real' or 'essential' meaning of a word, and therefore have been using it improperly. They have not found it because none exists. The various ways in which a word is employed often have much in common, but that is not to say that there is a real meaning, it simply says that there is a "job we can employ this word to perform" (Emmet, 25) and which would be likely to be understood if someone were to employ the word. To say that no essential meaning exists does not mean that there are no guidelines for use of a word. Among those speaking the same language, there is likely to be some general, unspoken consensus as to how a word is used. This is what is most important. A dictionary definition may seem more official, but in the interests of clearer communication, one should employ the word in a manner that their audience would be most likely to understand.

5. Understanding the context of a word

One must understand the context, or background, in which a word is used to have a grasp on the meaning of the word itself. "The background elements are not explicitly perceived, but they play a part in shaping our experience of the situation." (Church, 110). To cite an example: A woman, upon going outside on a cloudy afternoon, exclaims, "It is dark outside." This darkness is quite unlike that which one would encounter upon entering a windowless room, yet upon entering, one would say nearly the same thing. Understanding the context of a word is nearly as important as an understanding of the word itself, as the situation controls to a degree how the word will be used. All of these problems are contained within language. Yet, language is our most important tool in communication and thus must be employed. If it were not, communication would be hindered, or even blocked, to a far greater degree than it is due to the problems presented. It should be the goal of everyone to, if possible, avoid these problems. The result would be language which is far more clear, precise, and less misleading, or bewitching. Language free of most problems would make it an even greater tool, effectively improving the communication between persons and developing better understanding and knowledge through this communication.

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