

An Analysis of the Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language in Ekegusii

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of the pragmatic function of vague language use in everyday interactions in Ekegusii. The paper analyses the types of meanings conveyed by referring expressions such as: The plural “you” for singular reference, The inclusive “we”, The pronoun “they”, Down toners and Placeholders. The analysis applies Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Principle. The paper maintains that vague language is not a deviation from precision and clarity, but that it has a critical role that cannot be achieved through precise language.

Key words: *Vague language, pragmatics, meaning, Ekegusii*

1. Introduction

It is commonly assumed that language, ideally, is precise and that vagueness is a deplorable deviation form of precision and clarity. Vagueness has been attributed to ignorance and absence of knowledgeable ability, and hence the usual reminders to speakers not to be vague. Vague language has not been appreciated as being crucial to everyday communication. However, contrary to the persuasive belief that vague language is to be avoided, vagueness is one of the essential and inescapable attributes of language. Vagueness is often the aspect of language that permits its flexibility in communication and its ability to perform social functions. Often speakers use vague

language, not for lack of precise language to convey information accurately, but because they consider it more polite to make a less definite statement.

Several linguists have argued in favor of vagueness in human language. Stubbs (1986) proposes that precise language is not necessarily more efficient than vague language. Williamson (1994) describes vagueness as a positive feature of human language:

Used as a technical term, 'vague' is not pejorative. Indeed, vagueness is a descriptive feature of natural languages. Vague words often suffice for the purpose in hand, and too much precision can lead to time-wasting and inflexibility (p. 4869)

Channell (1994) argues that "vagueness in language is neither 'all bad' nor 'all good'. What matters is that language is used appropriately." (p.3) Jucker et al., (2003) propose that use of vague or precise language should be based on context. These authors argue, and correctly so, that some contexts require precise language, for example, in achieving the goals of a medical report, a legal contract, or an academic paper, a high degree of precision is ordinarily needed. However, the same type of precision from a politician, in a radio interview, or for partners during a casual chat would be counter-productive in that it might be off-putting and/or misleading. Channell (1994), concludes that speakers and writers tailor their language to make it suitable to the situation (when, where and why) and the linguistic context (is it gossipy chat, an interview, or a story in a popular paper?)

Jucker et al., (2003) consider that the ability to vary the precision of utterances and to use them in appropriate contexts is part of the speakers' communicative competence, and the interpretation of such expressions is a natural part of language use. They conclude that an

understanding of the nature and the role of vagueness in language use is critical to an understanding of language itself. Arguing for an interactional approach to the concept of vagueness, they state the following:

Vagueness is not only an inherent feature of natural language but also –and crucially-it is an interactional strategy. Speakers are faced with a number of communicative tasks, and they are vague for strategic reasons. Varying the level of vagueness may help guide the addressee to make the intended representation of entities and events and to draw intended implications from them (p.1739)

Channell (1994) focuses on linguistic expressions that are, ‘purposely and unabashedly vague’ (p.20). She provides a comprehensive description of various ways of approximating quantities in English to various ways of referring vaguely to categorize (e.g., with tags such as ‘or something like that’) and of totally vague words such as ‘thingy’ or ‘thingummy’ and ‘whatsit’.

In this paper, we explore the contexts and meanings of vagueness in everyday conversation among speakers of Ekegusii. We will also attempt to determine ways in which vague expressions are not just poor but good-enough substitutes for precise expressions, but preferable to precise expressions because of their greater efficiency (Sperber and Wilson 1995 p. 45-48).

1.1 Theoretical Grounding for Pragmatic Functions of Vague Language

In this paper, we make use of the theory of conversational implicature first promulgated by Grice (1975) and since then refined and developed by among many others (Brown & Levinson (1983). According to Channell (2003), Grice’s theory of implicature assumes that conversation is

a cooperative venture, and that speakers adhere to the Cooperative Principle (CP). In accordance to this principle, speakers try to send understandable communicative messages within the context of any particular conversation, and hearers assume that speakers are doing this. The Cooperative Principle involves both parties knowing and using four rules of conversation. Grice called these rules maxims and outlines them as follows:

1. The maxim of quality (be truthful according to the evidence you have)
2. The maxim of quantity (be informative, but not over-informative)
3. The maxim of relevance (be relevant to the conversation)
4. The maxim of manner (say things clearly, unambiguously, briefly) (Grice, 1975: cited in Channell (1994 p. 33))

Channell cites two ways in which maxims are relevant to vague language. First, vague expressions may be used to enable speakers to follow these maxims. She gives as an example of the answer she could give, asked what time she would expect to be home from work. Since she cannot anticipate the workload or traffic, the most truthful reply for which she would have evidence would be “about six o’clock”. From this, the hearer would infer that she could not say exactly what time she would be home.

The second way in which the Cooperative Principle could be of interest in the study of vague expressions is that they are often used when one of the maxims is flouted. Grice explained that in conversations, speakers very often break rather than follow one or more maxims. When they do this, specific effects are created for hearers, which he called implicatures. The use of conversational maxims shows that vague expressions are devices speakers use to tailor their contribution in order to give the right amount of information for the purpose of the conversation.

The second theory that has been used for the analysis is the Politeness Principle. Politeness as a linguistic theory was first systematized by Brown & Levinson (1987). Brown & Levinson assume that all competent adult members of a society are concerned about their face, the self-image they present to others, and that they recognize other people have similar face wants. They distinguish two aspects of 'face' which they claim are universal and refer to two basic desires of any person in any interaction: 'negative face' and 'positive face'. The former is a person's desire to be unimpeded by others, to be free to act without being imposed upon. The latter is a personal wish to be desirable to at least some other who will appreciate and approve of one's self and one's personality. 'Positive face' is fundamentally determined by the culture and by the social group to which the participant belongs; it is ultimately of an idiosyncratic nature.

Brown & Levinson (1987) say that face is something that is emotionally invested and that it can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction. Since one's own face can only be sustained by the actions of others, these authors claim it is in everyone's interest to cooperate in order to maintain each other's face. The politeness theory has been used in the analysis of referring expressions: the use of plural 'you' for singular reference, the inclusive 'we' and 'they' as devices for back-grounding the agent.

2. Analysis

In the analysis below, we identify the types of meanings conveyed by the vague expressions in Ekegusii and the role their meanings play in conversations.

2.1 Referring Expressions

It is often the case that speakers use vague expressions and vary them in accordance with their purposes. The common referring expressions are those that make use of personal pronouns such as the plural ‘you’, the inclusive ‘we’, and ‘they’. Consider, for example the following extracts:

2.1.1 *The use of ‘you’*

Speaker A and speaker B are husband and wife respectively. Speaker A has just arrived home from a week’s journey and only to discover that a neighbor’s plough that he had borrowed and had wanted returned to the owner is still lying in the house. The speakers use the vague expression ‘you’ for various reasons:

A: *Naki motarairera Mokaya obokombe bwaye?*

Why have you not returned Mokaya’s plough to him?

B: *Ngwatotebeti toiranie gaki?*

Did you really tell us to return it?

A: *Timbatebeti? O igo nebeta rirorio*

I did not tell you? Oh! I must have forgotten then

B: *Aye inchwo gaki omoirere bwango*

You, please come and take it to him quickly

The second person pronoun ‘you’ has been used in three different ways in this exchange. First, speaker A, who is the husband has used the plural ‘you’ for singular reference. Among the

Ekegusii speakers, the plural ‘you’ is used as a face-saving strategy in an asymmetrical relationship. The husband uses it to avoid putting blame squarely on the wife when things have gone wrong in the home. Singular ‘you’ is direct and confrontational and it is avoided in order to maintain social harmony. The wife on the other hand uses singular ‘you’ which is more direct to indicate that the husband is to blame for not informing them that the plough needed to be delivered to the owner. Speaker B uses the first person plural us implying that the task could have been done by anyone in the family and not necessarily by her. Her use of the direct pronoun you is however not confrontational because she does not express her protest with finality. Instead she expresses it tentatively as a question. This may be seen as a redress for what would appear as blame on the husband for failure to give instructions to deliver the plough.

The pronoun ‘you’ has also been used as a vocative in this exchange. Speaker A refers to his wife as ‘you’ and not by her name or by any endearing expressions such as darling, honey or sweetheart. In a context where neither the spouses’ first name nor any endearments are comfortably acceptable in private or in public, the vague expression ‘you’ is the preferred vocative. Some speakers address each other by their first-born child’s name, but whenever the spouse is far, their attention is drawn by use of the vocative ‘you’.

2.1.2 The ‘inclusive we’

The inclusive ‘we’ may be used in discourse in reference to the speaker and the hearer (you) or to a third person (he/ she). In the following scenario, speaker A and B have just come out of church where the sermon was about the Christian’s responsibility over the poor. Speaker A is a very active community- service leader of the church who has done a lot to help the poor in the community. However, in her interaction she makes her observations using the inclusive ‘we’.

A: Twabeire abasiereriamono

We have become very negligent
 B: *Ninki?*
 What is it?
 A: *Twangire gokonya abataka egati yaito*
 We have refused to help the poor among us.

Speaker A uses the inclusive ‘we’ to avoid taking a ‘holier than thou’ attitude towards the issue of neglect for the poor in her church. The use of the inclusive ‘we’, shows that she accepts the inescapable responsibility of the church over the poor. The speaker in this way does not just blame the addressee and other church members but presents herself as equally to blame for the neglect. The inclusive we here functions as a face-saving device by which speaker A criticizes the addressee and the rest of the church members without excluding herself even though she has done a lot for the poor herself.

Another use of the inclusive ‘we’ is in the following scenario where two women A and B are in conversation when they see another woman they do not like. Their use of the inclusive we has a meaning and function completely different from the one discussed above.

A: (Winking at B) *Noroche buna twaswagire?*
 Do you see how we have put on weight?
 B: (Laughing sarcastically) *Inki eke tokarekoria?*
 What could we be eating?

The inclusive ‘we’ functions as an in-language, providing the two speakers a way of talking about someone else without the individual realizing that they are the subject of gossip. The use of the inclusive ‘we’ flouts the maxim of quality since the speakers are apparently telling a lie as what they say does not refer to them. However, the hearer can draw a conclusion from what they do not say by using partly what they say, the context in which they say it, and the shared knowledge between the speakers and the hearer.

2.1.3 The pronoun ‘they’

The pronoun ‘they’ has no unique reference. For instance, speaker A and B are a lower primary school child and the parent respectively. Speaker A has just arrived home for lunch and is reporting what she has been sent to take to school the following day.

A: *Igo bateba toire chibesa chiamatemwa mambia*

They said that we take the examination fees tomorrow.

B: *Barabi bateba?*

Who(plural) said?

A: *Omwarimu*

The teacher

Children use the pronoun ‘they’ which is often equivalent to an agent-less passive. This enables them to talk about people whom they think are more powerful than them without mentioning their names. The child knows it is the teacher who has sent for examination fees, but she uses the vague expression ‘they’ to express the idea of ‘them versus us’: those in authority versus those without. In the following scenario, speaker B is talking to speaker A who has observed that he comes late from work every day.

A: *Ninki gekogera okonyorwa korwa egasi kera rituko?*

Why are you always late from work every day?

B: *Igo bagotoa egasi enyinge rakini mbari gotoakana obataemu*

They give us too much work but they do not pay us overtime

B is disgruntled about the terms and conditions of his job, but he is not in a position to complain directly to the management. The vague expression ‘they’ therefore allows him to talk about his frustration without specifically mentioning names of those frustrating him. ‘They’ is pervasively used in the ‘them’ and ‘us’ references where the ‘them’ are in authority and are perceived as more powerful than ‘us’.

2.2. Downtoners

Speakers try to avoid the force of the verb or the adjective by using a variety of vague expressions that have a lowering effect. Downtoners include such expressions as ‘kind of’, ‘sort of’, ‘rather’ and ‘a bit’ which have a slight lowering effect. The extract below illustrates the use of a downtoner. Speaker B is sick, but she does not want her children and husband to know this or to grasp the full magnitude of her condition. Speaker A is her six-year old child.

A: *Mama igo orwarete?*
Mom are you sick?

B: *Ee igo ndwarete ake igo.*
Yes I am a bit sick

Speaker B uses the downtoner ‘a bit’ as an understatement of her sickness in order to avoid alarming her children and her husband. Unlike men, women avoid appearing too sick or too tired for fear that this may alarm the husband and the children. In this example the speaker gives less information than is required. The vague expression is to be preferred in this context as precise and direct language is likely to frighten.

In the following extract speaker A has made a complement to speaker B about how neat her house looks.

A: *Enyomba yao ekororekana buya!*
Your house looks neat!

B: *Ee, ake igo gaki.*
Yes, Just a little bit

Speaker B minimizes the complement by saying that her house looks just a little neat. This scaling down of a complement is appropriate among Ekegusii speakers so that one does not give an impression of being conceited. Total acceptance of a complement gives an impression that

one is better than the others in the conversation and thus threatens solidarity, creating an asymmetrical relationship between them.

A third instance in the use of a downtoner is as in the following scenario: Speaker B has been doing a piece of contract work for speaker A and Speaker A is trying to find out what B thought of the task:

A: *Naki egasi yareng?*
How was the work?

B: *Nenkong'u ake*
It is a little bit hard

Speaker B describes the work as 'a little hard' which gives an impression that it is easier than if described simply as hard. A full evaluation of the work may have been face-threatening to the giver of the contract as it might portray him as inconsiderate.

The use of a bit which is a hedge is a politeness strategy that reduces the force of face-threatening speech act that would result from the use of the precise word hard. The force of a precise language utterance here would be a complaint or a criticism, but this has been softened by the use of the downtoner a bit.

2.3 Placeholder words

These are words that convey no referential content in themselves but instead they invite the listener to infer a referent (Jucker et al., 2003 p. 1794). Crystal and Davy (1975) observe that these words express total vagueness (p. 12). Speakers may use placeholders because they do not know appropriate words/names or they are not able to access the exact names or words at the moment of speaking. Channell (1994) also suggests that a person who has access to an appropriate name may prefer to use a placeholder in order to avoid using an offensive or taboo

word (p.16). Jucker et al (2003) observe that the pragmatic meaning of these terms is more crucial than their semantic meaning. (p.1794). Jucker et al further state that in situations in which the speaker cannot access a name, use of a placeholder word may allow the speaker to maintain the place of the conversation. In the example below, the speaker, who is an elderly man trying to watch a new TV program in his son's house, uses the placeholder for one or both of the above mentioned reasons:

A: *Ekwerende eye tebwati bipindi biya bono.*
This thingy does not have interesting programs now.

The speaker uses the placeholder because he cannot remember the word TV. The placeholder allows the speaker to maintain the conversation even without the proper name of the object. The following excerpt shows that a placeholder can also be used for another purpose. Speaker A is talking to B who reminds him of a person he would rather forget, and this is their talk.

A: *Konye momeneyete na Mbeche. Ngai achiete omenyete aye bweka rero?*
You have been staying with Mbeche before. Where did he go and how come you are alone now?
B: *Takong'inyoria rikwerende riria ranyibera ebinto biane rigatama?*
Please don't remind me of that **what'sthename** who ransacked my house and took away with my stuff.

Speaker B uses a placeholder even though he knows the name of the person he is talking about. The speaker uses the placeholder in this context to express his negative attitude towards the person he is talking about. His name is just not worth mentioning and he hates to be reminded of the person.

Channell (1994) suggests that a speaker who has access to an appropriate name may prefer to use a placeholder in order to avoid using an offensive or taboo word, being derogatory, being

pretentious, or rewarding pronunciation problems (p. 162). For instance, speaker A and speaker B are walking along a footpath with so many other people. Speaker A notices some faeces along the way and cautions speaker B to be careful not to step on it.

A: *Rigereria buya totacha amakwerende ayio.*

Be careful not to step on the thingummy.

This placeholder serves a euphemistic function here since mention of faeces is regarded as verbal taboo. In the following scenario, the placeholder serves yet another function. Speaker A has noticed that speaker B's zip is loose. He uses a placeholder to pass the information as follows:

A: *Bunga ekwerende yao*

Fasten your thingy

Speaker A uses the placeholder to pass confidential information to B without attracting unnecessary attention from other hearers.

Placeholder words play a significant role in Ekegusii as they allow speakers to maintain the conversation when they either do not know or they have forgotten the name of the person or object they want to talk about. Speakers also use placeholders to express their attitudes towards the object or person they are talking about. Placeholders serve a euphemistic function, enabling speakers to avoid mentioning taboo or offensive words. Finally, placeholders may be used for confidentiality when only the speaker and the hearer have the knowledge necessary for their interpretation.

3. Conclusion

Vague expressions are persuasive in everyday conversations. They are not a deviation from precise language. Rather, they serve a variety of functions in the contexts in which they are used.

There are several reasons why speakers use vague expressions. First, these expressions enable speakers to carry on with a conversation when they either do not know a word or they cannot access it in time. In some cases, speakers may, even when they know and can access a word, opt to use a vague expression in order to avoid using a precise word that is perceived to be taboo or offensive. Vague expressions may also serve a social function where they may serve as politeness strategies, helping to tone down a complaint or criticism. The interpretation of the expression requires a common knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

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