

# ***The Vagueness of Ordinary Language and Its Impact on the Pragmatic Turn***

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**Abstract:** The significant contribution of ordinary language to the pragmatic turn in analytic philosophy has received a great deal of attention from philosophers and linguists, but there is still a gap in the special study of the influence of ordinary language on the pragmatic turn from the perspective of its vagueness. On the basis of the fact that ideal language cannot portray the reality of some linguistic facts, this article compares and analyzes the differences between ideal language and ordinary language in terms of vagueness, and further argue that ordinary language cannot exist in the process of language use in isolation from the reality of the situation through three subdivisions of vagueness: roughness, ambiguity, and incompleteness. The vagueness creates the opportunities for language to be used in a way that is closely tied to the actual situation, dismantling the artificially shaped conditions of perfect use of the ideal language and redirecting the philosophers' attention to the concrete elaboration of language. In this manner, philosophy's concern of ordinary language use and the subjective experience of language users coincides with pragmatics and further drives philosophy to take a pragmatic turn.

**Keywords:** vagueness, ordinary language, pragmatic turn, language use

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research Background**

#### **1.1.1. Ideal Language and Ordinary Language**

In modern Western philosophy, ideal language has been constructed and widely discussed by lots of philosophers. It is a form of language different from ordinary language that is artificially shaped by people in the process of perceiving the world and language [1]. According to the "Truth-value conditionalism", the meaning of the sentence depends on the conditions that make the statement true, that is to say, the ideal language has a distinction between truth and falsehood, and is a standardized, more perfect form of language with truth-value statements [2]. Therefore, the ideal language, created in strict accordance with scientific logic, is considered by philosophers as a "perfect language form" due to its precision and certainty, and has advantages that are incomparable to natural languages [3,4].

On the other hand, Ordinary language, also called natural language, is the opposite of the ideal language, which does not seek too much precision in expression and contains vague expressions or unaccounted names. The philosophical school of semantic analysis believes that Ordinary language is prone to vagueness in the process of using, detracts from the precision of expression, and it is not useful for the presentation of scientific theories. This ambiguous character makes ordinary language form truth-valueless statements when used, and thus it was criticized to a greater extent in the early studies of language in philosophy, to the extent that it was almost completely abandoned in early studies, and thus it was criticized to a greater degree in the early studies of language in philosophy, to the extent that it was almost completely abandoned in early studies [5].

Philosophers have argued about ideal language versus everyday language, often focusing on the differences that arise between the two in terms of language use. And in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein began to dismantle the constructions he had made earlier in the field of analytic philosophy about the ideal language in person, gradually recognizing the particularity of ordinary language, which was logically discarded by analytic philosophy because of its truthlessness [3]. However, it was its truthless vagueness that gave it the possibility of dichotomy without the criterion of truth or falsity. Thus, the rich, subtle differences in the use of ordinary language give it the ability to break down the metaphysical understanding of truth in the analytic philosophy, to oppose an oversimplified, formal understanding of language, and to pull philosophy's understanding of language back from the artificially constructed ideal language to natural language itself. Wittgenstein's late work "Philosophical Studies" marked the creation of a new philosophical school in the 20th century - the school of philosophy of language, and his "language games" represented the formation of a new worldview and methodology of philosophical understanding of language [3,6].

### 1.1.2. Pragmatics and Its Birth and Development

Based on Wittgenstein's late views, subsequent philosophers and linguists began to pay more attention to the actual situation of language in everyday use, opening up the pragmatics path of the philosophy of language.

To talk about the birth of pragmatics, it is better to start from the American philosophy of pragmatism. Pragmatism is concerned with the realistic effects that concrete things can have in the real world, and does not regard logical processes and forms as the final criterion for judging things [7]. Pragmatics, which emerged under the direct influence of the philosophy of pragmatism, was born with a very different approach to form and logic compared with semantic analysis philosophy. As a cross-discipline between philosophy, linguistics and psychology, pragmatics is closely related to the speakers and listeners, so the real-world linguistic phenomena are the basis for the study of the discipline of pragmatics, which cannot exist in isolation out of the real life. Pragmatics integrates the examination of users and receivers of language, i.e. speakers and listeners, with specific contexts and other factors affecting language understanding, focusing on the specific elaboration of language use and observing of the meaning of ordinary language in different contexts and the subjective experience of those involved in language use, which to some extent precisely compensates for the over-reliance of the philosophy of semantic analysis on the science of logic [7,8].

It was the philosophy of ordinary language, in opposition to the school of semantic analysis, which emerged as a critique of the ideal language, that is the real impetus for the pragmatic turn in modern analytic philosophy. The school of ordinary language reached its heyday around the Second World War. This school believed that linguistic research was too obsessed with the construction of a precise artificial ideal language that conformed to the logical sciences, and then fell out of touch with reality. As Wittgenstein said, compared to ordinary language, the ideal language is like a

smooth friction-free ice surface that meets our ideal conditions of perfection, but we are unable to walk on it, and this phenomenon of "linguistic idleness" affects philosophical inquiry into language. We need to get back to the rough ground [9,10]. Therefore, the only way to reconnect the development of philosophy to real life is to promote the pragmatic turn in philosophy through the breakthrough of ordinary language in the field of philosophy.

## 1.2. Presentation and Definition of Vagueness

In 1823, Russell's essay on vagueness, 'Vagueness', led to a number of issues. At first, philosophers used "vagueness" mainly as a dumpster category, where everything that did not satisfy the ideal precision could be included in vagueness [11]. Not long after, philosophers began to see the particularity of ordinary language, whose vagueness is a prerequisite for its flexible use and expression, and that the ideal of precision is now detrimental to the expression of ordinary language.

In 1962, in Austin's rebuttal to Ayer's claim of sensory material, he illustrated various features of vagueness properties covered in different contexts: roughness, ambiguity, imprecision, lack of detail, universality, inaccuracy, incompleteness [11]. These seven features are considered to be specific definitions of vagueness in ordinary language and are used as an important basis for determining vagueness in the latter part of the article.

## 1.3. Research Significance

The birth and development of pragmatics has received much attention from the philosophical and linguistic communities, but the importance of ordinary language vagueness for the pragmatic turn in philosophy has not yet been systematically and comprehensively understood.

In the perspective of vagueness, the subtle and rich real differences embedded in ordinary language make an outstanding contribution to responding to the diversity of the external world, which makes the everyday real world more closely connected to the ordinary language than to the ideal language. It is because of this closer connection between language and the world that philosophy of language no longer focuses exclusively on the logic and meaning contained in the ideal language. Therefore, the vagueness of ordinary language provides an important practical basis for the pragmatic turn in philosophy, and further promotes the breakthrough of pragmatic in the context of philosophy of language.

The current academic research on the contrast between ordinary language and ideal language is relatively extensive, and in emphasizing the importance of ordinary language for the occurrence of the pragmatic turn in philosophy, the analysis of ordinary language is based on scattered points, such as the empirical and systematic nature of ordinary language and the methodological dilemma [1,8]. This article is expected to try to look at the problem of language accuracy from the single perspective of the vagueness of ordinary language, and use the contrast between ideal language and ordinary language as a starting point to criticize the defects of ideal language from the perspective of the vagueness of ordinary language. It is more conducive to the representation of the external world than the ideal language. In this way, the study of language in the field of philosophy returns to "the rough ground", and help academia see the inevitability of the pragmatic turn in philosophy and the important role of vagueness in the process of pragmatic breakthrough [9].

Using a comparative analysis, this article selects three aspects of Austin's description of the vagueness characteristics of ordinary language through a comparison of ideal language and ordinary language to address their significance for the pragmatic turn: roughness, ambiguity, and incompleteness.

## 2. The Specific Manifestation of Vagueness in Ordinary Language and Its Implications for the Pragmatic Turn

### 2.1. The Roughness in Vagueness and Its Implications for the Pragmatic Turn

Ideal language is used in different contexts in such a way that the range of meaning of what it refers to is stable and unchanging, so that the meaning of the same words or statements is precise in different contexts, both from the point of view of the speaker and the listener. In contrast, in ordinary language, there are no exact and precise boundaries for the extension of what the language refers to in its use, and the blurring of such boundaries causes the range of what the language refers to to be unstable in different linguistic contexts [12]. Consequently, when discussing statements containing boundary cases, this fuzzy property can invalidate the true-false binary judgments of statements within classical logic.

The blurring of the boundaries shows the roughness and imprecision of the maximum extension of the vocabulary, under the influence of which the ordinary language acquires the maximum possibility of "being understood", and at the same time the classical logic of judgment of the ideal language is no longer valid. This borderline situation is often reflected in the use of ambiguous predicates in ordinary language [12]. Taking the word "gray" in "the hair is gray" as an ambiguous predicate, the boundary cases that occur in its use will be necessarily discussed. If in a statement "Your hair is gray" containing an ambiguous predicate, the ambiguous "gray" is represented by P, so the non-P represents "not gray", then the boundary case of the ambiguous predicate "gray" is between P and non-P. The following statements are judged by the truth-value dichotomy principle of classical logic: "Your hair is gray" indicates the existence of P. "All hair is gray" is true, and non-P is false; "Your hair is not gray" indicates the existence of the non-P situation "all the hair is not gray", and the statement is also true, and P is false; however, if a person has gray hair on his head and not all the hair has turned gray, which means the situation described by the statement is intermediate between P and non-P, and thus the statement is neither close to the situation where P is true and non-P is false, nor close to the case where non-P is true and P is false, so the statement is neither true nor false, and neither P nor non-P is true or false at the same time. However, since the situation of "having gray hair but not all gray hair" exists in a large number of cases in practice, the existence of P and non-P being neither true nor false at the same time has a realistic meaning. Therefore it arrives at the conclusion which is the vagueness of ordinary language can reflect the real existence of rough border situations in language. This roughness facilitates the language to be as realistic as possible and to be understood by the hearer, while breaking the logical framework of the dichotomy between true and false that the ideal language maintains.

Under the influence of the roughness feature in vagueness, many words and utterances in ordinary language lose their stable and unchanging precision of their extension boundaries, for example, ambiguous predicates can tolerate small changes in their extensions depending on the actual use of the language without affecting the expression of linguistic facts [12]. The meanings conveyed by ordinary language in the course of its use on the basis of roughness pushed the classical logic of dichotomy between true and false to fail, and true and false was no longer the only criterion for determining the conformity of language to linguistic facts. This indicates that the logical science relied on by the philosophical school of semantic analysis is not fully valid in real life, and the conditions of perfect use of the ideal language are broken. In a brief summary, the roughness feature in vagueness makes the classical logic that advocates the dichotomy of true and false invalid in the process of language use, which contributes to the pragmatic turn in philosophy.

## 2.2. The Ambiguity in Vagueness and Its Implications for the Pragmatic Turn

In the classical logic of the distinction between truth and falsity, the ideal language has a distinction between the truth and falsity of the words or statements that it expresses in the face of what it refers to, i.e., there are only two cases in which the sentence is "true" in accordance with the facts of the language and "false" in accordance with the facts of the language. The truth of a sentence is a matter of fact. Therefore, by judging the truth or falsity of the ideal language from the standpoint of a certain linguistic fact, the speaker and the hearer can obtain the same, definite, true or false meaning of the utterance. However, because classical logic contains dichotomous and dichotomous laws, it is difficult for the ideal language to convey multiple meanings of utterances in different contexts under the auspices of this logical science.

In contrast to the ideal language, the ordinary language is able to create expressions with boundary cases according to the actual situation, breaking the classical logic of the dichotomy between true and false in the ideal language because of its roughness, so that between true and false cases, there are expressions in the ordinary language that cannot be determined by true and false. Such expressions have no standard criteria for determining truth or falsity, and are therefore easily understood differently in different contexts of language use. This is the result of multiple phenomenon such as one word with multiple meanings and one sentence with multiple meanings.

The possibility of multiple phenomenon in both words and utterances is often related to two factors: the extension of the original meaning and the linguistic usage scenario. Taking the outward extension of word meaning as an example, it is almost impossible for the meaning of a word to exist completely apart from its oldest and deepest original meaning kernel, provided that the etymology and construction of the word remain unchanged [5]. Since this article explores the relationship between ordinary language's vagueness and the pragmatic turn, it is not integral to spend more time discussing the multiple phenomenon derived from the original meaning, but will mainly focus on the multiple phenomenon caused by the different contexts in the process of language use. For example, in different contexts, an identical utterance can be interfered with by the context of use, and the listener can obtain a very different understanding. For example, since the word "cold" has lost its fixed criterion for determining truth or falsity, the statement "I feel cold" has a completely different criterion in different contexts: in a winter of minus 30 degrees, the "I feel cold In a winter of -30 degrees, the word "cold" in the sentence "I feel cold" refers to the sub-zero temperature, so the phrase "I feel cold" has the connotation of objectively low temperature; while in a summer of -30 degrees, if "I" as a patient with fever, if "I feel cold" because of the abnormal thermoregulation caused by fever, then the phrase "I feel cold" here is subjectively cold and does not contain the connotation of "objectively The "I feel cold" here is subjective cold, and does not include the connotation of "objectively low temperature".

Thus to draw the conclusion, ordinary language is subject to contextual changes in the course of use, resulting in listeners receiving different meanings, facts and information in different linguistic situations. The different meanings in the use of the language indicate the existence of multiple phenomenon in ordinary language, which can lead to ambiguity, and thus the ambiguity of ordinary language includes the characteristic of ambiguity, which is not possible in an ideal language.

Under the influence of the ambiguity feature in vagueness, the use of the same word or the same utterance in reality is enhanced, and the same expression can be adapted to different scenarios of language use, linking language more closely to real life, paying attention to the concrete elaboration of ordinary language and the different meanings in different contexts and the subjective experience of speakers and listeners [13]. Therefore, driven by ambiguity, the use of ordinary language has been given greater attention, providing more ripe conditions for a pragmatic turn in analytic philosophy.

### 2.3. The Incompleteness in Vagueness and Its Implications for the Pragmatic Turn

In the use of the ideal language, philosophers often seek efficient and precise expressions in which the semantics conveyed by the speaker and the semantics received by the listener are not misaligned to a large extent under such precise and complete expressions. This efficient communication of information makes the ideal language meet the expectations of philosophers, but this precise expression sacrifices the convenience and conciseness of expression, requiring the speaker to conceive lengthy, unambiguous expressions to ensure the uniqueness of the semantics.

In most ordinary language usage, people usually pursue simplicity of speech as opposed to efficient communication. The speaker, in the pursuit of convenience and simplicity, omits the parts that he or she thinks the listener can understand, which results in a lack of detail at certain moments. These incomplete features of language do not occur in ideal language, but are more common in ordinary language.

In the case of utterances, for example, the speaker's appropriate omission of content from the utterance inevitably results in a lack of detail, and the lack of detail further results in an incomplete description of the linguistic facts described by the utterance. The "incompleteness" here does not refer to the absence of grammatical components of the utterance, but rather to the fact that the utterance does not completely portray the linguistic facts, thus causing the listener to demand self-completion of the linguistic facts, which may lead to misunderstandings in the process of self-completion. The use of pronouns is a typical example of omission in ordinary language. In the case where the language facts have already been portrayed, the speaker involuntarily assumes that the listener understands the language facts he or she has omitted and uses pronouns to omit the preceding facts in the pursuit of simplicity. This makes it necessary for the listener to think about what language fact is being referred to by the pronoun. This non-grammatical omission or mutilation affects the communication of semantics in different contexts, where a part of the semantics is blurred and shows vague ordinary language's properties. What is more, this situation is only possible in ordinary language and does not occur in the use of the ideal language.

Under the influence of incompleteness in vagueness, the phenomenon of omission in utterances and discourse is often seen in the process of language use. Although such omissions may cause discrepancies in the understanding of speakers and listeners and affect the efficiency of information conveyance, they greatly satisfy the speakers' desire for convenience and simplicity in language use. Although the incomplete nature of ordinary language affects the precision of language expression, it satisfies Wittgenstein's "rough ground with friction", which truly combines language with real-life usage, breaking the idealized conditions of perfect language use that are fully compatible with logical science, and preventing the dilemma of using language in a way that is out of touch with real life. This precisely meets the needs of the development of the discipline of pragmatics, and thus, under the influence of the incomplete character of vagueness, ordinary language in the process of use unconsciously pushes the analytic philosophy to take the pragmatic turn and promotes the development of the philosophy of language.

### 3. Conclusion

Starting from Austin's specific description of vagueness, this article takes the position that "the ideal language is indistinguishable from a certain part of the linguistic facts" and, by comparing the differences between the vagueness of the ideal language and that of ordinary language in the actual use of language, further concludes that the characteristics of roughness, ambiguity and incompleteness all reflect the important contribution of the vagueness of ordinary language in the actual use of language to break the conditions of perfect use of the ideal language. Although the roughness feature blurs the boundaries of the meaning of language expressions, it provides

adjustable space for the adaptation of language expressions to contexts in the process of actual use; ambiguity, while causing the phenomenon of multiple meanings in everyday language, also greatly increases the frequency of using the same word and utterance, and the number of possible contexts behind language expressions becomes larger; incompleteness, while making ordinary language lack a degree of precision, creates a greater degree of possibility for omission of language expressions, while avoiding the phenomenon of excessively lengthy language expressions.

Although vagueness makes ordinary language vague and imprecise, the classical logic of the ideal language fails in the use of ordinary language with vagueness, and language no longer spins on frictionless ground, but returns to reality, combining language with the context in which it is actually used. The fact that ordinary language cannot exist in isolation from real life coincides with the specific elaboration of language use that is the concern of pragmatics. Thus, the manifestation of vagueness in ordinary language use is of great value in promoting the development of pragmatics itself and in facilitating the turn towards pragmatics occurring in analytic philosophy.

In seeking the manifestations of the vagueness in ordinary language and its implications for the pragmatic turn, this article has just selected only three features of vagueness and has not compiled a systematic and comprehensive overview of the vagueness characteristic and its particular manifestations in ordinary language. Future studies are encouraged to explore the manifestations of vagueness in ordinary language using process systematically from a deeper perspective, or explore the significance of ordinary language for the pragmatic turn from multiple perspectives that are not limited to a single aspect of vagueness, in order to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding.

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