

An Analysis of Rhetorical Strategies in Chinese Diplomatic Euphemisms in the Context of Pragmatic Principles

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Abstract: Most Chinese diplomatic euphemisms shine brightly in the diplomatic field with the tactful and graceful image as well as become a significant diplomatic link between China and other countries. The brilliant and unique Chinese diplomatic euphemisms, on the one hand, highlight the erudition and wisdom of the spokesperson, and on the other hand, arouse scholars' strong research interest in it and set off a wide range of research upsurge. The author is also deeply inspired by the above two aspects. After browsing the relevant literature and materials, the author believes that the charm of Chinese diplomatic euphemisms goes far beyond the linguistic level because they are crucial in reducing the irritation and sensitivity of diplomatic discourse in the actual application. In addition, they not only highlight the image of China as a country of etiquette but also promote the conduct of current and future diplomatic activities. Therefore, Chinese diplomatic euphemisms have profound research value and this paper aims to analyze the guiding role of pragmatic principles as well as refine its rhetorical strategies through the actual examples of Chinese euphemisms on recent diplomatic occasions.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic principles are actually the basic rules that people abide by or adopt in interpersonal communication, mainly including cooperative principle and politeness principle. Euphemism is “the use of a word which is thought to be less offensive or unpleasant than another word”^[1], so it has the characteristics of implication and elegance, and conforms to cooperative principle and politeness principle in language use. In the diplomatic field, Chinese spokesmen often combine euphemism with rhetorical means such as metaphor, humor, and vague to form unique diplomatic euphemisms with Chinese characteristics. If we can study them thoroughly and earnestly, they can effectively promote the construction of the Chinese diplomatic discourse system, which is also of great significance for maintaining China's international image and enhancing the status of Chinese discourse. Therefore, combined with the analysis of typical examples of Chinese diplomatic euphemism, the author looks forward to making a modest contribution to the study of Chinese diplomatic euphemism and China's

diplomatic discourse system.

2. Diplomatic Euphemisms in the Context of Pragmatic Principles

2.1 Cooperative Principle

In 1967, Grice proposed cooperative principle in *Logic and Conversation*, namely “the maxim of quality, the maxim of relevance, the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner”^[2]. Based on these four principles, people are able to express their views explicitly and successfully. Gradually, they tacitly accept the cooperative principle as the applicable principle to promote the conversation. Therefore, in most cases, these principles can be found in ordinary and diplomatic conversations, and the author analyzed the conversational examples on recent diplomatic occasions.

Example 1: On March 21, a plane crashed in Wuzhou, Guangxi, and no survivors on board were found for the time being. The next day Wang Wenbin wore a black tie to preside over a regular press conference, and the Reuters reporter asked if it had special meaning. He just simply replied, “I don’t see the need to go into that”^[3]. This succinct sentence meets the maxim of quantity, provides the appropriate amount of information without redundant words, and euphemistically explains the special intent of wearing a black tie as a token of condolence for the crash.

Example 2: When asked by a Reuters reporter whether China and the Solomon Islands had signed the inter-governmental framework agreement on security cooperation, Wang Wenbin explained that the signing work had been completed. But he disagreed with the reporter’s statement that the Chinese foreign minister had visited the Solomon Islands, replying that he had not heard the news that the foreign minister had personally visited the Solomon Islands. It was not only a euphemism for not knowing much about the fact but also a reflection of the maxim of relevance in the conversation, that is, answering the content of relevant matters without answering irrelevant questions.

Example 3: “I have no information to release at this moment”^[4] and “As for the specific question you raised, we are seeking further information from all parties”^[4]. These two sentences are derived from Zhao Lijian’s speech, and his words embody the maxim of quality. As he didn’t say anything that he lacked evidence to verify and frankly explained to the reporters that the specific details of the questions raised needed to be further verified by him before he could answer. At the same time, the reporters were informed in a euphemistic and polite manner, and he would respond again after he had the relevant information.

2.2 Politeness Principle

It has been proven in practice that it is an ideal state for people to adopt cooperative principle in a conversation. Because in reality, people tend to think about what is at stake and then adjust what they want to express. In other words, people prefer to use polite and implicit words to avoid violating taboos or to express their opinions more appropriately. Thus, in 1983, Leach first proposed politeness principle in his *Principles of Pragmatics*, which subdivided them into six distinct categories, including tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim, and sympathy maxim^[5]. These principles are not only applied in people’s daily communication but also reflected in diplomatic conversations, serving as significant roles in them.

Example 4: Tact maxim is “Minimize cost to other; maximize benefit to other”^[5]. On diplomatic occasions, what a foreign party has previously said or done something negative to its own country, it can respond appropriately and deal with it leniently to reduce the damage to the international image of the foreign party, which is an application of tact maxim in diplomacy. For example, regarding the visit of some members of the European Parliament to Taiwan, the spokesman responded to the media

that “China urges the European side to redress its mistake...”^[6]. The word “urge” reflects China’s sincere persuasion to the European side to correct its mistake. Tact maxim embodied in this diplomatic discourse highlights China’s generosity and tolerance of the European side’s diplomatic mistakes with Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party, and persuades the European side not to make the same mistake again, so as not to harm the friendship between China and Europe.

Example 5: Approbation maxim is “Minimize dispraise of other; maximize praise of other”^[5]. Modesty maxim means “Minimize praise of self; maximize dispraise of self”^[5]. As we all know, each country has a lot to deal with and it is its duty to efficiently complete the corresponding work affairs. If its competence is praised by other countries, it is undoubtedly a high recognition of that country and its relevant leaders. Modesty maxim, when applied to inter-state diplomacy, reflects the demeanor of the state and the appreciation of the noble deeds of other countries. For example, in an interview, Wang Yi mentioned that Egypt, Algeria, and Syria are countries with profound characteristics, which have made positive contributions to the governance of international affairs. They are good friends worthy of China’s trust, reflecting China’s unstinting praise and recognition of these countries. At the same time, Wang Yi said that China is willing to work with other countries for development, promising that China remains a member of developing countries and a sincere partner of developing countries, which fully reflects China’s humble and sincere attitude towards other countries.

Example 6: Due to historical backgrounds, cultural differences, and diverse governing philosophies, there are differences and frictions between countries to a certain extent. On diplomatic occasions, the influence of these objective factors has caused misunderstandings about other countries and even for their own countries therefore diplomatic spokesmen should appropriately exert their subjective initiative and adopt agreement maxim to skillfully clear up misunderstandings and elucidate their opinions. For example, “we are not siding with anyone against anyone”^[7]. This was the spokesperson’s response to a journalist’s question about the possibility that Sino-Russian cooperation could harm Sino-European relations, stating that China insists on discussing matters on their own merits and does not engage in any siding. In this way, the spokesman stated China’s position clearly, reduced the differences between China and European countries at the level of consciousness, and enhanced the agreement between them, so as to seek better cooperation and achieve a win-win situation.

3. Rhetorical Strategies of Chinese Diplomatic Euphemisms

Through the above examples, the author has found that in diplomatic euphemisms, the use of the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, and the maxim of relevance can help the speaker express views and respond to questions in concise terms. In this way, it can not only avoid lengthy discourse and miscommunication but also carry out diplomatic negotiations in a time-saving and efficient manner. The use of politeness principle helps avoid taboos and alleviate embarrassment. However, to enrich diplomatic discourse and achieve a better euphemistic effect, spokesmen will employ a large number of rhetoric strategies on diplomatic occasions, among which the common rhetoric includes synecdoche, hyperbole, understatement, etc. After studying with lots of examples, the author found that rhetorical means such as metaphor, analogy, allusion, vague and humor are typically used in Chinese diplomatic euphemisms, and the specific analyses are as follows:

Metaphor: “ASEAN countries are chess players who will help promote regional development and prosperity, not chess pieces in a geopolitical contest”^[8]. The major difference between a chess player and a chess piece is that the former has a high degree of initiative. Zhao Lijian likened ASEAN countries to “chess players”, reflecting China’s high respect for the autonomous development rights of ASEAN countries, and euphemistically expressed that China has never interfered in ASEAN countries’ development but shares ASEAN countries’ cherishing of the peace and stability in the

Asia-Pacific region.

The terms “a major artery” and “steel camel fleet” are both used as metaphorical synonyms for the China-Europe Railway Express, euphemistically and implicitly pointing out the enormous and significant contribution of the Belt and Road Initiative. As history shows, more than 2,000 years ago, a team of merchants brought their camel companions, contributing to the cultural and material exchange between the East and the West. With the vigorous development of the economy, China has now successfully built and efficiently operated the China-Europe Railway Express, becoming a contemporary “steel camel fleet”, driving local economic development and continuing to benefit countries and people along the Belt and Road.

Analogy: “All local governments must count every cent and make every cent count to ensure that all funding support for businesses will be fully delivered, and it would be even better if more could be done”^[9]. This sentence compares local governments to “misers” and gives them an intensely emotional color, vividly and euphemistically highlighting the sincere expectations of the central government for local governments to spend money prudently and eliminate their extravagant and wasteful behavior. What’s more, the central government encourages them to put money to good use and to produce results that benefit the people.

The basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter play a crucial role in multilateralism which is similar to that of multiple pillars in ancient architecture. The spokesperson, therefore, compared the basic norms of international relations to multiple pillars, tactfully and euphemistically telling the international community that all countries should consistently uphold multilateralism and that China would participate in the governance of international affairs together with other countries in accordance with the United Nations Charter.

Allusion: When referring to the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreement, Hua Chunying said “Is it a “gift” or Pandora’s box?”^[10]. According to Nepalese experts, the terms of the MCC agreement may be detrimental to Nepal’s national security, so Hua Chunying quoted Pandora’s box, a Greek allusion to disaster and adversity in response to a regular press conference to gently remind Nepal that it needs to carefully consider signing MCC agreement.

In his speech at the summit to mark 30 years of China-ASEAN dialogue relations in November last year, President Xi cited the Chinese allusion that “Designs for justice prevail, and acts for people’s benefit succeed”^[11]. This sentence is derived from Yanzi’s Spring and Autumn, which is a profound insight of Qi Jinggong and Yan Zi on the method of governing the country and is intended to persuade that those who plan in accordance with morality are sure to achieve aims and those who act following the wishes and welfare of the people can succeed. To sum up, the allusion euphemistically explains to ASEAN countries the significance of putting people first, calling on ASEAN countries to benefit their people and work with them for a bright future.

Vague: “The clumsy show of a few people won’t shake in the slightest the international community’s universal and firm commitment to the one-China principle or the inevitable trend of reunification of China”^[12]. Wang Wenbin used a vague statement and the minority he referred to was Tsai Ing-wen and some members of the European Parliament with whom he met. This ambiguous approach is intended to be implicit and polite, which not only avoids the direct conflict between China and Europe but also conveys that Taiwan is a provincial-level administrative region of China, emphasizing the fact that there is only one China in the world.

“In a world confronted by challenges, all countries, large or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equals, and should uphold the principle of democracy in international relations”^[13]. The use of three contrasting adjectives here obscures the actual countries, rather than directly pointing out which countries are small, weak, and poor, thus implicitly maintaining the international image of these countries, while indicating that China actively encourages them to explore and pursue democracy that suits them.

Humor: In response to a question from the media at a news conference, Wang Wenbin jokingly pointed out that the United States is “the world’s number one quitter”^[14]. It not only humorously explained its incorrect practice of frequently withdrawing from international treaties and organizations but also avoided direct criticism from words, thus reducing the irritation of diplomatic discourse and safeguarding Sino-US friendship and peaceful development.

The terms “beauty camera” and “grey-black filter” were mentioned by Wang Yi when he commented on the selective coverage of the media. As we all know, these two words have a certain humorous color. Using them to replace the sensitive words can wittily convey Wang Yi’s sincere expectations for the media to objectively record and report events as well as express his and people’s hope that more journalists who report the news as fairly and truthfully as “Edgar Snow” will emerge in the future. This example effectively proves that the use of euphemisms with humorous rhetoric not only avoids the embarrassment that may arise on diplomatic occasions but also creates a relaxed and funny atmosphere of negotiation, which is conducive to consensus and cooperation between the two sides.

4. Conclusion

Diplomatic discourse is closely related to the image and interests of the country. Through the analysis of the above examples, the author found that on diplomatic occasions, the spokesperson will adopt two major pragmatic principles, namely cooperative principle and politeness principle, and organically combines the two, conveying them in subtle and polite euphemisms. To enrich their euphemistic expression effect and achieve the ideal communicative purpose, the spokesperson usually embellishes them with various rhetorical strategies and they will eventually become unique Chinese diplomatic euphemisms, creating a harmonious communication atmosphere for both sides and facilitating diplomatic activities. Moreover, by using these Chinese diplomatic euphemisms, which combine the euphemism with figurative and subtle humor, spokesmen can articulate China’s true views more courteously and respectfully, and even dispel misconceptions of China by other countries. From a longer-term and more realistic perspective, China’s unique diplomatic euphemisms have made great contributions to promoting countries to seek common ground while reserving differences, achieving mutual benefits and win-win results, and maintaining friendly relations. Therefore, the author believes that it is of great significance to thoroughly and exhaustively conduct the study of Chinese diplomatic euphemisms and the rhetorical strategies they involved in the context of pragmatic principles. Finally, the author sincerely calls on scholars to devote themselves to the study of Chinese diplomatic euphemisms in the future, so as to jointly contribute to the enrichment of China’s diplomatic discourse system.

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