

# The Research on Hedges in *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the Perspective of Politeness Principle

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**Abstract**—The politeness principle, a rule to maintain the harmonious relationship between the speaker and the listener in conversations, is proposed by G. N. Leech. At the same time, hedges as language phenomenon are also applied to indirectly convey conversational implicatures, to avoid conflict and to achieve polite expressions. Through studies on the actual use of approximators in the masterpiece *A Dream of Red Mansions*, this paper investigates how hedges are applied as effective methods in showing the politeness principle.

**Index Terms**—G. N. Leech, hedges, politeness principle, approximator, Cao Xueqin, *A Dream of Red Mansions*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Vague language is the objective attribute of natural language, and the vague language in the literary works is a type of artistic language [1]. The main reasons of these languages are the restrictions of language itself, the basic characteristics of the literary language and the differences of understandings between the readers. However, hedges are the common and typical languages of vague languages which mean that these words make things vague. It modifies and restricts the ranges and degrees of utterances that contributes to the expression of certain affections [2].

*The Dream of Red Mansions*, written by Cao Xueqin, is regarded as a typical work for the analysis of vague language phenomenon [3]. Being a summit of ancient Chinese classic masterpiece, it opens a fantastic feudal and picturesque society from state family regulations to basic interpersonal skill, all of these deserve repeatedly appreciation. More than this, the reason of why this book attracts many scholars and experts' attention is because its art in language expression, just like a Chinese poem's portrait: "still holding the pipa half block surface [4]." Cao Xueqin employs a great deal of words with intended semantic meaning to describe characters and draw up plots.

## II. HEDGES AND GENEROSITY MAXIM

According to Leech, Generosity Maxim means minimizing benefit to self, and maximizing cost to self. The another aspect of this maxim is about tact maxim which means minimizing cost to other, and maximizing benefit to other. So speakers must try their best to minimize the hearer cost or to maximize the hearers' benefits. For instance, it is clear that when people want to require others to do something, they cannot say it toughly and directly.

Otherwise, hearers will feel to be offended and they will not behave cooperatively in this conversation any more. It means that the speakers must try their best to minimize their own benefits or to maximize their cost. What's more, the speaker cannot be strict to others. By following the generosity maxim and tact maxim, the conversation between the speaker and the hearer can be smooth. While language communication depends on the social environment which identifies social status of the communicators, the condition of their social relationship, and their relationship with others.

Languages in *The Dream of Red Mansions* differ from each other due to different social strata, living environment and distinctive characteristics. The language of Baochai usually represents the tact maxim that most benefits others. This may artificially show altruism, but actually it benefits herself which becomes a win-win situation. So, the usage of hedges indicates her nature of sagacious and shrewd characteristics. In the fifty-six chapter, after Xifeng's sickness, Li Wan, Baochai and Xichun offer helps to her daily management. When Baochai talks about mansion's management, she says that "even if they don't complain openly, they are bound to feel resentful, and then if they pick more fruit or flowers ostensibly for their mistresses but actually for themselves, there will be no body to whom you can complain, But if they benefit too, they can keep an eye on things for you when you're busy [5]." In her discourses towards those women, she uses hedges like: "more" and "too". On the one hand, she affords great benefit to women through the words "more", a hedge that cannot tell the exact number or volume of the benefit they can get, but it would be more than the current benefit they can get. The word "too" also indicates that the expectations of Baochai to offer them the same profit as other old married women. But the thing is the actual right of this decision that is depended on Xifeng. Here Baochai's words not only brings happiness to the women who can have more motivations to work but also brings gratification of Xifeng who may think her as a competent assistant for her to stimulate women's working passion at Xifeng's mansion.

From the pragmatic point of view, the application of hedges here conforms to the politeness principle, the tact principle as it benefits others most, and make others lost less. After her proposal, the women were delighted, which meant that they would neither be controlled by the stewards nor have to settle accounts with Xifeng. All they need to do is to pay a few extra strings of cash every year.

More, Baochai even says that they needn't decline. All these show Baochai as a smart manager by using the tact principle to gain others' trust. Later, she says: "this is none of my business but, as you know, my aunt has urged me repeatedly to help out now that Madam Zhu's so busy and

other cousins are still young, I don't want to add her worries by refusing. Besides, your Second Mistress has poor health and is busy with family affair, while I've nothing to do." [4] Here Baochai uses "as you know" as the hedge to indicate that the current situation is too tough, and in this way she may minimize benefit to herself with maximizing cost to herself which is the generosity principle of politeness. She represents her cost, her kind motivation, her generosity to help and her none consideration of herself. Then she further explains that she has to overcome her scruples and does not mind if everyone regards her a nuisance. Therefore, not only the approximators but also shields can be reviewed as the effective way to show politeness and to achieve certain communicative purposes.

In the third chapter, Daiyu, the motherless granddaughter of lady dowager, comes to the Rong mansion. When they talk about her body condition, Daiyu says that "I've been taking medicine ever since I was weaned. Many well-known doctors have examined me, but none of their prescription was any use. The year I was three. I remember being told, a scabby monk came to our house and wanted to take me away to be a nun. My parents wouldn't hear of it. The monk said, 'if you can't bear to part with her she'll probably never get well. The only other remedy is to keep her from hearing weeping and from seeing any relatives apart from her father and mother. That's her only hope of having a quiet life', Now I still taking ginseng pills." [5] the lady dowager approves that "it's good, we are having pills made, and I'll see they make some for you [5]." After Daiyu's recall of her weak and unlucky experiences, her grandmother answers her as great consolation with the usage of hedge word "some" to show her tact way of communication. From the perspective of tact and generosity principle, the speakers must try their best to minimize the hearer cost or to maximize hearers' benefits as the tact maxim considers the speakers' point of view. It means that the speakers must try their best to minimize their own benefits or to maximize their cost. What's more, the speaker cannot be strict to others. So the tact way of speaking can enhance Daiyu's sense of belongingness.

Also when Lady Wang asks whether Xifeng has distributed the monthly allowance or not. Here are conversions between Lady Wang and Xifeng: "just now I took some people to the upstairs storeroom at the back to look for some brocade. But though we searched for a long time we couldn't find any of the sort that you described to us yesterday, madam. Could your memory have played you a trick?" "It doesn't matter if there is none of that sort, Just choose two lengths to make to make your little cousin some clothes. This evening don't forget to send for them[5]." Through this dialogue between them, the hedge "some" is also used by Lady Wang.

The above two quotations respectively comes from Lady dowager and Lady Wang. they may sound like artificially several words, but they contain the politeness and cares of their guest Daiyu. On the basis of Leech's tact and generosity principle, when we communicate with others, we have to increase others' benefit, our own hardship as much as possible, and decrease the cost of others. Namely, when we are prepared to accept others' benefit, we should be at ease and decrease our sense of guilt or protect others face as much as possible. So when we express our cost, we need to

reduce the tension of expression and simply describe it.

So the hedge word "some", said by lady dowager, indicates that it is easy for us to add more medicines, and it will not cause in any trouble, so Daiyu could feel relaxed to accept. At the same time, the word hedge used by Lady Wang also shows that it is convenient for them to make clothes, we have a lots of idle drapery, Daiyu could feel relaxed to accept as well. Along with Lady Wang's later conversation "so next time you know where to find her. If you want anything just let her know[5]" as the absolute representation of politeness principle. The active suggestion to Daiyu to turn to Xifeng for help if she confronts with any troubles which eliminates her qualm of where to look for help.

### III. HEDGES AND APPROBATION MAXIM

The approbation and modesty maxim can be seen as the most common principle in *The Dream of Red Mansions*[4]. In a society, strictly dominated by those dogmatic rules, the relationship between the people is determined by their social status. The lower class will try to think highly of those who are in higher social class. On the other hand, some shrewd people will also use these two maxims to arrive in sudden communicative goals or gain a further interpersonal relations.

While in the thirty-two chapter, after Jinchuan's death, Baochai tries to console Lady Wang. She says that: "you feel that way, because you are so kind-hearted. But I can't believe that she drowned herself in a tantrum. She was playing by the well, more likely, and fell in[5]." Confronting with Jinchuan's demise, Baochai does not show her sadness but show her callous side for she uses hedges like "so" and "more likely" which indicate her approbation towards Lady Wang though she is the actual killer of Jinchuan. The another hedge "more likely" means that her deduction of the death reason is totally Jinchuan's self-responsibility. This vague guessing partly releases Lady Wang's guilt and partly alleviates Baochai's personal subjective responsibility which perfectly suits the approbation maxim, that is to minimize dispraise of other, and maximize praise of other.

Through the threads of *The Dream of Red Mansions*, though Baoyu's marriage largely depends on Jia Zheng and Lady dowager, the suggestion of Lady Wang is also very important. Baochai's speech act has two impacts, on the one hand, Lady Wang is her aunt and her compliment is reasonable which helps relieving her tension. On the other hand, Lady Wang, mother of Baoyu, might sense her considerable nature that contributes to her preference to regard Baochai as the expecting partner of Baoyu. Thus, under the angle of politeness principle, the use of hedges can properly realize goals of communications.

In the third chapter, when Xifeng first sees Daiyu, she takes her hand and carefully inspects her from head to foot, then lets her back to her seat by the lady dowager. And she says with a laugh, "this is the first time I've set eyes on such a ravishing beauty. Her whole air is so distinguished! She doesn't take after her father, son-in-law of our Old Ancestress, but looks more like a Jia. No wonder our Old Ancestress couldn't put you out of her mind and was forever

talking or thinking about you. But poor ill-fated little cousin, losing your mother so young"[5]. Within this conversation, she even dabs her eyes with a handkerchief.

Knowing that Daiyu is left for nothing and has no choice but depend on Lady dowager in Rong mansion, she also uses hedges like "such" and "so" to convey her approbation of Daiyu's beauty. Daiyu's father Lin Ruhai has a poor background, and could not compare with these mansions. Daiyu must behave herself carefully to avoid any conflicts or embarrassment. So Xifeng's words may not tell the truth or not completely conform to the truth. But she applies hedges to show her warmth and adoration for Daiyu's beauty, so she could not use any exact words but the degree adverb to describe. In this way, the polite attitude becomes very obvious. What's more, these utterances not only exalt Daiyu but also exalt lady dowager and her another three granddaughters. Xifeng's proper use of hedges successfully achieves her final objectives.

According to Leech, he defines the speakers and listeners as "self" and "other" [6]. In the discourse, "self" means the speaker, and listeners may be exact listeners or the third parties. The polite attitude of the speaker can be expressed to the exact listener or the third parties. So her politeness travels to Daiyu, three granddaughters as well as the lady dowager. With the application of hedges, Xifeng perfectly conforms to the politeness principle of approbation maxim though it violates the cooperative principle.

#### IV. HEDGES AND SYMPATHY MAXIM

Agreement maxim means the principle to minimize disagreement between self and other, and maximize agreement between self and other. At the same time, sympathy maxim pays attention to minimizing antipathy between self and other, and maximize sympathy between self and other. Sometimes, although the speaker disagrees with other people's opinions, the speaker still attempts to show his or her support to others' opinions. In this case, the speaker follows the agreement maxim. Of course, it doesn't mean that people should always flatter others. As a matter of fact, people who follow the agreement maxim just want to save other people's face in a polite way. Apparently, the maxim of agreement can play an important role in ensuring a successful communication. The sympathy maxim emphasizes that when others complain about their troubles or difficult situations, the speaker should express his or her sympathy. And it can help the speaker to build a good relationship with the hearer. Being considerate can be seen as polite behavior in people's communication, and follow the sympathy maxim can be helpful in people's daily communication.

Daiyu comes to the old lady, her grandmother, for help. She is totally a lonely person with the death of both her mother and father. So when she first meets relatives, she definitely would receive sympathy about her terrible experiences. One of the obvious one is Xifeng's relieved and comfort words. Xifeng carefully inspects her from head to foot at first and flatters that Daiyu is such a ravishing beauty. Then she turns her tone : "But poor ill-little cousin, losing your mother so young"[5]. with that she dabs her eyes with a handkerchief. The hedge "so" here tells the sympathy

towards Daiyu. She experiences a lot when she is at an age that should not experience these awful things. The degree adverb or hedge used here shows the affection along with Daiyu's mind and achieves the politeness principle: the sympathy maxim. Knowing these background of Daiyu, Xifeng, a shrewd and capable person, must take some measures to cater to this new and important person to exaggerate her own considerate characteristics. In the following conversation, she even switches at once from grief to many greetings like "How old are you, cousin?", "Have you started your schooling yet?" "you mustn't be home sick here ." and so on. These sentences all indicate that Xifeng conducted her conversation with the sympathy maxim in mind that after the usage of such hedges to emphasize her emotion, she continues her warmhearted greetings to express her deep sympathy for Daiyu.

In thirty chapter, Baoyu explains to Baochai that he could not attend the birthday because he has been sick for a time and tells her that: "I would have be out of sorts on your brother's birthday; that's why I have not sent any present over or even gone to offer congratulations. If he doesn't know I'm unwell he may think I couldn't be bothered and be offended. Do explain to him, will you, cousin"[5]. The smart Baochai answers that: "You are over-punctilious. We would not put you any trouble even if you wished to go, much less so when you're unwell. As cousins you are always seeing so much of each other, you have no call to behave like strangers"[5]. Baochai's answer saves the discourse space of Baoyu. Generally, if the speaker wants the listener to do something, he or she will have such method to speak to save the discourse for the listener which is the intended meaning of the utterances. Baochai speaks indirectly to show her opinion that she wants Baoyu to know her forgiveness about his absence. She knows that Baoyu is not fond of attending the boisterous party activity. So she uses the word "over", "so much" and "much less" to agree with Baoyu's actual situation that he is not very well at that time though he is really nice regularly towards each other. In this way, Baochai catches the intention of the reason of Baoyu's absence and answers Baoyu accordingly and purposely. This may contributes to impressing him her fine image of considerate characteristics with her application of agreement maxim in politeness principle.

In the tenth chapter, Dr. Zhang diagnoses Keqing's illness. He replies Jia Rong after his pulse analysis that "Those gentlemen have delayed your lady's recovery, if she had taken the right medicine when she first missed her menses, she would have been quite well by now. Since she has had no effective treatment, this trouble is only to be expected. I would rate her chances of recovery at three out of ten. If she sleeps well tonight after taking my medicine, that will about double her chances"[5]. This sentence contains several number words "three", "ten" and "double". These words do not have their own meaning like the exact number but represent the vague meaning as approximate number. Keqing is an important person at the mansion, the result of Dr. Zhang's diagnosis is also badly vital. While, he is an very experienced doctor, he even uses these vague words or hedges to convey his sympathy of Keqing. Though he may know the terrible situation of Keqing's sickness, he does not tell the truth directly but afford a possibility of her recovery

which also indicates his intended way of conforming to the politeness principle, the sympathy maxim.

## V. CONCLUSION

The politeness principle, proposed as a theory towards pragmatics by G. N. Leech, answers the question of why people use hedges during communication. The politeness theory explains the phenomenon that speakers intentionally violate the cooperative principle to express their true feelings inside their mind which are due to the consideration of making the utterance decent. The tact maxim and generosity maxim, approbation maxim and modesty maxim, modesty maxim and sympathy maxim are three parts of the politeness principle that each part represents two angles of the same principle.

In the light of the definition of hedges, it can make discourse vaguer, more euphemistic and more decent[7]. According to its function, hedges may make modifications of the utterances on the basis of the value and range of the topic, and this kind of modifications usually reflect tact maxim, modesty maxim and agreement maxim of politeness principle. Also it can make subjective evaluation or indirect evaluation of the subject on the content which represents the sympathy maxim, approbation maxim and generosity maxim. Approximators allow the safety and politeness of the utterances that successfully and effectively justify and maintain the equal cooperation of both speaker and listener under the perspective of pragmatic functions. Therefore, hedges is one of the indispensable strategies to comply with the politeness principle. Hedges, as the positive polite strategy, can weaken the responsibilities of the speaker about the degree of truth of the speaking content and express the attitude of the speaker about the subject which may attenuate the power of the utterances, consider the possible suggestions that may be proposed by the listener to avoid the unnecessary collision of both sides, and protect the self-image. As negative polite strategy, hedges also abates the politeness principle that cuts down the menace of face as much as possible, allays the utterances, avoids imposing oneself upon others and protects the passive face of the listener [3].

At the same time, the employment of hedges lets utterances become more relaxing that decreases the conflicts against other. This modest principle can promote the successful and sooth conduction of the communication, and increase the objectivity of the speaker's content. Politeness is the remark of human civilization, and an important principle of human life. The speech act of human beings should be restricted by this principle. Being polite is one of the most ordinary phenomena in communication. As for some language communication, the politeness component plays an important role in achieving the effectiveness of the implicature, and the degree of politeness depends on these rules: 1) Don't impose, do not intervene other; 2) Give options, listeners make decision by themselves; 3) Friendly

treat other, construct mutual-benefit relationship, which is to give options to other and do not impose on other. Along with Cao Xueqin's intention of depicting his characters in the novel, these hedges can perfectly help him with these points.

Another vital reason that impacts the politeness is people's social strata, such as within the communications of upper class and lower class, the latter would pay much attention to the politeness while speaking to the upper class. The female language represents this characteristic most. Because of the lower position of the female, they have to speak in a more indirect, more careful and politer way with their proper expressions of hedges. So, applications of them become increasingly extensive in communication. With the proper use of hedges, on the one hand, speakers can realize their purpose of communication easily, on the other hand, the content inside their communications becomes more objective, more convincing, more decent and politer, moreover, it gains the chance of hiding personal responsibilities and redeems face. In such a mansion with various status gaps, both of the shrewd ones or vulnerable ones, they all have to carefully disguise themselves with languages.

However, hedges also have passive roles. In light of the restriction of knowledge or other reasons, someone may have no choice but use hedges that lead to a failed communication. All in all, in the process of communication, hedges indeed can bring polite attitude or mode towards listeners, and modify the equal cooperation between both sides. If suitably utilized, hedges could contribute to the specific communicative assignment. At this time, the application of hedges is one of the common strategies adhering to the politeness principles.

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