**Grace Q. Zhang. *Elastic Language: How and Why We Stretch Our Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; xvi + 242 pp., US$110.00 (hbk)**

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Over the past two decades, vague language (VL) has attracted researchers’ attention as an important feature of language (see, for example, Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2007). VL is defined as language which is contextually dependable but not resolvable (see, for example, Zhang, 1998). The following example clarifies the point further:

[I]f you, as a person perfectly aware of the fact that I am fond of Cuban cigars, ask me, in front of my curious child, why George, one of the guests invited to my place, has not yet arrived, and I say that I have asked him to buy me, on his way to my place, “one of those things that I am fond of”, I can be said to have been vague about the reason why George has not yet made it. In this situation, my use of the vague expression “one of those things that I am fond of” would serve to imply, inter alia, that your question was not timely and/or that I do not want to mention the word “cigar” in front of my child. (Parvaresh, 2015, p. 130)

In the situation described above, the expression “things” is contextually dependable (i.e. it refers to “Cuban cigars”) but is not resolvable (i.e. the utterance does not disclose any information concerning, for example, the “quantity” or the “brand” to be purchased). Thus, “things” would be an example of VL.

Given the growing interest in the investigation of VL, Grace Zhang’s book is a timely and welcome contribution to the field. To begin with, the choice of the term ‘elastic language’ (EL) instead of VL has enabled Zhang to stay away from the negative attitudes some people might traditionally have about VL. The significance of the volume goes, however, far beyond this change of terminology. Taking a pragmatics-oriented perspective, Zhang successfully develops her theory of elasticity and provides the reader with theoretical as well as empirical evidence as to how elasticity is manifested in actual language use.

The book is divided into 10 chapters which offer fresh insight into both the nature and complexity of EL use. Chapters 1 and 2 explain how and why Zhang has adopted a pragmatic rather than a cognitive approach, and provide the reader with a thorough overview of the current literature on VL. Thus, Zhang lays the foundation for a framework that “consolidates past research and charts news directions” (p. 47).

The most significant contribution of the volume, however, comes in Chapter 3, in which Zhang develops her theory of elasticity, which is empirically tested in the remainder of the book. Drawing on her previous publications in general and from Zhang (2011) in particular, she proposes one main and a number of specific maxims which serve to “encapsulate the strategic dimensions of VL use” (p. 56). The maxims are as follows (pp. 56-63):

* Main Maxim:

Stretch language elastically in discursive negotiations to achieve communicative goals

* Specific Maxims:

1. Go just right (provide the right amount of information):
   * 1. Go approximate (elasticize in approximate form)
     2. Go scalar (elasticize in scalar form)
2. Go general (speak in general terms)
3. Go epistemic (speak in hypothetical and/or subjective terms)

Zhang’s argument is based on the assumption that EL stretching is governed by three principles summarized below (p. 57):

* Fluidity Principle: Elasticity is a matter of degree, and EL stretching is gradual.
* Stretchability Principle: Utterances can be stretched in different ways based on communicative needs.
* Strategy Principle: Fluid utterances are employed to serve strategic purposes.

In this context, the word *stretchable* rather than *vague* is a very useful metaphor indicating that “when an elastic expression is used, its interpretation can be extended in one way or another” (p. 57). To clarify, in *many students*, ‘many’ stretches the set “upward to a large number” but in *few students*, ‘few’ stretches the set “downward to a small number” (p. 57).

In the remaining chapters, Zhang uses a mixed methods research design, which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and she draws on a corpus of “real-life spoken language” consisting of “video recordings primarily taken at international airports […] throughout Australia” (p. 67), to show how her refreshing elasticity theory can explain the various strategic dimensions of VL use.

For example, in Chapter 5, Zhang provides a thorough analysis of the linguistic realizations of EL. The chapter reveals how four categories of stretchers, namely approximate stretcher (e.g. *about*), general stretcher (e.g. *anything*), scalar stretcher (e.g. *very*) and epistemic stretcher (e.g. *probably*), are manifested linguistically in the data. This information is complemented by Zhang’s in-depth qualitative analyses provided in Chapter 6 in which she looks at the contextualized functions of EL. Zhang’s study also focuses on the relationship between such important social (e.g. power and gender) and speech (e.g. speech events and speech genre) factors and EL use, providing a wealth of insight into how people ‘elasticize’ their language.

All in all, Zhang’s book makes a great contribution to the field by filling a significant theoretical gap. The conceptual framework developed and tested throughout the book has the potential to contribute not only to studies on VL use but also to other areas of linguistic investigation. Despite the fact that it is concerned with institutional data, the book broadens our understanding of the use of EL in context and is thus essential reading for graduate students of linguistics as well as for researchers.

**References**

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