

## AMBIGUITY VERSUS PRECISION: THE CHANGING ROLE OF TERMINOLOGY IN CONFERENCE DIPLOMACY

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*“The question is” said Alice “whether you  
can make words mean different things.”  
“The question is” said Humpty Dumpty  
“which is to be the master—that’s all.”  
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass**

In the classic inventory of the prerequisites of the ideal diplomat as set out by Harold Nicolson,<sup>1</sup> precision ranks second only to truthfulness. Yet further down the list the virtues of diplomatic ambiguity or diplomatic understatement are also extolled. How are these two seeming opposites to be reconciled? In common parlance the skill of finding formulations which avoid giving offence and are at the same time acceptable to all sides is treated with justifiable respect and often referred to as a “diplomatic” form of expression. This usage probably reflects an accurate perception of language and diplomacy down the years. In conference diplomacy, the successful diplomat engaged in the negotiation of texts will often strive to persuade his interlocutors to reach agreement on a form of words which combines precision with ambiguity. The two can be brought together in the same paragraph or longer text, more rarely in the same sentence. The precision will as a rule serve the purposes of his own side in stipulating claims or limits to commitments; the sought-for ambiguity will serve to allay anxieties on either side or to secure a margin for subsequent interpretation. As conference diplomacy has steadily gained in importance, the terminology that it employs has evolved, sometimes reflecting the simultaneous pursuit of both precision and ambiguity. The reflections which follow represent a preliminary discussion of why this may be so. A full examination of the question would benefit from the extensive analysis of the texts of selected agreements by means, *inter alia*, of such innovative tools of textual and contextual analysis as DiploAnalytica.<sup>2</sup>

## SOME DEFINITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Observing a time-honoured tradition it may be well to go back to the beginning and define our terms—unambiguously if possible!

**Precision:** the condition of being precise, where (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) “precise” means:

1. accurately expressed;
2. punctilious, scrupulous in being exact, observing rules, etc.<sup>3</sup>

**Ambiguity:**

1. Doubtful or uncertain (Webster);
2. Capable of being understood in two or more possible senses.

This dual definition of ambiguity arises in turn from the two possible meanings of the prefix “ambi”, signifying either:

- bothness (being on two sides at once: thus, ambidextrous; ambivalent), this sense implies **duality**;
- aroundness (being on all sides at once: thus, ambience; ambit), this sense implies **vagueness**.

In linguistics, the duality reading is associated with syntax, as well as with homophones and homonyms, where what is called a duck/rabbit effect is achieved in that you have either one reading or the other in mind, but *not* some hybrid of the two.

Some examples:

*Syntactic ambiguity*

- Flying planes can be dangerous. (Either you are doing the flying or someone else is.)
- The president could not ratify the treaty. (He couldn’t ratify it *versus* he could “not-ratify” it, as an option.)

*Lexical ambiguity*

- bank (financial *versus* river);
- pear *versus* pair *versus* pare.

From what one gathers of linguistic theory, the scope for semantic vagueness is an inherent part of all living languages and is caused by the influence of *context* (both linguistic and extra-linguistic) on meaning. An essential property of languages is considered by specialists to be that they underspecify the intended meaning of speakers. This underspecification invites inference on the part of the listener (or reader) in order to retrieve the most likely intended message, given one's knowledge of the language, the author and the context.

Examples of influence of linguistic context on meaning:

- I am going to Malta to attend a conference (physical movement, two verbs separated).
- I am going to attend a conference in Malta (ambiguous between physical movement, intention and futurity).
- I am going to enjoy the conference (futurity and intentionality only, since the first verb modifies the second verb).

Examples of world knowledge on meaning:

- headache pill (gets rid of headaches) *versus* longevity pill (prolongs life);
- I like to eat pizza *with* my parents/ *with* my fingers/ *with* red wine/ *with* capers.

The foregoing considerations of a linguistic nature throw some light on the scope and diversity of ambiguity as defined by one of the earliest and most influential of modern students of the subject (although his interest was almost exclusively confined to the forms of ambiguity used in literature) as being: "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."<sup>4</sup>

When reflecting on the narrower subject of the uses to which diplomacy may put ambiguity, the following points would seem to emerge from what we have seen so far:

- Ambiguity occurs spontaneously or naturally (i.e. unintentionally) in languages because, in order to be flexible, they do not spell everything

out and thus leave scope for alternative interpretations induced by contextual factors.

- It is possible (even probable) that different languages, emerging from and reflecting distinct cultures, offer varying scope for ambiguity, intended or unintended. Some maintain, for example, that the Chinese are predisposed to underspecification and ambiguity as a culture-conditioned stance in interpersonal communications;<sup>5</sup> while the opposite holds true of United States citizens (President George W. Bush may be the exception who proves the rule).<sup>6</sup>
- If this is true, differences in the grasp of the language used in negotiations could conceivably confer a distinct advantage on diplomats seeking to introduce ambiguities in negotiated texts in order to serve their own purposes. (The use of Latin in drafting diplomatic documents until supplanted by French in the eighteenth century would at least have avoided the advantages subsequently enjoyed by native French speakers, and, since the early twentieth century, by those diplomats and other negotiators for whom English is their mother tongue.)

We may note in passing that precision is often avoided with having recourse to ambiguity, simply because precision can give hostages to fortune, or give offence. The Treaty of Breda, concluded in 1667 between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands after protracted negotiations, and couched in Latin, nowhere makes any explicit reference to the central cession it embodies—that of the island of Manhattan from the latter country to the former in exchange for a group of spice islands in the East Indies. Contemporary examples of avoidance of potentially risky precision are the advice given by the legal department of the World Bank to its president, Mr Wolfenson, to avoid any explicit reference to the term “corruption”. Here, precision could give offence. In Northern Ireland, tactical manoeuvres surrounding the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement have included the claim by the deputy leader of one side (Sinn Féin) that the future of the peace process would depend on a “leap of imagination” on the part of the British government (in respect of policing and arms decommissioning arrangements). That is a circumlocution for what was really meant—namely, a “major concession”, for use of so precise a term would have provoked an outcry amongst those opposed to any concessions at all, and would thus have been self-defeating.<sup>7</sup>

Before turning explicitly to the matter of ambiguity in the terminology of conference diplomacy, the following extract from a lecture given at Harvard University in 1973 by the celebrated conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein demonstrates how the concept can be perceived by an outsider to that process.

When I first wrote down the title of this lecture "*The Delights and Dangers of Ambiguity*" I had no idea that the word *dangers* would itself acquire an ambiguous meaning by the time the lecture was delivered. ...a few days ago...a formidable new danger was thrust upon us when our Secretary of State announced that the armed forces of the United States had been put on world-wide alert in response to what he called "the ambiguity of some of the actions and communications" regarding respectively movements of Soviet troops and statements of Russian diplomats. Now that is a dangerous ambiguity, dramatising the dangers that accompany a lack of clarity in human communications. Those are clear and present dangers: failure of communications can lead to a complete breakdown and to disastrous consequences. Then why (you may ask) do I place this persistent emphasis on "the beauty of ambiguity"? The answer must be obvious: ambiguity *may* be a useful tool in diplomacy, as it is in art; but it can be catastrophic when diplomacy turns into hard fact, just as it can be glorious in an actual work of art. Aesthetics *si*, politics, *no!*<sup>8</sup>

## AMBIGUITY IN CONFERENCE DIPLOMACY

In the drafting of legal documents such as contracts strenuous efforts are usually made to eschew ambiguity because their survival in the document improves the chances of one or other of the parties raising a successful challenge in court and thereby escaping fulfilment of

ambiguous provisions. Hence, the ingenious anti-ambiguity drafting efforts just mentioned often result in documents whose prose is all but impenetrable.

Conference diplomacy implies virtually constant exposure to legal texts, either those containing the mandates or precedents governing the conduct of the conference or those which have to be drafted containing its results (which may take many forms ranging from recommendations possessing no legal force to those involving binding commitments). The interpretation and negotiation of such documents is thus a major part of conference diplomacy. The work of drafting committees or groups of “friends of the Rapporteur” occupies what is often a central role in which the conciliation of the views of those delegations seeking precision in definitions and commitments with those who prefer ambiguity is pivotal.

This is so because it is easier to hold a party to an agreement to a specific commitment than to a vague or ambiguous one. Hence, those which may have to give something up have an interest in obfuscating their potential obligation, and those which stand to gain have an interest in clarity and precision. The eleven years during which the Uruguay Round (UR) of multilateral trade negotiations took place, culminating in the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1994, abound in examples of these opposing interests, mainly between developed and developing countries, but sometimes within the former group (especially between the United States and the European Union).<sup>9</sup>

One striking example of this opposition of interests regarding precision versus ambiguity occurred when the UR negotiations ran into stalemate in November 1999, and were on the brink of collapse, because of a failure to agree on the drafting of new multilateral rules for the conduct of international trade. Thirty countries, representing virtually all of the countries most actively engaged in the Round, with the exception of the Quad,<sup>10</sup> then issued a statement expressing their “deep preoccupation about the state of the UR negotiations on rules” and insisted on a concerted additional effort toward “clearer and more precise rules” providing a sound legal basis which they held to be the “cornerstone of the multilateral trading system”.<sup>11</sup> Their appeal was heard, but it was to take another two and a half years before the negotiation culminated in the Final Act<sup>12</sup> ready for signature in Marrakesh.

Understandably, one of the constant bones of contention between developing and developed countries throughout the negotiations was the question of the concessions (essentially, lighter commitments or longer periods of adaptation to the new rules) which the former could secure from the latter. This they called “special and differential treatment” which has subsequently entered into the terminology of WTO ongoing negotiations under the acronym “SPD”. Thus, a new term was introduced to describe the constant preoccupation of a numerous group of countries. It is too vague (although rendered more specific in certain contexts) to represent any firm commitments, but is nonetheless used as a constant reminder from the developing members to the developed members that the latter should not expect full reciprocity of commercial policy concessions from the former.

Conversely, on issues where developed countries are *demandeurs*, as they are in respect of market access for financial services, or intellectual property rights, or trade and the environment, they strive within the WTO (the main duel is between the United States and India) to extract precise concessions from vaguely or ambiguously formulated provisions of the Final Act. It is, in a sense, the reverse side of the SDT medal. The claimant has an interest in precision, the granting country has an interest in vagueness or ambiguity.

Agricultural protectionism furnishes an interesting example of an issue where those countries (developing and developed alike) which protect domestic producers and are therefore at variance with the UR accords providing for the gradual liberalisation of the sector (notably, Japan, the EU, Norway, Switzerland) have joined forces to defend these policies on the grounds of the “multi-functionality” of agriculture. The term is vague, perhaps ambiguous, and signifies that farming is part of a national life-style or culture serving as a vehicle for traditional and social values which exempt it from merely commercial considerations. A great irritant to the net food-exporting countries which constitute the Cairns Group (a pressure and negotiating coalition), this term has now become firmly entrenched in the terminology of multilateral commercial diplomacy.

Examples can also be found in the domain of peace-keeping as the relevant concepts and terminology have evolved over the past decade—with the significant difference that here ambiguity is seldom sought, since

it could have serious operational consequences if, for example, the term “rules of engagement” were to be assigned different meanings by different national contingents in multinational peace-keeping forces. That has happened, more by accident than by design, and partly because of ambiguities arising from problems of translation—but that is another virtually self-contained subject.

In lieu of a conclusion, let us glance back at what Alice in Wonderland had to say on our central topic:

“You should say what you mean” the March Hare went on.  
“I do” Alice hastily replied “at least, I mean  
what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”  
“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter.  
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), and revised edition of 1951.
- 2 DiploAnalytica was devised by Alex Sceberas Trigona and Jovan Kurbalija, at the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, organisers of the conference at which this communication was made.
- 3 This entire section, including the citation from Bernstein, owes much to the helpful advice of Dr Biljana Scott, tutor in linguistics and semiotics, University of Oxford.
- 4 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927).
- 5 Examples attracting much diplomatic attention, and creating some political excitement, occurred in the early months of the presidency of George W. Bush. As it happens, both concerned the interpretation of ambiguities in English and Chinese. At the beginning of April 2001 an American “surveillance” (sc. “spy”) aircraft collided with a Chinese military jet off China’s southern coast in the vicinity of Hainan

Island. China demanded an apology from the United States as a prerequisite for discussing the release of the crew of the aircraft. The United States took the view that they had nothing to apologise for, arguing that the collision had occurred in international airspace, and solely because of the dangerous interceptionary flight path of the Chinese military air craft. These opposing views gave rise to a linguistic-diplomatic challenge to both “sides to come up with sentences in English and Chinese that [were] close enough to be considered a single statement...yet distant enough to allow subtly different interpretations in each country” (*International Herald Tribune*, 10 April 2001, 5). “The sticking point [was] China’s public demand for an apology-*dao qian* in Chinese...a legalistic and formal kowtow that both harks back to the country’s grand imperialist past and...reflects psychic thin skin...so that any slight to...national dignity is acutely felt...Washington stuck mainly to expressions of “regret” ...translated as *yihan* in Chinese, a term that carries no acknowledgement of guilt...So...the two sides have drawn their semantic lines in the sand, leaving a gap that diplomatic wordsmiths are now trying to bridge. But just as nuances in translation can create misunderstandings, they can create opportunities, too, allowing diplomats to leave a fuzzy middle between words that is palatable to both sides.” (Ibid.)

- 6 This lighthearted reference to the verbal infelicities termed “Bushisms” should not deflect attention from the underlying point regarding the two different culture-determined approaches to ambiguity, in respect of which President Bush made a signal contribution when commenting in April 2001 on United States policy towards the security of Taiwan. For many years the basic texts governing Sino-American relations had been characterised by their inherent ambiguities, and in particular by what came to be termed the “strategic ambiguity” of how far the United States would be prepared to go in defence of Taiwan if the latter were to be attacked. By affirming that the United States “would do what it takes” in such an eventuality, President George W. Bush abandoned ambiguity for precision.
- 7 The desire to eschew precision can lead to a *reductio ad absurdum* such as the practice of the Chief Economic Advisor under the Carter

Presidency, Mr Alfred Kahn, who had triggered serious market turbulence by referring in a speech to the risk of a “recession”. There after Mr Kahn referred to a recession as a “banana”. Thus, he spoke of “the major banana experienced by the United States in the 1930s”.

- 8 Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Harvard University Press, 1976).
- 9 The WTO created, as one of the most important provisions of the Final Act of the Uruguay Round, a dispute settlement mechanism which has to adjudicate on complaints that member states have failed to respect their contractual commitments. This task involves, *inter alia*, meticulous interpretation of possible ambiguities.
- 10 The name given to the four largest trading nations/entities—namely, the European Union, the United States, Japan and Canada.
- 11 Cf. John Croome, *Reshaping the World Trading System: A History of the Uruguay Round* (WTO, 1995).
- 12 26,000 pages (just short of 200 kilos—now, fortunately, available on CD-rom) of agreements and promises/commitments.