

Workshop on
**The meaning and form of vagueness:
a cross-linguistic perspective**

Proposal to be submitted to the

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Subfields

Historical linguistics, intonation, lexicon, pragmatics, semantics, syntax, typology.

Keywords

Approximation, categorization, identification, (in)definiteness, (in)determinacy, vagueness.

Description

“Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?” (Wittgenstein 1953). Indeed, vagueness is a basic property of human languages, which manifests itself at all level of signification and in a number of different ways (Channel 1994). Vagueness is basic in that it fulfills the important communicative task of conveying a piece of information that is indefinite, imprecise, in a word “vague”.

The notion of vagueness is part of different scholar traditions and has received numerous definitions. Traditionally, for philosophers and formal linguists, a sentence is vague when it does not give rise to precise truth conditions, and the vagueness of an expression originates in imperfect discrimination (Sorensen 2006, van Rooij 2011), e.g. gradable adjectives or quantity adjectives. In this tradition, a vague expression is not well defined with respect to the specific entities in its domain of application, or when truth is not preserved when moving from a case of which it is true to qualitatively very similar cases (sorites) (Hyde 2005), or when the cutoff point of a series is not known. However, the coverage of the term can be broadened, since vagueness may also concern the information that is communicated and may affect the identification of the referent, be it a class or an entity. Therefore we can recognize two different levels of vagueness: a systemic vagueness, closely related to the notion of

indeterminacy, which responds to the general need of multiplicity of meaning in linguistic expressions, and a contextual vagueness, which refers to the multiple determinability of the meaning and function of words or expressions depending on specific speakers' choices and situational needs.

In other words, forms of vagueness may also concern the very content a sentence is meant to convey. We refer to this as "intentional vagueness". The aim of the workshop is to gather together scholars working on the form and meaning of intentional vagueness, namely on the fact that some constructions (at whatever level, of whatever type) are used by the speakers precisely to encode a vague referent or state of affairs.

This type of vagueness can be conveyed by a variety of forms at different levels of encoding, which, by virtue of their belonging to different domains, are often studied by distinct subfields and linguistic traditions:

- a) syntax: see binominal constructions with approximators of the *sort/kind* type (cf. Tabor 1994, Denison 2002 for English; Mihatsch 2007, Masini 2010 for Romance languages), some of which have developed into hedges with a more metalinguistic function (Lakoff 1972, Kay 1997), but also some kinds of list constructions, which have been proved to have an approximating function (Bonvino, Masini & Pietrandrea 2009), or again connectives that encode the non-finite nature of the set of linked elements, thus serving as vagueness markers;
- b) lexicon and semantics: see the relationship between the coding of vagueness and a specific type of lexical source which is recurrent in different languages, e.g. the class of taxonomic nouns, such as Italian *tipo* (Voghera to appear), Swedish *typ* (Rosenkvist & Skärlund to appear), French *genre* (Fleischmen & Yaguello 2004);
- c) pragmatics: discourse studies have a special role in the investigation of vagueness, since a number of expressions encoding vagueness (e.g. adverbs, connectives, vague category identifiers or general extenders, cf. Channel 1994, Overstreet 1999, Mihatsch 2009) have been mainly examined in terms of their function in discourse, rather than as markers that bear a grammatical meaning (cf. Dubois 1992, Dines 1980, Aijmer 1985 who assimilate these constructions to discourse markers);
- d) and, recently, intonation: it is generally recognized that vagueness is more frequent in spoken discourse than in written language (Biber *et al.* 1999) and that prosody can play a crucial role in conveying a vague interpretation of a chunk of speech (Warren 2007).

What emerges from this picture is a great specialization in individual areas, but very little communication between the various subfields and methodologies. Moreover, we observe a lack of a true cross-linguistic perspective.

This workshop aims at investigating the following three lines of research:

1) Cross-linguistic variation and diachronic paths in the coding of intentional vagueness

- How are the various types of vagueness encoded in the world's languages? Is it possible to identify recurrent patterns? Are there significant typological differences?
- On what levels may vagueness be encoded (intonation, lexicon, morphology, syntax, discourse)? Do different levels match with different types of vagueness (e.g. vagueness conveyed syntactically *vs.* vagueness conveyed phonetically)?
- Are there recurrent diachronic patterns leading to the coding of vagueness?
- Are specific categories more apt to be reanalyzed as vagueness markers (e.g. connectives, generic nouns, epistemic adverbs)?

The latter question is directly related to the second line of research we propose to explore.

2) Intentional vagueness and other functional domains: delimitation issues

- How is intentional vagueness connected with phenomena such as indefiniteness, indeterminacy and non-factuality/irrealis that have been discussed in the literature (cf. Lyons 1999, Jayez & Tovena 2006, Mauri & Sansò to appear)?
- Assuming that vagueness is a category of its own, then how can we tell it apart from the above-mentioned domains?
- Assuming, instead, that vagueness is a larger category, can we say that there are different types of vagueness that typically trigger different encoding strategies across the world's languages (e.g. indefinite reference is typically encoded by pronouns, adjectives and adverbs)?
- In any of the above cases, what would be the best way to represent the relation between all these expressions and their distribution in the languages of the world (e.g. a semiotic hierarchy, a functional map)?

3) Theoretical and metalinguistic issues: how to talk about vagueness?

Given the great intra- and cross-linguistic variation in the coding of vagueness, and the lack of a systematic analysis of intentional vagueness, there is a tendency to overproduce ad-hoc categories for given strategies, suffice it to mention the great variety of terms used to name so-called *general extenders* (Overstreet 1999), e.g.: *set marking tags* (Dines 1980), *utterance-final tags* (Aijmer 1985), *extension particles* (Dubois 1993), *vague category identifiers* (Channel 1994), *post-detailing component* (Selting 2006). This probably depends on various factors:

- first, the defining criteria of traditional grammatical categories are of little help in identifying the vagueness functions of the investigated constructions. What about items such as English *etcetera* or Italian *tipo*: does it say something about their semantics to describe them in terms of “adverbs”? Another case in point is the Italian connective *piuttosto che*, which has recently developed the value ‘or something like that’ in particular syntactic contexts (Mauri & Giacalone Ramat 2011): is it useful to still analyze it as a connective even if it does not link anything in such contexts?
- secondly, vagueness markers are difficult to classify because they may have a reduced or broader distribution than other items of the same grammatical class;
- third, vagueness is not only a semantic phenomenon, nor a purely morphosyntactic one, but it may be rather encoded across different levels, and can require multilevel criteria and representation tools.

All these factors – we believe – produce great terminological variation and many distinctions. In our opinion, a better understanding of such a complex phenomenon would take great advantage of an effort also on the metalinguistic side: this would be a decisive step not only forward a better descriptive adequacy, but also forward a better explicative adequacy. In other words, we should try to be less ‘vague’ when we talk about vagueness if we want to develop a good theory of vagueness.

Topics

We welcome submissions discussing the form and meaning of vagueness from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective, in line with the questions raised above. Topics of interest include:

- identification and description of specific constructions encoding intentional vagueness (at any level of analysis) in one or more languages;
- identification and description of strategies (e.g. connectives, adverbs, etc.) used for coding vagueness intra- and cross-linguistically;

- typological studies describing recurrent patterns in the coding of intentional vagueness;
- synchronic and diachronic analyses regarding the relation of vagueness with (what seem to be) functionally related domains (such as indeterminacy, indefiniteness, non-factuality/irrealis);
- diachronic analyses regarding the emergence of constructions encoding intentional vagueness in the languages of the world;
- cognitive or formal representations of intentional vagueness, as part of the meaning encoded by a linguistic expression.

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Call Information

Potential participants should send us a provisional title and a short abstract (300 words) no later than **November 6, 2011**, so that we can submit the workshop proposal (including a preliminary list of participants) to the SLE Scientific Committee by November 15, 2011.

If the workshop is accepted, all abstract will have to be submitted to the SLE by **January 15, 2012** via the conference site (<http://www.sle2012.eu/>).

For any information please contact workshop.vagueness2012@gmail.com.