

On the Optimality of Vagueness

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ABSTRACT

What is the function of vagueness in language? Vagueness is often viewed as a deficiency, but it has also been recognized as a mechanism of prudence and error minimization. The leading hypothesis in this paper (co-authored with Benjamin Spector, Adele Mortier, and Steven Verheyen) is that in contexts in which a cooperative speaker is not perfectly informed about the world, the use of vague expressions can offer an optimal tradeoff between truthfulness (Gricean Quality) and informativeness (Gricean Quantity). Focusing on expressions of approximation such as ‘around’, which are semantically vague, it is shown that they allow the speaker to convey indirect probabilistic information, in a way that can give the listener a more accurate representation of the information available to the speaker than any more precise expression would. The paper presents and develops a probabilistic account of the meaning of “around” to substantiate this hypothesis, in the wake of recent work done in the field of Bayesian pragmatics. I will discuss some philosophical implications of the account, in particular to revisit a debate between C. Wright and T. Williamson regarding the epistemic conception of approximation expressions such as ‘around’ and of vague expressions more broadly.

Paul Egré is a Research Director at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), based at the Jean-Nicod Institute. His work focuses on Logic, the Philosophy of Language, Epistemology, and Cognitive Science.



DATE AND TIME

MELBOURNE

5:00 pm, 1st April

PARIS

8:00 am, 1st April

LOS ANGELES

11:00pm, 31st March

SEMINAR HELD OVER ZOOM

Register at
tinyurl.com/EgreSeminar

To join our Seminar email list or for other questions, please email dmitri.gallow@acu.edu.au.