VAGUENESS, INDETERMINACY AND SOCIAL MEANING

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Vagueness is distinguished from unspecificity, ambiguity and context-dependence. The classical sorites paradox is explained as a way in which vagueness challenges the application of formal logic to natural languages. Accounts of the paradox based on fuzzy logic are shown to be flawed. The widespread idea that borderline cases of vague expressions involve non-epistemic indeterminacy is rejected on the grounds that it mystifies the notions of truth and falsity. An epistemic account is proposed on which borderline cases involve radical ignorance of a special kind. The account is compatible with the idea that the meaning of an expression supervenes on its use. The account is also argued to be compatible with the possibility of communication, given the social determination of linguistic meaning and even of propositional content in specific contexts.

Introduction

This paper constitutes an informal introduction to a cluster of problems in the philosophy of logic and language associated with the three elements of its title. In the course of it, I will dispute the widespread view that the principles underlying the calculi of symbolic logic pioneered by Frege, Russell and others are strictly applicable only to the kind of perfectly precise artificial language to which some mathematicians aspire. I will argue that they apply equally well to the massively vague language inherent in social life.

I Vagueness

In philosophy, the term ‘vagueness’ is a label for the phenomenon of borderline cases. An expression or concept is vague if and only if it has borderline cases, that is, actual or potential cases in which it neither clearly applies nor clearly fails to apply. For example, a borderline case for the term ‘tall’ is someone who is neither clearly tall nor clearly not tall. Even when one can see the person in question without difficulty, one cannot decide whether the term ‘tall’ applies—or perhaps one decides it one way while other speakers equally familiar with English and with an equally good view of the person decide it the other way. There seems to be no room for a scientific investiga-
tion to resolve the question. However carefully we measure the person’s height, and even the height of other people in the relevant comparison class, the matter remains undecided. The more prone a term is to such borderline cases, the vaguer it is. To the extent to which a term is not vague, it is precise.

Vagueness must be distinguished from several phenomena with which it is sometimes confused: in particular, from unspecificity, ambiguity and context-dependence.

A term is unspecific if it applies to a variety of cases. For example, if you ask me what proportion of the conference participants were women and I reply ‘It was not between 49% and 51%’, my answer is highly unspecific—it leaves in too many diverse possibilities (for example, 1% and 99%) to give you much information about the conference—but that by itself does not make it at all vague. It may in fact be slightly vague—for example, it might be unclear whether to count some people as participants—but that is not a consequence of the unspecificity. A variety of cases in which a term clearly applies does not amount to even one case in which it neither clearly applies nor clearly fails to apply. If I had said ‘Roughly 40%’ my answer would have been vaguer but more specific; I have given you useful information about the conference, but it is not clear whether my answer applies to the case in which the exact proportion of women was 35%. The difference between vagueness and unspecificity emerges vividly when one negates a term. The negation of a vague term is just as vague as the original term, since it has the same borderline cases. By contrast, the less specific a term is, the more specific its negation is. For example, the negation of the highly unspecific answer ‘Not between 49% and 51%’ is ‘Between 49% and 51%’, which is highly specific, although of course not perfectly specific.

A term is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. A term can be vague but unambiguous if it has a single vague meaning. Equally, a term might in principle be ambiguous between several precise meanings. Probably the best way to think of ambiguity is as a case in which several linguistic expressions can be realized in physically the same form. For example, we count ‘bank’ in ‘financial bank’ and ‘bank’ in ‘river bank’ as distinct words. Vagueness and precision are properties of the disambiguated linguistic expression itself.

A term is context-dependent if its application depends on the context in which it is used. In practice, vague terms tend to be context-dependent and context-dependent terms tend to be vague, but theoretically the two phenomena are quite distinct. For example, the reference of the word ‘me’ depends on who is speaking, but that does not constitute any vagueness, since it does not in itself imply any unclarity in the application of the term in any given context (which is not to deny that such unclarity can arise). Equally, a vague term could in principle be context-independent. For example, if a term had in every context the application which the term ‘tall’ has in this present context, then that term would be context-independent but still vague, because ‘tall’ as used in this present context has borderline cases.