

Konferenciaelőadásra épülő közlemény

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Schiffer on Vagueness: The Issue of Unarticulated Constituents*

Abstract

The paper provides an overview of philosophical approaches to the understanding of vagueness expressed as a property of linguistic communication, with special emphasis on Stephen Schiffer's current views rejecting truth-conditional, as well as formal semantic, epistemic, and compositionally based approaches to its interpretation and describing its manifestation, supporting its belief-relatedness and stressing its gradability. Schiffer outlines contextually bounded usage-based factors in his analysis. Related to Schiffer's views on the non-compositional nature of sentence meaning and linguistic expressions, relying on his notion of 'character', I analyze the interpretation of vagueness in the linguistic pragmatic coding of lexically unexpressed but contextually implicated unarticulated constituents, based on a set of examples discussed in the literature and also based on a case study of empirical investigations of the pragmatics of the linguistic expression of possession.

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Traditionally, language philosophers in the first part of the last century and even before that, took sentences to be a complete, complex product of the linguistic system, representing thought in terms of truth conditions. In case they were not suitable to fulfil this task, they were taken to be imprecise, vague. However, as early as in Russell's work, the counter idea can already be identified, according to which sentences before the completion of their formation may already be, originally, vague in case the expressions or terms constituting them are vague in their content. At the time of Russell the issue of unarticulated constituents, or the notion of subsentential representation of meaning, could not yet be addressed, but he already brought up the idea that the unarticulated content of the main words in sentences could result in vagueness of linguistic expression (Russell 1923).

In the chapter on vagueness of *The Things We Mean* (2003: 5) and elsewhere (2006), Schiffer states that vagueness is a property of linguistic communication not to be studied in truth-conditional terms as done by various authors in earlier research. It is not semantic, epistemic, ontological, it does not arise by way of the compositional nature of expressions, but it is rather of psychological nature; it arises from special kinds of partial beliefs (see 2003:

* This paper was presented at the international conference titled *The Things We Mean: Conference on Stephen Schiffer's Theory of Meaning* (University of Pécs, Hungary, 14-15. May 2007).

5, repeated on p. 198, and Sainsbury 2005: 107); it is related to borderline cases of (linguistically coded) properties. In his important monograph, now a classic, Timothy Williamson, in referring to Frege, notes that it is not the case that semantically vague terms (that is, words like *heap*, for instance) would make sentences lack truth value (1994: 45). Words, he notes on p. 170 of the same book, “do not have precise meanings; words are sorites susceptible.” Vagueness, he states, is a relative notion: a ‘term’ is vague in case it has borderline cases (1994: 201). As such, vagueness is a gradable phenomenon. As early as in 1937, Black already notes that vagueness can be measured experimentally. However, much much later, after the turn of the millennium, Schiffer (and others) give no details or advice on how to measure this gradational property with precision. Beyond stating that vagueness is a general property of human linguistic communication characterizing linguistic representations of various types and at various levels (with which view I fully agree), and beyond studying various well-known examples taken from the literature (such as the lexical cases of *bald* and *rich*) and also less known ones, he says practically nothing on constructional vagueness (exemplified, for instance, by the cognitive pragmatic issues arising during the interpretation and contextual functioning of types of genitive constructions, including the so-called Saxon genitive in English) and vagueness related to the issue of so-called unarticulated constituents, amply discussed nowadays by language philosophers such as Recanati, Bach, Borg, Stanley, Marti, and others, all related to John Perry’s coining of the term in 1998.

In this paper I would like to interpret the nature of the linguistic expression of vagueness based on a number of Schiffer’s examples and also by studying a few cases of the issue of unarticulated constituents, some of them taken from the literature, and others taken from my own sources.

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As recognized, described, and interpreted by various researchers: linguists, language philosophers, and also psychologists of various sorts, language, linguistic communication is full of vague expressions, both at the lexical and constructional levels of representation. There are some who say that all of the notional expressions of language are vaguely expressed and used. However, to my knowledge, the rate of vagueness in linguistic communication has not so far been precisely (or even less precisely) estimated. There is a lot of talk about vague terms, expressions, verbs, or propositions, sentences and utterances. I believe that the important issue here is not really the – how can I, or should I, put it – the originality of vagueness in the word, expression, or term itself, or vagueness identified in the compositionality of sentential representation, but it is the issue of identifying the usage-based factors of the arising vagueness, which are contextually bounded. It is this scope of analysis, I believe, which constitutes the basis of Schiffer’s idea saying that vagueness is basically a psychologically-based phenomenon.

At the level of lexical expression (called lexical vagueness) we may say that vagueness is qualitatively and also quantitatively coded (for instance in propositions where *rich*, *bald*, and other examples well-known from the relevant literature are used, but also including cases with color-terms involved, such as *yellow*, *yellowish*, *pinkish*, *roundish* (examples taken, for instance, from Field 2006: 11), the questionable *dark* or *light yellow* (versus the fully acceptable *light* or *dark green*), analogic color names such as *emerald* or *emerald (green?)*). All these are gradable notions, gradable lexis, and their saliency and appropriateness for pro-

positions depends on contextual factors such as conceptual frame relatedness: their lexical appropriateness depends on prototypicality and constituents of the background knowledge of the speaker and hearer. Saliency against standard sets of culturally coded expectations, constituting an integral part of prototypical information content, together with cognitively viable perspectivization procedures, are vitally important factors here, all contributing to the cohesion and coherence of linguistically coded information (see, for instance “*bald*” – *but to what extent*, “*rich*” – *but how much?* for the lexical information encoded by the expressions to gain reasonable interpretation (the same examples also work in Hungarian: *kopasz, de mennyire?* – *bald, but to what extent?*). See also Field’s notion of ‘ideal epistemic circumstances’ discussed in his recent paper (2006: 11). There are numerous cases, however, where the notion of prototypicality is difficult to turn to. Predications with *good* provide such examples, for instance. The strict literal meaning of the word is often neutralized, giving way to grammaticalization (as described by Traugott (2002)), in particular to the expression of intensification or quantification, as exemplified in

- (1) (a) *Peter had a good drink.*
 (b) *Peter had a good breakfast.*

Good is certainly vague here and so is the proposition. Most native speakers would agree that its meaning here can be paraphrased as ‘a lot of the drinkable substance’ in (a) and ‘big or, more idiomatically expressed, *substantial*’ in the case of (b). The lexical process is the same in Hungarian (*jót evett/ivott*) – referring to the amount of substance, food, eaten or drunk. Schiffer calls such cases ‘borderline propositions’: “a proposition is borderline when it’s indeterminate, and its indeterminacy is owed to the possibility of someone’s v*-believing it in the concept-driven way [just sketched]” (2006: 242).

Knowledge of word meaning does not parallel with knowledge of the sentence, Schiffer argues on p.107 of *The Things We Mean*. He obviously holds the view here that sentence meaning is non-compositional. Discussing the nature of meaning, he addresses the relation between expression (i.e. word) meaning and propositional content, the speech act relatedness of lexical content and function. On pp. 156-57 he states that “linguistic expressions have meaning just in case they have things [what things, I may ask?] I’ve called *characters**, abstract entities that represent constraints on what speech acts, and with what propositional contents, literal speakers must be performing when they utter those expressions.” And lower down, he continues. “*Characters** do much of what meanings would do if there were meanings, for having meaning consists in having a *character**, and sameness or difference of meaning always consists in sameness or difference of *character**. ... The *character** of an expression is clearly determined by use, either by how the expression itself is used, if the expression is semantically simple [whatever semantic simplicity means, I should remark], or by how the expressions and structures composing the expression are used, if the expression is semantically complex.” I believe that this idea is in close parallel with a matrix-feature-based identification of appropriateness and relevance of meaning. Meaning is identical with a complex of operative features of the kind described, for instance, in Andor (1998), providing *character** (in Schiffer’s understanding), and it is this complexity of features (*characters**) then, which marks out lexical items appropriately used in the given context under the given speech-act related conditions. “*Characters** [Schiffer writes on p. 160 lower down] are tantamount to expression meanings.” I quickly have to remark here, however, that Schiffer’s characterization of his notion of ‘*character**’ was somewhat differently phrased in his earlier

work: on p. 323 of his article titled *Vagueness* (2003) we can read the following: “Characters* are not meanings. ... But having meaning consists in having a character*.” Perhaps Schiffer’s notion of ‘character*’ is analogous, to some extent, with Cruse’s notion of ‘meaning facets’: facets exist in case meaning exists, but without meaning the notion of ‘facet’ does not make any sense. (Cruse 2004: 112-15).

At the propositional level, in cases of propositional vagueness, however, the interplay has different facets: it is this domain where type of constituency, common ground-based knowledge factors, and related to these, saliency conditions, all interact as conditions of contextual appropriateness. It is this level where lexical representation via the surfacing of coded constituents versus deep, conceptual representation of so-called unarticulated constituents take force. The latter types of constituents are not surfaced but still are easily, routinely evokable by hearers during the act of communication.

Perry’s classical example (1998: 10) that started the debate on the unarticulated constituents’ issue was

(2) *It’s raining.*,

implying *here* (at the given place where the utterance is performed) and *now* (at the given time point). However, even traditional grammar teaches us, the morphological expression of continuous aspect in English provides the linguistic coding of the superficially missing, unarticulated constituents, which, as pointed out by Recanati (2006/2007 and criticized by Marti (2006)) are constituent parts of the propositional content of the utterance. When possibly surfaced (which depends on criteria of perspectivization (such as the realization of functional sentence perspective – Firbas 1992), the two constituents appear in the form of sentential adjuncts. There are – to my mind – better examples in the literature, though, for instance

(3) *They are serving drinks [at the local bar].*,

also Perry’s example (2001: 44). Although, Perry argues, *local* refers to a bar located somewhere in the speaker’s neighborhood, this reference is not directly designated in the sentence, but can only be implied, hence, we are also facing here the case of an unarticulated constituent. Hence, the proposition in (2) is also vaguely formulated (syntactically and semantically), and requires the operation of pragmatic tools in the decoding of the message contained in it. In his recent paper, Dokic calls such cases ‘cognitive unarticulated constituents’ (2007: 204). We have to note, in addition, that supposing we have the lexically less dense variant of (2), in the form

(4) *They are serving drinks [here].*

the same implication to the potentially salient location, the local pub or bar, can be inferred via frame-based inference from our common ground.

Similar cases are abundant in language. To take just one more example, let us see (4), also well-known from the literature:

(5) *The ham sandwich wants to pay.*

The context is that of a restaurant, at the end of dinner. Culturally based scriptal knowledge helps hearer to evoke the missing, unarticulated constituents of the sentence: *to the waiter, now, using money, for the meal*. In possession of this scriptally-based common ground, the above constituents do not have to be lexically overtly expressed, they can all remain unarticulated in the given context. But supposing a factor from the frame or script is to be highlighted, for instance, the “ham sandwich” intends to use his credit card versus paying in cash, the constituent definitely gains surface representation:

(6) *The ham sandwich wants to pay using his credit card.*

Or in case some constituent in the given frame is not scriptally compatible, but is highlighted in the context, it will also be surfaced, as in (6):

(7) *The ham sandwich wants to pay for the cigarettes as well.*

The missing constituents all have their functionally, frame-based, encoded position in the argument structure of the predicator that has a central lexical role in the given context, hence they do not need to be surfaced, unless they are highlighted due to perspectivization.

4

In the final section of this paper I address briefly the issue of, what I call, constructional vagueness. The domain I study is the comprehension and interpretation of genitive constructions using the so-called Saxon genitive, concentrating on the identification of the pragmatic function of the expressed possessor. I argue that from this perspective such constructions are vague, as native (and also non-native) speakers of the language have a different understanding of the possessor in terms of their relational feature (see Andor, 1998), argument role in the situations represented. Such cases are not strictly cases of unarticulated constituents in the standard sense of the term, but still, I would say, there is considerable vagueness concerning the precise articulation (and consequently, in the decoding) of (typically) the Agent vs. the Patient actants. Examples are abundant. Here are just a few:

- (8) (a) *Peter’s coffee was very tasty.*
 (b) *Their house was very nice.*
 (c) *Peter’s knife was very sharp.*

Interpreting (8a) is twofold: the morphologically marked possessor is dominantly understood as a consumer (Patient role expressedly), the one who drank the coffee (85% of 50 native speakers interviewed), but 15% of the interviewees responded by saying that Peter here is somebody who prepared the coffee (Agent role), for instance the owner of a coffee house. Concerning (8b) the options of rates of distribution of two dominant interpretations were the following: 87%: “their” referring to the owner of (or tenant in) the house (Patient role), 13%: children or people who drew/built/etc. it (Agent). The same parallel can be observed in subjects’ intuitive judgment concerning (8c): owner/user of knife (Patient) – 78% vs. producer (Agent) – 22%. Interestingly, in case we replace the possessor named in (8a) and (8c) by a pronoun, the rate of judgment significantly changes, becomes more balanced:

- (9) (a) *Their coffee was very tasty.* (reference to consumer: 55% vs. producer: 45%)
 (b) *Their knife was very sharp.* (reference to user, owner: 64% vs. producer: 36%)

Further modifying the constituents in the sentences, pluralizing the cutting instrument of (9b),

- (10) *Their knives were very sharp.*

results in an even more balanced distribution of judgment: interpreted user or owner: 56% vs. 44% producer.

Changing the tense, replacing past with the present results in a reverse rate of judgment:

- (11) (a) *Their coffee is very tasty.*
 (b) *Their knives are very sharp.*

The possessor is judged to be a producer rather than a consumer or user at a rate of 76% vs. 24% in (11a) and at a rate of 67% vs. 33% in (11b).

Pragmatics, I believe, is not yet ready to interpret the above results reliably. My view is that studying factors underlying perspectivization and lexical saliency, in a frame-semantics framework, might provide possible and feasible research plans. I wonder how Stephen Schiffer and other researchers referred to in this paper, those involved in studying vagueness would interpret the above phenomena and data.

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Could human language properly function without vagueness? Certainly not, I believe. Mapping our thoughts into linguistic structures with extreme high precision would certainly make our communication uninteresting. Moreover, as noted by Williamson in the beginning of his seminal monograph: “It is hard to make a perfectly precise statement about everything.” (1994: 2). We humans, perhaps, like to be vague and communicate in possession of the linguistic technicalities, expressibility of vagueness. This is part of the Wittgensteinian message. It is also part of the principle of economy of our linguistic program. Perhaps this is one of the key factors which make us human.

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