

VAGUENESS, CONTEXT DEPENDENCE, AND PERSPECTIVE

Many natural language expressions are vague in the sense that their use is tolerant. Arguably, the evaluation of vague predicates is essentially context-dependent. But how is the context dependence involved with vagueness to be understood? Stanley (2003) seems to believe that contextualists about vagueness claim that vague expressions are indexical. On his understanding of contextualism, the contextualist holds that a vague predicate has a meaning that determines different properties in different contexts. And he goes on to argue that contextualist views are simply wrong, because vague predicates seem to behave differently as compared with indexicals in a specific construction. Indexicals have invariant interpretations in verb phrase ellipsis constructions (as, e.g., in “John likes me, and Bill does too.”), while holding the same about vague predicates makes it difficult to account for some specific versions of the Sorites paradox. And so, according to Stanley, vague expressions are not indexicals and therefore contextualism is wrong. I do agree with Stanley that vague expressions do not behave like indexical expressions. Where I do not agree with him is in holding that contextualists (maybe one exception would be Scott Soames, 1999) claim that they are.

We should distinguish two types of context dependence: dependence of *content* on context and dependence of *extension* of context (see, e.g., MacFarlane, 2009). According to the Kaplanian picture, indexicals are expressions whose content at a context depends on features of the context. In contrast, there are expressions which are context-dependent without being indexicals, in the sense that their extension at a context depends on features of the context. I will call this nonindexical context dependence. There is context dependence in determining contents from characters, and there is also context dependence in determining extensions (or truth values) from contents. And so, we have two types of contextualism: content-contextualism and extension-contextualism (or truth-contextualism) (cf. Åkerman and Greenough, forthcoming).

The meanings of vague predicates fail to determine precise extensions. For example, the meaning of “rich” does not determine for each object whether it is in the predicate extension or not. So vagueness is to be characterized by extensional indeterminacy. It is not the content (the property expressed by a vague predicate) that varies with the context of use. That would have untenable consequences, making communication impossible in the end. On my preferred view, it is the extension of a vague predicate that varies with the context of use. A view like this is recommended by the fact that we can characterize the very same person as tall in some circumstances of language use and as not tall in some other circumstances without incoherence. The same about a vague sentence: we can hold it true at some context of use and false at other without contradiction. And this is so, I argue, because vague expressions are perspectival. Perspectival expressions presuppose a perspective point (circumstances of evaluation) from which matters should be construed (see, e.g., Bezuidenhout, 2005 or Brogaard, 2008).

Such a view accommodates best some features of vague expressions. First, we can make sense of the fact that there is a real disagreement between us when I hold that John is rich and you hold the opposite. On my preferred view, this is explained simply as a disagreement on whether John is in the extension of “rich” or not, and this is perspective-dependent (cf. Richard, 2004). If you want to put it that way, the dispute is on the perspective point we should consider in evaluating whether John is rich and not on the content of “rich”. Second, as Fara (2000) argues, vague predicates are interest-relative. Predicates like “tall” or “rich” do not only describe the objects to which they apply, they often also contain some sort of evaluation. A contextualist view as the one I defend here can easily accommodate that by taking the interests involved as being part of the perspective which is provided by the conversational context. More, vague expressions are not only context-dependent, but also context-changing (see Barker, 2002 or Kyburg and Morreau, 2000). This fact is also easy to accommodate within the framework I propose, by holding that a context update as the one envisaged actually involves a change in perspective and so, that vague expressions are perspective shifters.

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