Vagueness and Communication: A Minimally-Contextualist Approach [Abstract]

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Epistemicism about vagueness makes the connections between understanding, use and meaning mysterious. We are ordinarily what we may call *first-order users* of vague expressions. Taking "tall" as our sample vague expression, we classify some people as tall, some as not tall and some others we are unable to classify either way: these are the borderline cases. No two people classify the same way in every situation. No one person classifies the same way across all appropriately-similar contexts, as we know from considering the influence of "near neighbours" when people are asked to classify members of a sorites sequence. Yet from this semi-chaotic behaviour, a sharp zero-order boundary is supposedly fixed. It is not clear how. This also raises questions about correct understanding. How are we to know if our behaviour is properly reflective of how things are? How are we to tell whether we share the same vague concept? Could we in fact be grasping different but similar concepts?

Epistemicists argue that we should not expect to grasp the relationship between meaning and use. The semantics and the theory of proper use are two distinct components of a theory of vagueness. Besides, they might add, how much better do rival semantic approaches fare? Semanticists take borderline case behaviour – ambivalence, explicit classification – to reflect the incompleteness or the richer structure of vague concepts. But it is not quite as simple as that. Ordinary speakers typically prefer to classify with the "zero-order" options: "tall" and "not tall". Borderline cases are typically cases where speakers find themselves unable to resolve differences. Speakers are unwilling to assent to the statement that a borderline tall person is either tall or not tall but are also unwilling to agree that such a person is neither tall nor not tall. Finally, the first-order picture suggests first-order boundaries but these are not reflected in our classificatory behaviour either. It is widely agreed that genuinely vague expressions are higher-order vague to some degree (possibly infinite). Yet by admitting higher-order vagueness, the gap between use and meaning widens again. For higher-order vagueness has no echo in our ordinary practices with vague expressions and it is not at all clear how we are to understand it. Hence, it can still be asked what determines the correct use of vague expressions and in what our shared understanding of them consists. Semanticists too seem just as much to need sharply to distinguish the semantics from the theory of use.

It is therefore worth exploring whether there is space for a position which avoids first-order boundaries and higher-order vagueness and which makes better sense of the relationship between understanding, use and meaning. In this paper, I sketch an outline of just such an approach. I call the position *minimal contextualism*. Vague expressions are incomplete, flexible and highly context-sensitive expressions. Vagueness is a semantic phenomenon, with borderline cases as reflective of incompleteness and to be reflected in truth-value gaps. The account has affinities with the positions of Soames (1999) and Shapiro (2006) but the context-sensitivity is more radical, the contextualism reflecting an response-dependent component to the meaning of all vague expressions that contributes equally to determining the determinate as well as the borderline cases: it is this that yields boundaryless without higher-order vagueness and makes the contextualism 'minimal'.[1] In the remainder of this abstract, I shall sketch some of the key points.

Underpinning the analysis is an understanding of vague concepts as primarily rough-and-ready tools designed for fast, efficient, but sloppy classification and

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[1] Soames, S. (1999): *Understanding Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press, ch. 7; Shapiro, S. (2006) *Vagueness in Context*. Oxford University Press.

communication. They are flexible classifiers that enjoy no fixed relationship to the world. They are simple: something either falls in the positive or negative extension of the concept or neither. We aim to classify positively or negatively, as this is both simple and informative. This ultimately explains our unwillingness to aver that someone can be neither tall nor not-tall. We exploit their flexibility when we communicate. I suggest we have a basic policy of trying to maximise communicative ease through coming to know each other well enough to be able to predict each other's classificatory reaction with a high rate of success. This takes the form of aiming to be in agreement with another and aiming to know where we disagree. Whilst we have our own views on how our concepts apply – we differ in our basic opinions, after all – they are not set in stone. We exploit their plasticity to bring ourselves into a state of "communicative harmony" or mutual understanding, where the level of harmony or mutual predictability is determined contextually by our needs. By sharing a common conception of how a concept applies, we can communicate with each other successfully thereafter.

At a basic level, we may consider ourselves as simple speakers, who exhibit three basic individual classificatory behaviours with vague expressions: positive application ("tall"), negative application ("not tall") and indecision ("I'm not sure", "Not quite either"). If we coincide on our views (positive or negative), then all is well. If we do not, then (ultimately) we may either accept the case to be borderline, agree to resolve it one way or the other or we may stand by our classifications. In the first two cases, we choose to operate with the same standards; in the latter, we choose not to. The correctness of our applications of courses consists not in agreement alone. But we must avoid the idea that the flexibility of vague concepts is parasitic on the speaker-independent determination of the determinate and borderline cases. To put it crudely, the process is rather one in which the world provides materials that speakers mould into concepts. Once this process has taken place and speakers abide by communicative rules such as the above, the concept is said to be *stable*.

Vague concepts are primarily designed for real-world classification. Sorites sequences are artificial philosophers' constructs. So long as we stick to the ordinary, our similarities and tolerance of one another bring it about that there is a stable, shared concept. Individually, each member of a sorites sequence can be coherently classified but these classifications cannot be brought together. There is no context in which a whole sequence can be evaluated. So much is familiar. But by according speakers their role in determining how vague concepts apply, we must look on our inability to effect a coherent classification not as the malfunctioning of measuring instrument but as the malfunctioning of a tool deployed outside its normal functioning environment. Vague concepts are designed to be used in contexts where few things appear. They break down when they are pushed to work in soritical contexts. In this respect, the analysis is similar to Horgan's (1994, 1998) transvaluational approach.[2]

A rough but essentially correct condition for being tall is therefore:

(1)   x is tall in c iff a speaker or group of speakers would judge that x is tall in a context c (where speakers, conditions and the context are in the relevant senses normal and "tall" is stable.)

It is potentially misleading to think that legitimately and separately disagreeing speakers may be right "in their own contexts" whilst the case is properly classed as a borderline case. No: the disagreeing speakers reflect the vagueness of the expression and the case is borderline with respect to a more "populated" context. There is no single, all-embracing and coherent context in which people can be spoken of as tall or not-tall. This would be to restore boundaries. We can legitimately ask what it is to be tall and who is in fact tall so long as we accept the vagueness of the response. What we will see is the "first-order picture": the pattern of agreement shading off into disagreement and

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[2] Horgan, T. (1994): "Transvaluationism: A Dionysian Approach To Vagueness" in Horgan (ed.) *Vagueness*. The Proceedings of the Spindel Conference 1994, published as *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 33, *Supp. Volume;* Horgan (1998): 'The Transvaluationist Conception of Vagueness', Monist 81, pp. 316-33.

ambivalence and back into agreement again. We can point to regions of this pattern and say that the tall are roughly here and that the borderline cases start about here. This is the most we can do and the most we need ask for.

The analysis forges a close connection between the meaning, use and understanding of vague expressions. The paper will show how more complex patterns of classificatory and communicative behaviour are easily and naturally accommodated. It will also indicate how higher-order vagueness is constructible (but unnecessary) and how the determinacy operator should primarily be understood as a communicative device of co-ordination to ensure speakers understand each other the right way by signalling that raised standards are now operative: one says that this person is to be counted as tall in any context.