Review of vagueness and context dependence

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2025

1   Question 1

Which of the following best summarizes the status of vagueness in natural languages?

   i. **Correct**: Far from being a bad thing, vagueness is essential to natural languages.

   ii. Vagueness reflects a defect of natural languages that speakers can and should work to overcome.

   iii. Some vagueness is unavoidable in natural languages, but it affects only a very small number of words and phrases.

2   Question 2

The word **mouse** can refer to a small rodent or to a computer peripheral. We note that *Hayley picked up a mouse, and Henry did too* cannot mean that Hayley picked up a rodent and Henry picked up a computer peripheral. They both need to have picked up the same kind of mouse, as it were. What does this help us understand about the word *mouse*?

   i. *mouse* is vague in that it can refer to small rodents or computer peripherals.

   ii. **Correct**: *mouse* is ambiguous between referring to small rodents and referring to computer peripherals.

   iii. *mouse* is a highly general term in that it can refer to small rodents or computer peripherals.

   iv. *mouse* in its meaning as a computer peripheral does not refer to a prototype.

3   Question 3

Are non-prototypical instances of a category necessarily vague instances of that category?

   i. Yes

   ii. **Correct**: No   (**Think of the penguins!**)

4   Question 4

In the terms we have developed, are general claims necessarily vague?

   i. Yes

   ii. **Correct**: No   (**For example, the sentence *Every number can be represented as a product of prime numbers* is general but precise.**)

5 Question 5

Try to use the ellipsis test to determine which of the following sense distinctions are ambiguities:

i. *crane*: bird sense vs. machine sense

   Example answer with judgments: *Hayley saw a crane, and Henry did too.* ⇒ Both saw a bird or both saw a machine. ⇒ Ambiguity

ii. *open*: for a door, a small amount vs. the maximum amount possible

   Example answer with judgments: *Hayley opened the door, and Henry did too.* ⇒ Amounts the door was opened can vary. ⇒ Not ambiguity.

iii. *opaque*: for a window, slightly tinted vs. impossible to see through

   Example answer with judgments: *This window is opaque, and that one is too.* ⇒ Amounts of opacity can vary, I think(?) ⇒ Not ambiguity (probably?)

iv. *fly*: move through the air vs. move very fast

   Example answer with judgments: *Hayley flew into the room, and Henry did too.* ⇒ Both were airborne or both simply moved fast. ⇒ Ambiguity. (Note: since the two senses can be true of the same event, the judgment here is a bit tricky.)

v. *break X*: shatter into pieces vs. establish a new record in a sporting event (say)

   Example answer with judgments: *The robot broke the record, and Chris did too.* ⇒ Both damaged a music recording device, or both established new bests in an event. ⇒ Ambiguity