

VAGUENESS AND CONTEXT DEPENDENCE

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Commentators on vagueness have identified a series of *phenomena* correlated to an expression ε 's being vague. Prominent among these are: ε must present possible *borderline cases* of its application (*borderlineness*); it must *seem* that, if ε is true of a case, it is also true of every qualitatively very similar case (*sorites susceptibility*); the sharp cutoff for ε 's application, if it exists at all, must *not be known* (*ignorance of cutoffs*).

As we see it, there are two different approaches to contemporary theorising about vagueness. While the *dominant approach* takes as basic the phenomenon of borderlineness, the *traditional approach* rather takes as basic the phenomenon of sorites susceptibility. One very interesting kind of theory falling under the traditional approach is constituted by recent *contextualist theories*. In this paper, we aim at studying their main features and problems.

Contextualist theories start with the observation that all vague expressions also seem to be *context-dependent*. Indeed, not only are vague expressions also context dependent *on independent grounds*—*vagueness itself*, and borderlineness in particular, seems to generate context dependence (see Sainsbury [1990]; Shapiro [2006]). The borderlineness-generated context dependence is the one such that, if e.g. the number 500,000 is borderline small, given a suitable context c_0 an utterance of ‘500,000 is small’ would achieve the effect of having 500,000 fall under the extension of ‘small’ in the *new* context c_1 thereby created. This is a generalisation of the phenomenon first studied (for standards of precision) by Lewis [1979] under the name ‘accommodation’. Raffman [1994]; Shapiro [2006] in turn ground this context dependence in the alleged *response dependence* of vague predicates in the borderline area.

The correlation between vagueness and context dependence as well as this borderlineness-generated context dependence suggest the idea of explaining sorites susceptibility by appealing to subtle *context shifts*. Sticking to the example of predicating ‘small’ of natural numbers, the *key idea* is to appeal to such shifts to make any *utterance* of any instance of:

(CUTOFF) x is small and $x+1$ is not small

untrue in every context.

Although there are different ways of *implementing* the key idea, we’ll argue that they are all aimed at securing something along the lines of the following principle:

(CLOSE) Explicitly and truly predicating ‘small’ of x in context c requires that ‘small’ as used in c be true of $x+1$.

We’ll show how something like (CLOSE) is in effect pivotal in otherwise very different contextualist theories: in theories that connect vagueness with response dependence and appeal to the (empirically attested) psychological phenomenon of “*backwards spread*”, where, when

marched through the number series, a subject will typically reclassify with ‘non-small’ a few of the numbers immediately preceding the first number she classified with ‘non-small’ (i.e. Raffman [1994]; Shapiro [2006]); in theories that postulate the interest relativity of vague properties (i.e. Fara [2000]); in theories that reject classical logic (i.e. Soames [1999]); in theories that develop a non-standard, update semantics for conditional and conjunction (i.e. Kamp [1981]).

With (CLOSE) in place, it is supposed to follow that we’re inclined to accept ‘ $x+1$ is small’ once we’ve accepted ‘ x is small’, and it is then claimed that this *conditional inclination* implies that, for every *instance* of the negation of (CUTOFF), we’re inclined to accept it. From here, sorites susceptibility is explained by inferring that we’re also inclined to accept the corresponding *universal generalisation*, which is equivalent with the sorites premise. Moreover, ignorance of cutoffs is explained by claiming that our inclination to accept every instance of the negation of (CUTOFF) makes at least rationally unavailable any warrant one might have had for accepting a particular instance of (CUTOFF).

We see four main problems with the contextualist approach. Firstly, we believe that the correlation between vagueness and context dependence may not be as significant as the contextualist makes it out to be: it may simply be due to the fact that both properties are *pervasive* in natural languages. Indeed, we’ll give examples of some vague predicates that are *not* plausibly context dependent.

Secondly, we believe that the contextualist is too quick in thinking that her resources explain our inclinations to accept. We’ll criticise each step of the explanation sketched above. (a) From (CLOSE) to our conditional inclination to accept ‘ $x+1$ is small’ once we’ve accepted ‘ x is small’: there is a gap between something’s being true and us being inclined to accept it—an additional explanation is owed to license the transition from one to other. (b) From that conditional inclination to our unconditional inclination to accept the conditional ‘If x is small, then $x+1$ is small’: we’ll present counterexamples to this transition. (c) From our inclinations to accept each instance of a universal generalisation to our inclination to accept the universal generalisation: we’ll present counterexamples to this transition as well, some of which don’t even rely on the assumption that one doesn’t believe that one has considered *all* the instances.

Thirdly, the contextualist typically assumes that some cases are such that, roughly, the vague expression in question is true (or false) of them in *every* context. We will show how this (very plausible) assumption is inconsistent with the contextualist’s acceptance of (CLOSE).

Fourthly, it has been argued that the standard way of implementing (CLOSE) (which employs the common-and-garden kind of context dependence that is plausibly at work e.g. in ‘local’) cannot explain the plausibility of certain sorites arguments involving *VP-ellipsis* (see Stanley [2003]). The point has usually been taken not to be damaging to contextualist approaches *per se* and indeed to favour *non-standard* ways of implementing (CLOSE) (which appeal e.g. to some sort of non-linguistic relativity or to additional parametres in the circumstances of evaluation). Against this, we’ll offer new VP-ellipsis arguments targeted at such non-standard versions of contextualism.

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