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VAGUENESS VERSUS AMBIGUITY

The article deals with closely related but not identical phenomena of vagueness and ambiguity. It is revealed that *vagueness* lacks clear and specific meaning, on contrary *ambiguity* is always related to a specific meaning, which can be interpreted in more than one specific way.

Key words: *vagueness, ambiguity, semantics.*

The phenomenon of vagueness has given rise to a large number of research since the early 1970-s in the areas of natural language semantics, philosophy and artificial intelligence. Often **vagueness** is attributed to the information conveyed by particular sentences, typically to stress the fact that this information is imprecise or overly general [1, p. 90]. From a linguistic point of view, as P. Égré supposes, vagueness thus understood can obviously be found in many lexical categories and probably in all the categories, for which some notion of grading can be relevant. Thus nouns can be vague (indirectly most common nouns such as *chair, apple*, etc., and even proper names such as *London*) as well as verbs (*walk, run*), determiners (*many, few, much, little*), adverbs (*quickly, surprisingly, clearly*), and modifiers (*very, somewhat, completely*) [1, p. 92].

S. Loebner in order to demonstrate the vagueness phenomenon gives the following example: «Whether or not we will refer to a child as a “*baby*” depends on criteria such as the age of the child and its developmental stage, and both criteria are gradual. What one person considers a baby need not be considered so by another person. As a consequence, the denotation of the word “*baby*” has flexible boundaries. The concept “*baby*” is in itself vague» [2, p. 5]. Therefore one may conclude that vagueness can be observed in all concepts depending on properties varying on a continuous scale. Obviously, names of colours have a vague meaning. And, in general, all gradable adjectives are vague. For example, with the pair of lexemes *tall / short* language provides us with a rough distinction on the scale of a body height. This is much more efficient for everyday communicative purposes than expressions with a more precise meaning. S. Loebner underlines that vagueness may also occur in combination with polysemy [2, p. 17]. The idea that vagueness is not wholly reducible to imprecision is relatively uncontroversial, and the study of imprecision remains one important aspect of the understanding of vagueness. There remains some debate concerning the identification of vagueness with other semantic notions in its vicinity. Let us consider a few of those here.

In semantic theories of vagueness it is essentially tied to the notion of under-

determination and openness of meaning. This idea is crucially distinct from the contextualist position, according to which vagueness would derive from the contextual variability of a determinate threshold [2, p. 102].

Vagueness, according to M. Chierchia, is a matter of the relative looseness or of the no specificity of interpretation. Rightly all expressions can be considered as general. For example, *many linguists* is noncommittal as to the precise number of linguists involved. It seems to be a part of what we know about *many* and it is imprecise in this sense [3, p. 38]. J. Stern underlines that growing attention has been paid to the epistemological and psychological sources of vagueness in relation to the idea that vagueness might be more fundamentally an epistemic phenomenon (of ignorance, or inexactness) rather than a semantic one. Concurrently, various proposals have been made to stress the role and importance of context in the mechanisms of comparison involved in language and perception [4, p. 76]. The present phenomena have been studied by many researchers, for instance, by a Lithuanian linguist A. Kairytė, who emphasizes that it is still unclear how such processes operate for different linguistic items [5]. As well as Y. Huang states that vagueness is caused by the relative looseness or of the nonspecificity of interpretation of a phrase or of a word [6].

The phenomenon of vagueness is closely connected to this of *ambiguity*. One of the first classifications of the linguistic ambiguity was developed by the Stoics, who underlined the distinction between the ambiguity of a sentence and ambiguity of a word. During the long history of the School the Stoics, as C. Atherton states, constructed one comprehensive definition of ambiguity, which is still used with some additions or amendments nowadays. C. Artherton thinks that the Stoics were the first to state that ambiguity was the linguistic phenomenon meaning that the same linguistic item of the natural languages can signify two or more different things [7, p.11]. According to P.C. Gomes, natural languages possess many types of ambiguity at every level of description, and by this feature natural languages differ from formal ones. The author claims that ambiguity arises when a single word or word collocation is associated in the language with more than one meaning. P.C. Gomes states that the objective events in the world, to which language refers are the same, but human's perceptions and concepts differ. There is a wide range of problems arising due to ambiguity, namely problems of two levels. The first level is a structural one, when a communicator cannot get a right meaning, and the second one covers problems with translation. It is important not to confuse polysemy with ambiguity, because polysemy is a source of ambiguity agreed upon in cognitive semantics, corpus linguistics and lexicography [8, p.20]. Undoubtedly, in daily conversations, speakers are inclined to avoid ambiguity, unless there is some intention for usage of ambiguous items [9, p. 122].

A. Kairytė points out that «ambiguity is traditionally understood as that property of a sentence which makes it say something true and false at the same time»,

i.e. it is caused by ambiguous sentence structures. This type of ambiguity is defined as syntactic by A. Kairyte [5]. Among the most productive sources of syntactic ambiguity there are modifiers and prepositional phrases because they can be easily attached to any sentence. Nevertheless, it is to emphasize that even efficient communication system may be ambiguous assuming that the context is insufficiently informative about meaning. Ambiguity as a linguistic phenomenon eases processing by giving permission to linguistic units to be re-used. It is the way, in which the reference of certain elements in a sentence is determined in relation to a specific speaker and addressee, a specific time and place in utterance. For instance, the deictic lexemes have uncertain implications because of their changeable reference.

Vagueness is definitely tied with ambiguity: both linguistic ambiguity and vagueness are related to a certain indeterminacy degree in language. Still vagueness differs from ambiguity: vagueness lacks clear and specific meaning, on contrary ambiguity is always related to a specific meaning, which can be interpreted in more than one specific way. However, sometimes it is difficult to clearly differentiate ambiguity from vagueness and probably certain sentences might include the combined elements. So, one can conclude that both linguistic ambiguity and vagueness are related to indeterminacy in language or interpretive uncertainty.

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