Non-maximality and vagueness: Revisiting the plural Sorites paradox

Nina Haslinger

This talk revisits the relation between imprecision and vagueness. The imprecision phenomenon I will focus on is non-maximality in plural predication: While the default construal of (1a) is one that makes it truth-conditionally equivalent to (1b), there are contexts in which (1a) can be true even if some of the contextually relevant switches are on.

(1)
a. The switches are off.
b. All the switches are off.

My aim is to bring together two (prima facie) conflicting lines of research: On the one hand, Burnett (2017) proposes a unified approach to non-maximality and vague predication within the "strict/tolerant" framework (Cobreros et al. 2012b), motivated by the observation that non-maximal plural predications can give rise to the Sorites paradox. On the other hand, non-maximal interpretations often have precise truth conditions, and non-maximality does not pass certain tests for vagueness such as the acceptability of "pseudo-contradictions" like (2), which has led to the development of the QUD-based approach to non-maximality, on which vagueness and non-maximality are unrelated (Malamud 2012, Križ 2015, Križ & Spector 2021, Bar-Lev 2021, Feinmann 2020 a.o.). In this framework, the QUD directly influences the truth and falsity conditions of plural sentences; essentially, non-maximal interpretations are available if the difference between maximal and non-maximal scenarios does not matter for the purposes of the QUD. This makes largely correct predictions about the contextual constraints on non-maximal interpretations of plural sentences, but predicts the truth conditions of these sentences to be precise in every context.

(2)
a. #The switches are off and they are not off.
b. John is tall and he is not tall.

This tension in the literature can be resolved by looking more closely at the contexts in which plural predications give rise to the Sorites paradox: These are typically contexts in which there is no clear-cut contextual goal or binary QUD, but rather a relatively large set of potential outcomes, some of which differ only negligibly in their consequences. Essentially, the contexts giving rise to vague non-maximal construals are contexts in which it is underdetermined what exactly is at issue (cf. Graff 2000), because there are several similarly "good" choices for the QUD. In contrast, the QUD-based non-maximality literature has mostly focused on contexts in which there is a well-controlled, binary issue.

Based on on this characterization of the contexts that permit vague non-maximal interpretations, I propose an analysis that combines the QUD-based framework with a super-/subvaluationist version of the strict/tolerant idea, as proposed in Cobreros et al. (2012a). I suggest that the QUD-based theory of Križ & Spector (2021) should be thought of as a theory of *strict* truth conditions relative to a question Q. The *tolerant* truth conditions relative to Q are then derived by considering certain subquestions of Q that unify some of the partition cells of Q, while not diverging too much from Q. A plural sentence counts as tolerantly true iff it is true relative to at least one such subquestion. This divergence between strict and tolerant truth conditions makes it possible to apply the account of the Sorites paradox in Cobreros et al. (2012a).

On this proposal, the QUD-dependence of imprecise expressions is directly tied to their potential for vagueness, and also accounts for the optionality of vagueness with such expressions. The proposal also predicts an indirect connection between vagueness in plural predication and homogeneity: Vague non-maximal interpretations always give rise to homogeneity effects, while this is not necessarily the case for non-vague non-maximal interpretations. Further, it avoids some empirical problems of the earlier strict/tolerant approach of Burnett (2017) while preserving its insights.

References:

Bar-Lev, Moshe E. 2021. An implicature account of homogeneity and non-maximality. Linguistics and Philosophy 44(5). 1045–1097.
Burnett, Heather. 2017. Gradability in natural language. Logical and grammatical foundations (Oxford Studies in Semantics and Pragmatics 7). Oxford University Press.
Cobreros, Pablo, Paul Egré, David Ripley & Robert van Rooij. 2012a. Tolerance and mixed consequence in the s'valuationist setting. Studia Logica 100. 855–877.
Cobreros, Pablo, Paul Egré, David Ripley & Robert van Rooij. 2012b. Tolerant, Classical, Strict. Journal of Philosophical Logic 41. 347–385.
Feinmann, Diego. 2020. Lexical Illusions, (Non-)Maximality, and Invisible Gaps. University of Sheffield dissertation.
Graff, Delia. 2000. Shifting sands: An Interest-Relative Theory of Vagueness. Philosophical Topics 28(1). 45–81.
Križ, Manuel. 2015. Aspects of homogeneity in the semantics of natural language: University of Vienna dissertation.
Križ, Manuel & Benjamin Spector. 2021. Interpreting plural predication. Linguistics and Philosophy 44(5). 1131–1178.
Malamud, Sophia A. 2012. The meaning of plural definites: A decision-theoretic approach. Semantics and Pragmatics 5(3). 1–58.