

# Entailment relations between imprecise expressions

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Imprecision is a form of semantic context-dependency that is mediated by an 'issue' or Question under Discussion (see e.g. Malamud 2012, Križ 2015 a.o. for this perspective and Lasnik 1999, Burnett 2017 for discussions of the same cluster of phenomena that are not QUD-based). Standard examples are the distinction between maximal and non-maximal interpretations of definite plurals as in (1), and approximative uses of unmodified numerals as in (2). By default, these sentences receive the precise interpretations in (1-a) and (2-a), but given an issue for which the precise interpretation is irrelevant, weaker interpretations as in (1-b) or (2-b) become available.

(1) The switches are on.

a. Default/precise interpretation: 'All the switches are on.'

b. Examples of an imprecise interpretation: 'Some of the switches are on.' or 'Almost all of the switches are on.'

(2) John owns 100 cars.

a. Default/precise interpretation: 'John owns exactly 100 cars.'

b. Imprecise interpretation: 'John owns approximately 100 cars.'

For the purposes of this talk, I adopt an alternative-based theory of imprecision following Križ & Spector (2020). According to such theories, sentences containing imprecise expressions such as definite plurals or numerals have truth and falsity conditions that vary depending on the issue parameter. This raises the question of how entailment works for such expressions.

The talk explores the idea that imprecise interpretations are ignored for the purposes of evaluating entailment, i.e. the grammatically relevant notion of entailment is based on the precise truth conditions even in contexts that license imprecision. I argue that this makes interesting predictions about the following phenomena:

1) NPI-licensing properties of \*gather\*-type collective predicates in German (cf. Köpping & Schmitt 2014)

2) the polarity sensitivity of approximative numeral modifiers such as \*about\* (cf. Solt 2018)

3) a tentative generalization linking imprecision to lower structural complexity in the sense of Katzir (2007)

Finally, I discuss a case where the generalization appears to be too strong: In recent work (Haslinger 2022) I argue that the cumulative/distributive contrast in English and German is an imprecision phenomenon. But cumulative sentences with numerals may have implicatures based on a cumulative interpretation of their alternatives — a fact that is unexpected if (i) the distributive interpretation counts as ‘precise’ and (ii) implicatures require an alternative that entails the asserted sentence. The assumptions (i) and (ii) can be motivated independently for cumulative/distributive sentences without numerals, making the behavior of numerals even more puzzling.