Two types of non-maximality and the plural Sorites paradox

Nina Haslinger

Sentences with definite plurals, such as (1), in English and German have been argued to exhibit hallmarks of vagueness such as borderline cases and the Sorites paradox (e.g. Burnett 2017). This fact is sometimes related to the phenomenon of non-maximality — the fact that under certain contextual conditions, (1) can be judged true in a scenario where some, but not all windows are open (Brisson 1998, Malamud 2012, Križ 2015 a.o.).

(1) The windows are open.

The question arises whether non-maximal construals in sentences like (1) should be reduced to the semantic mechanism underlying vagueness (see Burnett 2017 for this position and Križ 2015 for criticism). I argue that this is not generally the case because non-maximality is not a unified phenomenon: Some contexts give rise to non-maximal interpretations with precise truth conditions, while other contexts give rise to non-maximal interpretations that exhibit the standard characteristics of vagueness. The availability of a vague interpretation in a given context depends on how fine-grained the contextually salient decision problem (Malamud 2012) or QUD (Križ 2015) is.

Existing approaches to the pragmatics of non-maximality are not rich enough to account for both types of non-maximal construals, as they either reduce non-maximality to the mechanism underlying vagueness or take non-maximality and vagueness to be completely unrelated. I will therefore develop a descriptively more adequate account that combines a context-dependent supervaluationist treatment of plural predication (Križ & Spector 2021) with a variant of the "tolerant/strict" approach to the Sorites paradox (Cobreros et al. 2012a,b).

If there is enough time, I will conclude by outlining some potential empirical advantages of this approach concerning 1) the conditions under which (1) gives rise to a homogeneity effect and 2) the semantic effect of German floated *alles* (all) with plural definites.

References:

Brisson, Christine. 1998. Distributivity, maximality, and floating quantifiers: Rutgers University dissertation.
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.
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.