

Vagueness and Approximation

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One way to understand vagueness is as a phenomenon of uncertainty about meaning. Different speakers typically have slightly different semantic representations for the same lexical entry (viz. Verheyen, Dewil, Egré 2018). In this talk, I will present some simple probabilistic tools for the representation of vague sentences. The main focus will be on the treatment of the vague approximator word "around" in relation to numerical quantities. I will introduce a simple Bayesian model of the interpretation of "around", joint work with S. Verheyen, B. Spector, and A. Mortier, with the results of an experiment designed to test the model. The basic idea behind this model is that use of "around" allows a cooperative speaker, in situations of uncertainty, to optimize a certain tradeoff between the need to be truthful (Gricean Quality) and the need to be informative (Gricean Quantity). This model, I will argue, also allows us to think about the function of vagueness in language more generally.