

A Note on Vagueness and Ambiguity

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A NOTE ON VAGUENESS AND
 AMBIGUITY

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It is generally agreed that certain sentences are ambiguous, while others are vague. Clear cases are abundant.

Ambiguity

- (1) Selma likes visiting relatives.
- (2) Harry was disturbed by the shooting of the hunters.
- (3) The chickens are ready to eat.

Vagueness

- (4) Harry kicked Sam.
- (5) Sam bought a lamp.
- (6) Max left for Rome.

I assume that (1)–(3) are self-evident. In (4), Harry could have kicked Sam with either his left foot, or right foot, or both; it is left vague which. In (5), Sam could have bought the lamp for five dollars, or a hundred dollars, or any other amount. The amount Sam paid is left vague. In (6), Max left for Rome from whatever place he was at, whether London, Paris, or Bayonne, N.J. The place of departure is left vague.

There is a test for distinguishing ambiguity from vagueness which works for such clear cases as the above.

- (1') Selma likes visiting relatives and so does Sam.
- (2') Harry was disturbed by the shooting of the hunters and so was Al.
- (3') The chickens are ready to eat and so are the children.

These sentences are two-ways ambiguous, not four-ways ambiguous. For example, (1') can mean either

Selma likes going to visit relatives and Sam also likes going to visit relatives

or

Selma likes relatives who are visiting and Sam also likes relatives who are visiting.

However, (1') cannot mean

Selma likes going to visit relatives and Sam likes relatives who are visiting.

nor

Selma likes relatives who are visiting and Sam likes going to visit relatives.

Such cases are discussed at length in Lakoff (1966), where it is claimed that identity of underlying and not superficial structure is required for the operation of the rule of VP-deletion. Similarly, (2') and (3') are two-ways, not four-ways, ambiguous. The same meanings are required on the left-hand and right-hand sides of (1')–(3').

Vague sentences, as would be expected, act differently in such constructions.

(4') Harry kicked Sam and so did Pete.

(5') Sam bought a lamp and so did Sandra.

(6') Max left for Rome and so did Harriet.

For example, if it is assumed in (4') that Harry kicked Sam with his left foot, (4') does not also require that Pete kicked Sam with his left foot. If Sam paid five dollars for the lamp mentioned in (5'), it does not follow from (5') that Sandra paid the same price. Nor does (6') require that Max and Harriet left from the same place. In (4')–(6'), vagueness on the left-hand side of the sentence is independent of vagueness on the right-hand side.

Let us now turn to some unclear cases.

(7) John hit the wall.

(8) John knocked the child over.

(9) John cut his arm with a knife.

In (7), John could have been thrown against the wall, or he could have gone over and punched it. In (8), John might have stumbled accidentally against the child's chair, thus knocking him over, or he could have gone over and purposely given the child a belt. In (9), John could have been using a knife to peel potatoes and accidentally cut his arm. Or John could have intentionally slashed away at his arm with the knife.

It might be claimed that such sentences are vague (with respect to the intention of the subject), but not ambiguous. However, such a claim would not accord with the results of the test discussed above.

(7') John hit the wall and so did Pete.

(7') can mean that John and Pete both went over and punched the wall, or it can mean that they both landed against it (after being thrown), but it cannot mean that John punched the wall and Pete landed against it, nor that John landed against the wall and Pete punched it.

(8') and (9') work similarly.

(8') John knocked the child over and so did Pete.

(9') John cut his arm with a knife and so did Harry.

In (8'), John and Pete could both have pushed the child over, or both could have accidentally stumbled against him. But (8') cannot mean that John stumbled accidentally against the child and Pete pushed him over, nor vice versa.¹ Similarly, (9') can involve two purposeful, or two accidental, cuttings. But (9') cannot mean that John accidentally nicked his arm (while slicing potatoes) and Harry purposefully slashed away at his, nor the reverse. Thus, if the above test is an accurate guide, (7)–(9) are ambiguous, not vague, sentences. This result accords with the observation of Jane Hill (1969) that in Cupeño, every verb must be marked morphologically volitional or non-volitional. In Cupeño, there would be no ambiguous sentences like (7)–(9); the verbs would differ in their endings, depending on the intended reading.²

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MORE ON DEFINITENESS

MARKERS: INTERROGATIVES IN PERSIAN

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o. In a number of languages, there are special morphemes put into any verbal construction whose direct object is definite. Thus, as a previous note pointed out (Browne 1970), Macedonian puts a clitic pronoun next to the verb when the object contains a definite article, a demonstrative or possessive, a personal pronoun, or a proper name. Of the interrogative pronouns, Mac. *kogo* 'whom' acts either like

¹ Robin Lakoff has observed that in the accidental sense of (8), one could say

John knocked the child over, the oaf!

or

John knocked the child over, the clumsy fool!

while in the purposeful sense of (8) one would say

John knocked the child over, the brute!

Thus, while one could say

John knocked the child over, the oaf, and so did Pete, the clumsy fool!

one could not mix the volitional and nonvolitional readings

* John knocked the child over, the clumsy fool, and so did Pete, the brute!

² Actually, Cupeño has a three-way morphological distinction: volitional, nonvolitional, and natural. By "natural", the following is meant: The actor performs the action because it is culturally, psychologically, or physiologically required of him, or is completely natural or