

Language

Vagueness

Definition

A word or phrase is vague when its meaning is fuzzy and inexact

- A vague word divides things into three classes
 - Those things to which the word clearly applies
 - Those things to which it clearly does not apply
 - Those things to which it may or may not apply
- Nearly all words are vague to some degree
- Varying level of vagueness
 - Precise - triangle, prime number
 - Moderately vague - vehicle
 - Extremely vague - rich, obscene

Example

- The shoes were expensive
- The parents and teachers spoke to each other. They were impressed
- Is there a lot of homework for this class
- Is the final exam going to be difficult

Appropriateness of Vague Language

- It allows us to speak with suitable caution
- It frequently adds richness, subtlety and complexity to poetry and other literary forms
- A certain deliberate vagueness may be needed to avoid disclosing important information and diplomacy

Overgenerality

Definition

Words are over general if the information they provide us is too broad and unspecific in a given context

≡ Example

- Where is Denmark located? Somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere
- Who won the race? The fastest runner

Words can be overgeneral and vague

- Where are you going? Out. When will you be back? Later

Ambiguity

Definition

A word expression is ambiguous if it has two or more distinct meanings and the context does not make clear which meaning is intended

- Some expressions are ambiguous because it is not clear to what a single word or phrase in the expression refers

≡ Example

- I saw many stars (stars in the sky? celebrities?)
- One morning he shot an elephant in pajamas (syntactical ambiguity)
- I saw a five dollar bill walking down the street

Semantic Ambiguities

Definition

Ambiguities that result from uncertainty about the meaning of an individual word or phrase

Syntactical Ambiguities

Definition

Ambiguities that result from faulty grammar or word order

- Ambiguity due to sentence structure and/or word order

Disputes

Verbal Dispute

Definition

Occurs when people appear to disagree on an issue but in actuality have simply not resolved the ambiguity of a key term

Factual Dispute

Definition

Occurs when opponents disagree not over the meanings of words but over the relevant facts

Exercise 4.1

- Part I
 - (1) vague and overgeneral
 - (4) overgeneral
 - (7) overgeneral
 - (10) vague and overgeneral
- Part II
 - (1) vagueness - border cases that debate what falls under disallowed actions could lead to debatable borderline cases
 - (4) vagueness and overgenerality - the weather report is general, not specific, and amount of clouds in the sky is vague
 - (7) ambiguity - we do not know if bottom refers to the person on the ship or her bottom
 - (10) ambiguity - we do not know if hot is referring to temperature or attractiveness
 - (13) ambiguity - the x-rays showing nothing could be debatable
 - (16) ambiguity - we do not know for sure what is meant by "I shall lose no time in reading it"
 - (19) ambiguity - we do not specifically know who was envious
- Part III
 - (1) - verbal dispute
 - (4) - factual dispute
 - (7) - factual dispute

Importance of Precise Definitions

- In many discussions terms may need to be defined before a position can be advanced

Types of Definitions

Stipulative Definitions

Definition

Telling your readers or listeners what it is you mean by the term

Persuasive Definitions

Definition

Where an arguer defines a term in an effort to persuade a reader or listener to agree with the arguer's point of view

- Usually contains emotional appeals and slanted terms and topics

Lexical Definitions

Definition

The conventional, dictionary meaning of a word

Precising Definition

Definition

Intended to make a vague word more precise so that the word's meaning is not left to the interpretation of the reader or listener

Emotive Language: Slanting the Truth

The Emotive Power of Words

Denotation

Definition

The literal meaning of a word

- The emotive power of words can come from the word's denotation

Connotation

Definition

The images and feeling associated with a word

- The emotive power of words can come from the word's denotation
- Comes from many sources
 - People's experiences
 - The use of the word in cultures
 - The way the word is used as a symbol or metaphor in various religions
 - The word's sound

Euphemisms and Political Correctness

Euphemisms

Definition

Mild, comforting, or evasive words that take the place of harsh, blunt, or taboo words-

- Very often in our communications with one another, we avoid language that we feel might offend, upset, or insult our listeners or speakers
- A [critical thinker](#) should be aware that pleasant or vague language is often used to hide reality or avoid facing the truth