

"I propose to prove that all language is vague". Discuss.

Part Two: Philosophy of Language
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This essay will discuss Russell's claim that in language there can be no distinction between precision and vagueness because all language is vague. There will be an in-depth analysis of his arguments and examples, and a detailed discussion of related literature regarding several theories of vagueness in language. Russell's view of vagueness will be contrasted with both Frege and Wittgenstein's, and the differences between Russell and Wittgenstein's treatment of linguistic vagueness will be contemplated. Additionally, the essay will involve a significant discussion of the relationship between words, their meanings as parts of propositions and vagueness.

From the outset, Russell made it clear that one of the central notions he is proposing is that beyond our linguistic representations of things, "there can be no such thing as vagueness or precision"¹, while noting that it does not follow that because our language is vague, the things language refers to are also vague. The reasoning presented for this conclusion seems watertight; "Nothing is more or less what it is, or to a certain extent possessed of the properties which it possesses"². But his primary concern is not with the non-vagueness of objects, but that language is vague. Russell does not define what he means by language, but although his examples generally focus on individual words, it is clear that he intends 'language' to be taken as meaning any given formulation of words, collections of sentences and so on.

To properly address the claim that all language is vague, we must first consider what is to be understood by the term 'vague'. Somewhat strangely, Russell offers his definition only after he has determined that words are vague. In light of this, it may be that the definition he gives is somewhat self-serving. Vagueness, he says, "is a conception applicable to every kind of representation"³, defining it with reference to what he says is the opposite notion, accuracy; "One system of terms related in various ways is an accurate representation of another system of terms related in various other ways if there is a one-one relation of the terms of the one to the terms of the other and likewise (with the relations)"⁴. There seems to be a parallel here with Ayer's description of the relationship between propositions and the objects they refer to; "the meaning of a sentence which refers to a sense-datum is precisely determined by the rule that correlates it with the sense-datum in question"⁵. It is peripherally noteworthy that unlike Ayer, Russell is not making a claim about how it is that sentences mean, the similarity is in the way the two pictures link subjects with objects. A vague representation then is one whose terms and relations do not map one-one with those of which it represents, that which Wittgenstein terms "a concept with blurred edges"⁶.

But already there are problems, for is it so clear that 'vague' and 'accurate' are such polarised concepts? To describe a cloud as being a whitish fluffy thing would be vague but not inaccurate, for the cloud is indeed generally white and its boundaries are indistinct. The problem with Russell's definition of 'accurate' is that it only holds true if the system of terms and relations being described can possibly be described in a non-vague manner. As has been stated, Russell holds that all objects are non-vague, but surely this depends on how broadly an object or collection of objects is to be conceived. At a sufficient level of abstraction, all things merge into one vague mass. If we can only talk of things that can be precisely defined, we cannot in fact talk of very much.

Austin considers several ways in which descriptions of things may be considered vague, citing lack of detail, ambiguity, imprecision, that they may be "a rough description, conveying only a 'rough idea'"⁷, or that the description may be somehow incomplete. Austin notes that in most cases, it is the use of the word rather than the word itself which is vague, stating that words "being applicable over a considerable range of non-identical instances is ... enormously

1 Russell: 148

2 Russell: 148

3 Russell: 151

4 Russell: 151-2

5 Ayer as quoted in Austin: 130

6 PI: 71

7 Austin: 126

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common; far more words exhibit it than ... we should want to label as ... vague"⁸. This distinction between words and their usage, or relation to the world, seems to be in keeping with both Wittgensteinian and Fregean thought. Harrison contends that Frege's assertion that a word only has meaning in relation to its reference is not indisputable, stating that "the grounds for its importance are not all evident or immediately obvious"⁹, though he does not say why.

Austin holds that there are important distinctions to be made between 'accurate', 'precise' and 'true', that "Certainly 'untrue but accurate' is pretty clearly wrong; but 'accurate and therefore true' doesn't seem quite right either"¹⁰. Whether what is accurate is true may depend on what is being measured. Austin states that there is a much clearer difference between what is precise and what is exact; "If I measure a banana with a ruler, I may find it to be precisely 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches long. If I measure my ruler with bananas, I may find it to be exactly six bananas long, though I couldn't claim any great precision"¹¹. Thus, calling accuracy, verifiability, exactness or precision the opposite of vagueness will need some qualification of terms before it can be accepted. However this may not be essential to an understanding of what Russell means by 'vague', because Russell's definition may work just as well with any or all of those concepts. For Russell, what is vague may be that which is neither true, exact, precise nor accurate.

Russell analyses several classes of word, starting with colours, attempting to show how their usage is vague. With colours, he states quite rightly that "there are shades of colour concerning which we shall be in doubt whether to call them red or not"¹². In common usage this is certainly true, hence such utterances as 'orangey-red'. But what Russell is referring to here goes beyond mere common usage. There is no doubt that there exists a scientific definition which confines 'redness' to a certain range of frequencies of light. Such a constriction would be arbitrary to a degree, but non-vague nonetheless. However Russell would contend that this definition is in fact vague on the grounds that we cannot without specialised equipment distinguish these frequencies, and even then that there will be minor fluctuations, imperfections in the equipment, further levels of detail to be considered and so on. Yet while for practical purposes even the scientific definition of 'red' may be vague, Russell makes no mention of the abstract concept itself, only the vagueness of its practical application. If we can say that a given application of the word 'red' is incorrect, it follows that there must be a correct way to apply the word, even if we are incapable of determining the correct application either through our senses or via some as yet non-existent machinery. If there are correct and incorrect applications, then the concept must be non-vague. But Russell would stipulate that the existence of borderline conditions is sufficient to cause a concept to be considered vague.

With reference to the standard metre, stating that the metre "is defined as the distance between two marks on a certain rod"¹³, he argues that the vagueness can be found in that the marks are not discrete points, but rather "patches of a finite size"¹⁴, that the rod will flex in different temperatures, and that temperature cannot be accurately measured. Due to this, he says that our conception of a metre is imprecise. But this is not so. *If* the marks were points, and the temperature constant and the rod inflexible *then* the distance between those points would be a metre. The purpose of marking a rod should not be to define the metre, but to give the closest possible physical representation of the 'theoretical metre' for practical purposes. The representation is vague, but what it represents is not. We might be tempted to say that Russell would be compelled to ask whether a line on a graph should be measured from its top or bottom edge, rejecting the idea that a mathematical line is a series of points having length but no height or depth. It would be bizarre to argue that a particular instantiation of redness or a metre was accurate, but equally bizarre to argue on these grounds that the concepts that the instantiations are instances of are inaccurate. But this suggestion neglects to account for the

8 Austin: 127
 9 Harrison: 54
 10 Austin: 129
 11 Austin: 128
 12 Russell: 148
 13 Russell: 148
 14 Russell: 148

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fact that Russell is not contending the existence of non-vague subjects of vague expressions, but rather highlighting the fact that, extant or not, we cannot talk of such subjects without being vague.

Khatchadourian gives a slightly different definition of vagueness to Russell's, contrasting it instead with precision, and stating that vagueness is "essentially a negative concept"¹⁵, citing the OED definition; "not precise or exact in meaning"¹⁶. Khatchadourian points to the lack of perceived vagueness in our everyday language, stating that "We might note that if *all* words in ordinary language were vague, the distinction between 'vague' and ... 'precise' words would not have arisen in ordinary language"¹⁷. Additionally, he states that "the existence of ... 'fringe' or 'borderline cases' itself would not constitute the vagueness of vague words"¹⁸. Khatchadourian denies that the opposite of vagueness in a linguistic sense should be seen as preciseness in a mathematical sense, because the two concepts are related to two different fields; language and mathematics, and therefore are not truly opposed. For this reason, we can reject Russell's claim that language is vague because it involves fringe cases, on the grounds that linguistic precision is not the same kind of thing as mathematical precision and that as such, fringe cases are linguistically acceptable. What linguistic precision, and hence vagueness, involves, according to Khatchadourian, is the mutually understood meaning of the words; "A non-vague expression (is) precise (if) there exists a set of relatively fixed and well-defined linguistic rules which conventionally govern its usage"¹⁹. Thus we must shift our attention from imprecision in subject to imprecision in meaning.

Wittgenstein argues that definitions of vagueness which focus on the imprecise relationship between a word and what it describes, such as that of Russell, are useless in terms of language, asking whether it is "senseless to say 'Stand roughly there'"²⁰, and herein objecting to Frege's assertion that "an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all"²¹. Indeed, Wittgenstein goes further than this and states that a vague definition is just as valid a definition as a precise one, at least as far as language is concerned. Wittgenstein's view is that a precise definition cannot be given for the majority of words or concepts; "(there are no) rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that"²². Rather than being ideally lacking in vagueness, Wittgenstein insists that "the word must have a family of meanings"²³. While this view is compatible with Russell's claim, the difference is that unlike Russell, Wittgenstein does not see the vagueness of language as a problem.

In conclusion, we have seen how Russell presents a picture of language that has its ultimate goal as something from which any vagueness has been removed, with which we can only talk of proper names. We have seen that the definition of vagueness is somewhat lacking due to its being a definition by means of defining the opposite concept, but that what vagueness is opposed to may not in fact be what Russell takes it to be. We have seen how both Wittgenstein and Russell agree that language is vague, but have also seen how their acceptance of this led to two starkly contrasted views of language. Russell seeks to analyse linguistic vagueness in order to "escape a host of erroneous notions"²⁴ which are brought about by being "unconsciously influenced by language"²⁵, whereas Wittgenstein thinks that sketching a distinct picture from a blurred one can only result in exactly the type of error that Russell seeks to avoid.

15 Khatchadourian: 140

16 Khatchadourian: 138

17 Khatchadourian: 138

18 Khatchadourian: 139

19 Khatchadourian: 140

20 PI: 71

21 PI: 71

22 PI: 68

23 PI: 77

24 Russell: 147

25 Russell: 147

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