VAGUENESS IN LANGUAGE: THE IGBO LANGUAGE EXAMPLE

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Abstract

Vagueness is one of the observed phenomena in many languages of the world which appears to be instantiated in nearly all lexical categories. It occurs when the boundaries of a word's meaning are not well defined. Vagueness is sometimes confused with other linguistic phenomena such as generality, ambiguity and open texture. This paper seeks to examine the nature of this phenomena in the Igbo language. The work studies vagueness in Igbo in general and on vague lexical categories especially. The aim of the study is to investigate the nature and sources of vagueness in the language. To arrive at the objective, the work adopts a descriptive approach in defining vagueness and contrasting it with other linguistic phenomena, the features of vagueness are also highlighted. The data used in the study was collected through the researchers day to day interaction with Igbo speakers and the researcher's intuitive knowledge of the language. The work reveals that vagueness is an inevitable linguistic feature and an essential property of natural language with examples from Igbo language.

1.0 Introduction

Words in the lexicon can have multiple senses (ambiguity) and can also be vague, so that the actual meaning is underspecified and becomes clearer in context. Vagueness has been a topic of continued interest in both linguistics and Philosophy, as well as Psychology. There are numerous accounts of vagueness, analysing the problem in different ways and providing logical machinery to cope with apparent paradoxes and indeterminacy resulting from vagueness. Still there seems to be no agreement on what a satisfactory analysis should look like. A deficiency of most analyses seems to be that they neglect the actual advantage that vagueness brings for natural language as well as for conceptualization (Rooij 2010). When linguists and philosophers speak of "vague expressions", then they are speaking of a class of expressions which, along with some number of yet undiscovered properties, have borderline cases, are susceptible to sorites paradoxes, and whose interpretation in a context depends upon the selection of a "standard"(Keefe and Smith 1996a)

In the words of Peirce (1902:748) a proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habits of language were indeterminate.

Some philosophers e.g. Frege (1903), view vagueness as pervasive defect of natural language and urge the adoption of an artificial language in which each predicate was completely precise in that there would be no borderline case. Russell too thought vagueness thoroughly infected natural language, but thought it to be unavoidable -- and indeed for ordinary usage and discourse (Russell 1923). Despite the occasional argument that vagueness is pragmatic rather than a semantic phenomenon, the attitude that vagueness is inextricably bound to natural language has led modern writers to the exploration of alternative logics which might adequately characterize vagueness -- that is which would account for our pre-theoretic beliefs concerning truth, falsity, necessary truth, validity, etc., of sentences containing vague predicates. Some recent writers have also argued that vague language undermines realism, and that it shows our concepts to be "incoherent". This paper argues that vagueness is not a defect on language rather it is a semantic property of language that helps language to retain its beauty. Most of the time we are unaware of the vague use of language and only stumble across it on closer inspection. This linguistic feature shows up in all grammatical categories and across lexical fields, so understanding the principles underlying this type of uncertainty is of fundamental importance for semantic theory

The tone marking convention used in this work is the Green and Igwe convention. Only the high tone is left unmarked, grave accent (`) is used to mark the low tone while the macro (-) is used to mark the down-stepped tone.

The work takes off with a general explanation of the concept. The meaning of vagueness and other linguistic phenomena were taken care of in the section that follows. The features of vagueness were discussed in section three. Section four, includes vagueness in languages, classification and analysis of Igbo lexical examples used as data in the work. The findings of the work were summarize and concluded in section five.

1.1 What is vagueness?

Vagueness has been observed to occur widely in language. However, people vary in defining this phenomenon. Peirce (1902:748) is considered as the originator of the notion of vagueness of language. He was perhaps the first to try to formulate the notion in a rigorous way as follows:

> A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By

> intrinsically uncertain, we mean not certain in consequence of
> any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker's habit
> of language were indeterminate.

Channell (1994) in his definition says an expression or word is vague if:

(a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition;

(b) it is purposely and unabashedly vague;

(c) its meaning arises from the intrinsic uncertainty referred to by Pierce

Linguistically, vagueness is a complex feature that exists in different forms in almost all lexical categories. Bosch (1983) argues that vagueness arises due to incomplete definition, that is to the fact that we can never know about every single item we would assign predicate to. He uses the example of a rose and how we get to know which flowers to call a rose and which not. We will never come to the point where we have seen every single flower there is, and hence must on our own- only based on our experience with flowers-create a definition for roses, so that when confronted with a new flower we can decide whether this is a rose or not. But this does not work all the time, as Bosch puts it, there will be cases for which our predicates are not defined. Vagueness occurs when the boundaries of a word's meaning are not well defined as in the word 'tall'. It exists when a word or a phrase reduces the level of information contained in a statement as in a stating that an action "may be appropriate"; this phrase reduces the clarity about whether or not the action should be performed. In the geographic domain vague senses of concept lead to indeterminism in the extension of features such as forests and mountains (Bennet 2001; Cohn & Gotts 1996, Burrough &Frank 1996; McGee 1997; Roy & Stell 2001).

1.2 Vagueness and other Linguistics Phenomena

There are a number of linguistic phenomena that resemble vagueness in certain ways, including tolerance for small deviations and uncertain applicability, but arguably are distinct from vagueness. Such phenomena like ambiguity, generality, open texture etc. will be examined here.

(a) Ambiguity: In his contribution, Cann, (1993:8) says that,

> A sentence is said to be ambiguous whenever it can be associated with two
> or more different meanings. Ambiguity can arise in a sentence for a number
> of reasons: through the ascription of multiple meanings to single words;
> through the assignment of different syntactic structures to a sentence, or
> through the use of certain expressions that may have different semantic
> scope.

From the above, we discover that words can be ambiguous as well as sentences. Cann cites three reasons that can give rise to ambiguity, when words are given multiple meanings, when a sentence has different meanings and through the use of expressions that may have different semantic scope.

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 A word can be vague even though it is not ambiguous, and an ambiguous term having more than one meaning would not be said to be vague if the different meanings it has are very precise. Ambiguity is a semantic property of word and sentences. Words, phrases and sentences are the units of language that carry meaning. Lexical ambiguity is a type of ambiguity where meaning resides in words themselves. In lexical ambiguity, lexemes express more than one meaning. This emanates from homonymous and polysemous words. Homonymous words are words with the same form but whose meaning are different and cannot be connected. For example the English word 'pen' which is a writing instrument can also mean an 'enclosure'. Polysemous words on the other hand are words that have two or more related senses. Thus the word 'screen' is polysemous since it is used variously of a fire screen, a cinema screen, a television screen and so on. An expression is vague, if it admits borderline cases. Terms that express cluster concepts like 'intelligent', 'athletic' and 'just' are vague because their instances are determined by the application of several criteria, no one of which is decisive (Bach 1994). Words are only vague directly by virtue of having a sense that is vague. In contrast, an ambiguous word has it's ambiguity directly, simply in virtue of having multiple meanings. This contrast between vagueness and ambiguity is obscured by the fact that most words are both vague and ambiguous. as Sorenson (2013) exemplified, 'Child' is ambiguous between 'offspring' and 'immature offspring'. The later reading of 'child' is vague because there are border line cases of immature offspring.

 (b) **Generality**: Terms can be general (person, dog) without being vague. Those general terms apply to many different objects but are not therefore vague; and furthermore, the fact that they apply to different kinds of objects (persons apply to both men and women) also does not show it to be vague or ambiguous. A vague term admits of borderline cases - a completely determinate situation in which there just is no correct answer as to whether the term applies to a certain object or not - and this is not the case with generality. Generality is a matter of under specification; the meaning of an expression is general in the sense that it does not specify certain details. For example, the meaning of 'city' is general because it does not specify whether or not a city is big or small, modern or ancient. "My friend" is general as it could mean a female friend, a male friend etc. Here are more examples:

1.(a) Mary saw John

(b) Mary changes a baby

(c) Mary receives a degree.

The meaning of (a) is general because it does not specify whether or not Mary saw John in a shop or in a school or any other place. In (b), Mary could be changing her own baby or a baby belonging to another person. The question of whose baby is left open. In (c), Mary could have an Art Degree or a Science or a Barchelor of Art Degree or a Doctor of Philosophy Degree. Again the sentence does not say specifically what kind of degree Mary received.

(c) Open Texture: Terms are considered open textured if they are precise along some dimensions of their meaning but where other possible dimensions simply have not been considered. It would therefore not be clear what the applicability of the term would be were objects to vary along these other dimensions. Although related to vagueness, open texture is a different notion.

Bosch (1983) discusses open texture which is said to be the possibility of vagueness; that is to construct very strange, untypical, and non-mundane scenarios in which a well-known concept may become doubtful and thus vague. Many commentators say that vagueness exists because broad categories ease the task of classification of vague. If I can describe your sweater as red then I do not need to figure out whether it is scarlet. This freedom to use wide intervals obviously help us to learn, teach, communicate and remember.

1.3 Features Of Vague Expressions

Ullmann(1962) points out that not only expressions we address vagueness to are vague but the term vagueness itself is rather vague. There exists no above all definition of vagueness and different linguists or philosophers all define vagueness slightly different so that according to linguist A something may definitely be vague while linguist B strictly disagrees and philosopher C cannot decide because his definition lacks for exactly that item. Still there are some important characteristics which vague expression must have almost everybody agrees on. The first characteristics is contextual variability is truth condition. This arises where there is lack of definition, or put differently, the fact that the same expression may be true under circumstance A while false under circumstance B. Let's look again at the adjective *tall* in 'John is tall'. The sentence can be true or false, depending on what exact situation it is referring to. And this again is due to the fact that *tall* is not fully defined, that is, it lacks information about whether being 1.80m counts as being tall or not in any given context.

Another very common characteristics of vague expressions is that they allow for borderline cases. Borderline case and uncertainty about the boundaries of vague predicates extension raise significant challenges for semantic theory. If we don't (and possibly can't) know exactly how much weight is required to put an object in the extension of heavy (in a particular context of use), even when we are aware of all of the potentially relevant facts, can we truly say that we know the meaning of the term? For any context, in addition to the set of object that a predicate like *is expensive* is clearly true of and clearly false of, there is typically a third set of objects for which it is difficult or impossible to make these judgements.

Finally vague predicates give rise to Sorites paradox (from the Greek word 'heap') which stems from the inability to define a thing precisely and can be applied to syntactic vagueness : for example, when grains of sand are removed from a heap of sand, at what point does it stop being a heap? When does blue stop being blue? or old, old? Or young, young? Many words language involve such vagueness.

1.4 Vagueness in Languages

A few comments will be made here on the vagueness found in some languages. Japanese is a language that is often used in a vague way (J-Myth 2008). It has a lot of vague phrases. It is one language of many languages that permits subject and objects to be omitted. Another reason why it is often said to be vague or indirect relates to certain aspects of its structure, especially the fact that Japanese sentences do not require overtly mentioned subjects and objects. Sometimes, even fairly long Japanese sentences seem to consist only of a verb with the usual assortment of endings, plus an adverbial time or place phrase, and the usual ending particles that show emotion, politeness, whatever. Take the generic Japanese phrase *"o-genki desu ka"* often translated as "how are you?" though it really means something more like "are (you) well?" Isn't this vague? After all it has no subject! Well actually, it just so happened that Japanese is one of many languages that permits subjects and objects to be omitted when what you are talking about is obvious from the context. The fact that the particle "ka" clearly makes the sentence a question pretty much removes the ambiguity: obviously, you are asking the other person or people about their health, not making statement about your own health, the honorific "o" also makes it clear that you are not talking about yourself, because in Japanese honorifics are used only for other people (honorifics and directional verbs like *kureru* and *ageru* actually end up doing a lot of the work that pronouns do in English). One

could ask who exactly is this other person that *"o-genki desu ka?"* is addressing, but it is also worth pointing out that the English equivalent "how are you?" is no different, as the English pronoun "you" can refer to pretty much anyone, singular or plural within earshot.

Navajo language can express some grammatical distinctions that are difficult or overtly wordy in the English language. The English phrase "*I am going*" cannot be said in Navajo, but the verb stem would include more information, such as "*I am going on foot/on plane/on horse"*. In this way, the Navajo language expresses in a verb phrase (two words) what English takes in five words, both expressing displacement (describing non-concrete activities) and conveying information. It is the permutation of the "*going* " verb that describes how the person is going.

1.5 Vagueness in the Igbo Language

Few of the works done in Igbo semantics centred on ambiguity. Udemadu (2011) investigated ambiguity in Igbo language using a descriptive approach. Mbah (2008) adopts a descriptive model in his study of ambiguity. The researcher is not aware of any previous work on the issue of vagueness in the Igbo language.

Vagueness of linguistic units in Igbo can be traced to such sources as will be discussed below. As has been emphasized, this work views vagueness as an inevitable and essential property of natural language. This type of vagueness covers all lexical categories for which some notions of grading can be relevant. Here are some examples of vague lexical items as will be classified below.

(a) **Vagueness of Common Nouns**:

2. Nnà m bù *ògàrànyà*

   'My father is wealthy'

3. *Nwàta* ahù nà-èjè ahịa

   'The child is going to market'

4. Nwokē ahụ bù *ogbènyè*

   'The man is poor'

5. *Nwaànyì* kà a chòrò

   'A woman is wanted'

The italicized lexical items in examples 2-5 are all common nouns. It is difficult to determine the objects that are included or excluded in each case. The lexemes: *ọgaranya, nwata, ogbenye, and nwaànyì* are all inherently vague because (a) we do not know how much money/material possession a man must have to qualify him as wealthy in the case of *ọgaranya*. (b) it was not specified whether *nwata* is a male or female and then the age. (c) how many criteria need to be fulfilled, and to what degree for one to be regarded as *ogbenye*. (d) the age of the woman is not specified.

(b) Vagueness in Quantifiers

Most quantifiers in Igbo are referred to as vague quantifiers. This is because there is no certainty or clarity about what or who is mentioned or involved. Below are some of the vague quantifier in Igbo.

6. *Ọtụtù* ihe kà o nyèrè m

   'He gave me many things'

7. *Ụfọdù* akwà yā akaala

    'Some of his/her clothes are thorn'

8. Okwu *òlenòle* kà o kwùrù

   'He/she said few things'

The words in italics in examples 6-8 are vague, they are referred to as indefinite quantifiers. This is because there is no certainty or clarity about what is mentioned or how many things/ items involved in each case.

(c) Vagueness of Verbs.

Some Igbo verbs lack specification in meaning. They do not specify how an action is performed. In languages like Navajo the verb stem would include more information such as "I am going on foot/on plane/on horse". Likewise, the verbs 'trek', and 'walk' in English implies going "on foot". The following Igbo sentences contain vague verbs.

9. Ha *gàrà* ahịa

    'They went to market'

10. O *sìrì* nri

    'He/she cooked food'

11. E *tìrì* nwa yā ihe

'His/her child was beaten'

The active verbs in italics are vague. They do not specify how the actions were performed. In (9) there is no specification as to how the 3rd person plural pronoun *ha* went to the market. Was it by trekking, on a bike or by car? For (10), one does not know how the 3rd person singular pronoun *o* cooked the food. Was it boiled, fried or roasted? Similarly the verb in (11) is vague because it is not clear how the beating was done whether by spanking or with a cane/whip?

(e) Vagueness of Pronouns

Some Igbo pronouns are inherently vague. They do not specify gender. The pronouns in italics in the following examples are illustrative:

12. *O* jèrè ahìa

    'He/she went to market'

13. *Ọ* bìarà n'ùtùtù

    'She/he came is the morning'

14. Ahà *ya* àmakà

    'His/her/its name is beautiful'

15. *Ha*   bị̀àrà   n'oge

    'They came on time'

The pronouns in the above examples, *o* (he/she) example 12 ,*ọ* (he/she) in example 13, *ya (him/her)* in example *14* and *ha* (they/them) in example 15 do not have sharp boundary which marks the things which do definitely fall under it from those which do not definitely and so on.

1.6 Uses of Vague Expressions

People use vague expressions when they are unwilling to give accurate information. They use vague expressions when they think it is unnecessary or socially inappropriate to give precise information. A good example of vague language is in rounding up numbers when telling time. Twenty-six minutes past two telling–it's about half past two/it is almost two/it is nearly half-past two.

In Igbo, vague terms are also used in;

(a)   Rounding up number when telling the time. For instance, twenty-seven minutes past two becomes;

16.   *Ya bụrụzie elekere abụa na ọkara/kpọzie ya elekere abụọ na ọkara.*

        'It is about half past two'

17.   *Ò fòdùrù naanị kịm kịm ole na ole ka ọ kụọ elekere itolu.*

        'It remains only a few minutes to nine'

18.   *O jirila obere ihe gafee elekere iri na abụọ nke ehihie.*

        'It is a little past noon'

The underlined expressions in 16-18 are vague since they are not specific enough about the exact time. Often, Igbo speakers use vague expressions not because they do not want to give accurate information but because they feel it is more polite to make a less definite statement.

(b) Speakers of Igbo language use vague expressions in completing certain lists (lists of items, list of names). Sometimes a speaker might start a list of some kind and then could not remember the rest of the list or does not feel the other items are important enough to be mentioned. In this case list completers are ideal as in;

19.   *Azùtàrà m anụ, akwụkwọ nrī, mmanụ nà ihe ndị òzọ ejì esi nrī.*

        'I bought meat, vegetables, oil and other things for cooking'.

20.   *I nwèrè ike ịjū dibịà oyìbo mọbụ ọkaīwū mòbù onye dī otu ahù.*

        'You have to ask a doctor or lawyer or someone like that'.

The underlined expressions in 19 and 20 are vague because they lack specificity.it is not clear what is included in *ihe ndị ọzọ (other things)* in 19 and *onye di otu ahụ* (someone like that) in 20. Other vague list completers in Igbo include:

21. *Ihe ndị òzọ dị iche ichè.*

    'All other things'

22. *Wèe dịrị gabazie/wdg.*

    Etc.

23. *Ka ọ ha m otu a.*

  'Let me stop here'

24. *Ùdị ihe ndị ahù*

  'Things like that'

25. *Nà mmadù ndị ọzò*

  'And other people

(d) Vague expressions are very common with numbers when expressing quantity. Low numbers are often substituted with phrases such as:

26. *Òle nà òle*

  'A few'

27. *Oberē/ntàkịrị*

  'A little'

However large numbers are rounded up with;

28. *Òtụtụ*

  'Lots of'

29. *Nnù kwùru nnù/agùtàọnù/agụkata agba awàa*

  'Too many to be counted'.

28. *Ndị bīarā mmèmme ahù bù ajā.*

 The people come-pst festival that be uncountable

 'The people that came for the festival were uncountable'.

(e) In the traditional Igbo society, vague terms are used in describing time before the advent of western education. Some of the terms are still in use in some Igbo dialects.

 For early hours of the morning, they use the following vague expressions:

29. *Zam zam ụtụtụ* (Onyekonwu, (2004:19)

 'Very early in the morning'

30. *Tupu òkụkò akwaa*

 'Before the cock crows'

31. *Mgbawarachī*

 'At dawn'

For late in the night, the eụpressions used are;

32. *Riom riom abàlì* (Onyekonwu, 2004:16)

 'In the middle of the night'

33. *Ime ime abalị/ ndeeri/òwù abàlì*

 'At the dead of the night'

For mid-day, the following vague expressions are in use as in:

34. *Ètitì ehìhìe/òkàra chi/òwù ehìhiè/ùkoli*

 'Mid-day/'noon'.

1.7 Summary of Findings and Conclusion

1.7.1 Findings

The major findings of this work are summarized as follows:

a. Vagueness is a linguistic condition that is common in language.

b. It is a fact of linguistic life, hence its use is often unintentional.

c. Some Igbo terms are both vague and ambiguous. For example, *nnwa* 'child' is ambiguous between 'offspring' and 'immature offspring'. The later reading of child is vague.

d. This linguistic device can be used intentionally in a speech situation as a means of evasiveness, treading cautiously and as a means of avoiding undesirable consequences.

1.7.2 Conclusion

As was said earlier, vagueness is an inevitable linguistic feature. It is an essential property of natural language. Most of the time, we are unaware of the vague use of language and only stumble across it on closer inspection. This paper has demonstrated vagueness in Igbo, it affirms that vagueness is a linguistic property that helps language to retain its beauty as Cerezo (2011) points out,

> ....Removing vagueness in language, while it clarifies meaning, entails sacrificing the beauty in language. It will make it tepid, one-dimensional and boring. It will suppress languages growth and hence stagnate our own creativity. Vagueness is very much the beauty of language. Why at times it can prove to be an irksome inconvenience, its outright removal or exorcism from our language by having a systematic one-one relationship of signifying terms and the thing signified will be quite a disaster. The only solution, I believe is to immerse ourselves in untangling the enigma of language, to get what is truly meant- to treat language as an adventure of discovery.

This paper has shown that vagueness exists in Igbo as in other languages. It is a linguistic feature showing up in most grammatical categories and across lexical fields. Vagueness in Igbo language arises from the use of terms that are inherently vague. Most of the research on vagueness studies vague adjectives, however, this work shows that vagueness is by no means limited to gradable adjectives; members of other lexical categories can also be vague. This work is a modest contribution to the study of vagueness from the Igbo perspective.

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