

Ambiguity and vagueness

1 Ignorance

A proposition is vague if the speaker may be ignorant with respect to details that do not follow from the proposition itself, without making the proposition false or infelicitous. If the speaker is asked to clarify these obscure details, he may truthfully answer 'I don't know'.

2 Mixed readings

Vague readings are possible in the following contexts, while mixed interpretations of ambiguous expressions are not.

- Vague readings (*aunt*)
 - John and Bill both have an aunt (John on his mother's side, and Bill on his father's side)
 - John has an aunt and Bill has too (John on his mother's side, and Bill on his father's side)
- Ambiguous readings (*file*)
 - John and Bill both have a file
 - * John and Bill have a file for filing fingernails
 - * John and Bill both have a file for filing papers
 - * #John has a file for filing fingernails, and Bill has a file for filing papers
 - * #John has a file for filing papers, and Bill has a file for filing fingernails
 - John has a file and Bill does too
 - * John and Bill have a file for filing fingernails
 - * John and Bill both have a file for filing papers
 - * #John has a file for filing fingernails, and Bill has a file for filing papers
 - * #John has a file for filing papers, and Bill has a file for filing fingernails

3 Zeugma

Zeugmas are a word-play like effect that arises with ambiguous readings, but are absent in vague contexts

- Ambiguity (zeugma)
 - Herb's driving license expired last Thursday, and so did John
 - Herb took his bag and his leave
 - Delta Airlines serves Germany and breakfast
- Vagueness (no zeugma)
 - The mouth of the cave resembles that of a bottle

4 Examples

Consider the following words. Are they vague or ambiguous? The relevant readings are indicated in parentheses.

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| earth (planet / ground) | brother (younger / older) | see (understand / consider) |
| inn (hotel / tavern) | pass (move / vanish) | fly (insect / bait on fish hook) |
| collar (of a shirt / of a dog) | blade (of a knife / of a leaf) | hole (aperture / cavity) |