

# Vagueness and the Semantics and Pragmatics of Contradictions

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## 2. Background of the topic and goals of the application

Vagueness of meaning is a central phenomenon of natural language. But modern linguistic semantics and pragmatics are still struggling to incorporate vagueness into compositional accounts of meaning to capture pragmatic judgments. Accounts based on several underlying logics – fuzzy logic, sub- and supervaluation, epistemic logic, and others – have been proposed, but presently there is little agreement on which approach is the correct one (see the two volumes by Egré and Klinedinst (eds.), in print, and Nouwen *et al.* (eds.), in print). One well-known problem concerning vagueness in semantics/pragmatics is posed by the following examples (Fine 1975, Kamp 1975, Kamp and Partee 1995):

- (A) The suspect is tall.
- (B) The suspect is not tall.
- (C) The suspect is tall and not tall.

If the suspect is 5'11"-tall, a borderline degree of tall-ness for the first two sentences may both be somewhat acceptable. The third, however, is a contradiction in classical logic. How could the conjunction of two sentences that don't seem entirely false yield a contradiction? Fine and Kamp conclude from similar examples that fuzzy logic cannot provide a satisfactory account of vagueness in language: if the first two sentences had truth values 0.5, fuzzy logic wouldn't predict that their conjunction had truth value 0 – vagueness must be represented outside of the compositional system, according to Fine and Kamp.

More recently, however, a problem with the Fine/Kamp argument has been noted. Namely, the conjunction (C) does not sound contradictory in the same way if the subject referred to is a borderline case as it would for a more extreme case – i.e. a 6'7" woman. Experimental work in print by Alxatib and Pelletier (2010) and Ripley (2010) corroborates this intuition – most subjects regard the contradiction to be quite acceptable for the borderline case. These intuitions undermine the argument against fuzzy logic, and consequently Schiffer (2000), Smith (2009) and others therefore propose a return to a fuzzy logic. But from our perspective, the account of contradictions of the form  $t(s) \wedge \neg t(s)$  and others is presently still unclear, and in particular three questions are important: Do sentences such as (C) become acceptable by means of a context shift (pro: Kamp & Partee 1995, contra: Ripley 2010)? Are they of equal acceptability as  $A \wedge \neg t(s)$  if  $A$  and  $t(s)$  have the same acceptability, but they don't form a classical contradiction (i.e. is truth-functionality respected)? To what extent should the acceptability of (C) be captured within semantics, and to what extent in pragmatics?