The importance of vagueness in translation

Diana Santos

In the present presentation, I will take up in detail the concept of vagueness, trying to make it more precise and to pin down its relevance for translation.

Obviously, that vagueness is one of the sources of complexity in translation is not a new statement. The idea that languages cut different pieces of reality is a classical in any textbook. This entails that, if in a particular case the target language is more fine-grained than the source language, the translator may have to choose on not objective grounds.

Here, however, I shall be concerned with another kind of vagueness, which I call monolingual vagueness. Monolingual vagueness is probably a bigger problem for translation, and it is an essential property of natural language.

Several different kinds of vagueness

When one linguistic object can have more than one classification — and those classifications correspond to conceptually distinct "objects" — then that object is vague with regard to that distinction. In other words, it can be used as member of either category, and it can be taken to denote both.

The most trivial vagueness occurs when the classification is made in terms of an objective, physical quantity (bald/not bald, fleuve/rivière). Here one could talk about referential vagueness, and this regards semantic classification. In general this vagueness is continuous, as opposed to the following two kinds, where vagueness is discrete.

The vagueness which is most conspicuous in translation studies, on the other hand, is the one concerning classification in terms of another language's classification. Its most common name is contrastive vagueness, and is relevant for contrastive studies and translation.

However, another kind of vagueness, which I will call grammatical vagueness, or monolingual to contrast with contrastive vagueness, concerns classification in terms of the language's own categories. By categories I mean here grammatical categories in the sense of 'all distinctions that are reflected in the linguistic system'.

>>>>> It is this last type of vagueness that has been least talked about, at least in a translation context.
Examples of the different kinds of vagueness

In addition to presenting examples of the three cases, I want to show that they are in principle independent, by pointing out cases where only one of the three types of vagueness applies.

**Referential (continuous) vagueness**
- *bald, careca* (how many hairs? how many zones without hair?)
- *large, small* (in addition to context dependency...)

**Contrastive vagueness**
- *céu* -> *heaven, sky*
- *neve* -> *snø, sludd, skare*
- *pant* -> *hipoteca, empenhar, depósito (de uma garrafa)*

**Grammatical (monolingual) vagueness**
- *acquisitions: be, pluperfect* (event, state)
- *amigo* (which part-of-speech? nome, adjetivo)
- *apaixonado* (which copula? *ser, estar* — 'passionate', 'be in love')
- *participio passado and past participle*
  
  *o muro pintado de branco tem de ser deitado abaixo*
  
  ('the white painted wall has to be destroyed': that is white or that has just been painted white?)
- *the interpretation of se*
  
  *o barco afundou-se* (*se passivo, se inergativo*):
  
  ('we drowned the boat' or 'the boat sank?)
  
  *eles abraçaram-se* (reciprocal, reflexive)
  
  (they hugged each other or themselves?)
- *aquisições: conhecer* ('know person', 'meet person'), *lembrar* ('have in mind', 'come to mind')

**Hypothesis:** If grammars have no parallel vagueness, grammatical vagueness in the source language entails, in most of the cases, contrastive vagueness.

**NB!** The above classification does not intend to exhaust all kinds of vagueness. In fact, it is orthogonal to what Dahl (1985) calls one-dimensional and multi-dimensional vagueness, in that more than one axis can be involved.

Another relevant classification in the literature is Kempson (1977).
Illustrating contrastive vagueness

It is important to distinguish between contrastive vagueness and homonymy, i.e., ambiguity in the source language (like *huske* (swing; remember), *aterrar* (land; frighten), or *hack* (cut; ride)).

**From Portuguese to English:**

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<tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>know, meet</td>
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**From Japanese to English** (from Almuallim et al. (1994)):
Arguments for grammatical (monolingual) vagueness

Let me produce some (unsuspected) references for monolingual / grammatical vagueness:

- From computational linguistics

**Hindle & Rooth** on prepositional phrase attachment: "an attachment is semantically indeterminate if situations that verify the meaning associated with one attachment also make the meaning associated with the other attachment true" (1993:113) [from 8.7% til 21.7%]

**Sampson** (1987) on anaphoric references: in a significant number of cases it is not trivial to decide the antecedent of the pronoun "it".

**Leech** on corpus annotation: "Experience with corpora suggests that uncertainties of category assignment are quite frequent: [...] because of the prototypical, or fuzzy, nature of most linguistic categories" (1993:280)

- From tense and aspect studies

**Heinämäki** on aspectual classification: "many, if not all cognitive verbs and perception verbs, can both have the achievement interpretation and denote the state-of-affairs that results from the achievement" (1984:165)

**Couper-Kuhlen** on temporal interpretation of discourse, discussing the sentence *He sat straight up in his chair, staring at the bottle.* "the event <he sit straight up in his chair> is open to two different temporal interpretations, depending on whether we treat it as an activity with no clear initial or ending point [...] or an Accomplishment with a clear beginning point" (1987:15)

- From formal semantics

**Hintikka**, 1980:4: "One of the most interesting features of game-theoretical semantics in general is that many game rules leave it open which player (myself or nature) makes a move. This is neither an imperfection (e.g., ambiguity) of language nor a flaw in the game rules, but an important part of how our language actually works."

**van Benthem**, 1986:63-71,125: "These various examples point at general type-change mechanisms in natural language. Many expressions do not stay within one single category: they can travel, within certain constraints. [...] The three kinds of type change thus identified share one common feature: one single expression adapts itself to various linguistic contexts. [...] Expressions of natural language need not stay in their basic category, but can assume higher types when desired for the purpose of interpretation."

**Kamp & Reyle**, 1993:505: "There is much to be said for conceptual rigour. Indeed, within philosophy the demand for it has been all to the good. But in natural language semantics the situation is, we think, somewhat different. One of the central tasks in semantics is to articulate
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<td>使う (tsukau)</td>
<td>use, spend, employ</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>使わ (nomu)</td>
<td>drink, take, eat, accept</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>行く (kōru)</td>
<td>conduct, play, hold</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>帰る (ōkuru)</td>
<td>answer, enter, meet</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>入る (yuru)</td>
<td>burn, bake, roast, brail, cremate</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>使ぐ (yaku)</td>
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Average Accuracy: 27.5
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the conceptual structures that guide and support our, human, understanding of the languages we use. If that understanding crucially involves concepts which are to some degree underdetermined, then the semanticist has the task of spelling out precisely how and to what extent the concept is underdetermined; it will not do to substitute a fully determinate concept of one's own conception for the underdetermined notion that is in actual use."

Contrasting vagueness with ambiguity

In common with ambiguity, vagueness can be characterized as "one linguistic expression has more than one interpretation/classification". It differs from it, however, on several counts

# the two interpretations are mutually exclusive in ambiguity, not in vagueness
# vagueness is systematic, ambiguity is accidental
# choice is information preserving in ambiguity, but not in vagueness
# ambiguity corresponds to homonymy, vagueness to polysemy (at least if one adheres to Kempson's (1980) analysis of both)
# vagueness is present in natural language both in competence and in performance, while ambiguity is a property of only the latter

What is vagueness, again

For matters of vagueness, both monolingual and contrastive, Keenan (1978) remains unsurpassed:

Keenan (1978:173): "if a speaker can remain indifferent between alternatives a and b and still meaningfully assert some sentence then the sentence is vague not ambiguous according as a or b obtains."

ibidem (160): "[...] the efficient requirement justifies the claim that human languages are, by nature, imprecise. That is, we claim that human language must be imprecise in order to permit efficient communication."

ibidem (166): "in considering the set of 'meanings' expressible in two languages we are faced with the following fact, in the general case: first, the basic meanings (i.e. those expressed by the basic sentences of the language) are not exactly the same in the two cases, and second, the ways of forming (expressions of) complex meanings from (those of) simpler ones are not exactly the same. It is surely plausible then that one of the languages would allows us to express some meanings that were not exactly expressible in the other. And it would surely be surprising, and a very strong empirical claim, that different languages using different means to express 'meanings' always arrived at exactly the same end."
Tense and aspect in English and Portuguese: A contrastive semantical study

Empirical studies regarding vagueness in my dissertation (Santos, 1996) were aimed at contrastive vagueness, but in the examples obtained there are many cases of grammatical vagueness (which led to contrastive vagueness):

- English acquisitions
- Portuguese aquisições
- English vagueness between inception or duration of an activity contrastive only?
- English vagueness between generic/habitual and particular activities
- Portuguese vagueness about relevance purely contrastive
- Portuguese vagueness about time taken by a change of state (Mudança)
- English vagueness about perfective aspect (that something is over) contrastive only?
- Portuguese vagueness about result of events that take time (Obras) purely contrastive
- English vagueness between properties or temporary states purely contrastive
- Portuguese vagueness relative to manner purely contrastive
- English vagueness relative to endpoint (present perfect)
- English vagueness relative to endpoint (passive)
- Portuguese vagueness relative to beginning point (conjuntivo)

etc.
Data for English acquisitions (vagueness between inception and state)

- By looking at translations only, from English, I note a large number of weird sounding Portuguese sentences that must come from the difficulty to translate acquisitions:
  
  From *Viva o Nodi*, translation by Maria da Graça Moctezuma of Enid Blyton's *Hurrah for little Noddy!*
  
  E todos tiveram de se pôr em fila e deitar uma moeda para um capacete dos policiais. Este *ficou* muito pesado quando caiu lá dentro a última moeda!
  'And all must stand in a queue and throw a coin to a policeman helmet. This was very heavy when the last coin entered it!'

  O Nodi *ficou* tão admirado que nem conseguia gritar.
  'Noddy was so astonished that he was not even able to shout.'

  E antes que (...) fecharam-no na esquadra (...) Como o Nodi *estava* triste! A sua cabeça até deixou de abanar.
  'And before he (...) they put him in jail. How sad Noddy was! His head even stopped waving.'

  Acompanharam-o até à toca dos coelhos e ali *estavam* todos os carros!
  'He accompanied them to the rabbit hole and there were all the cars!'

  O chefe da polícia deixou o Nodi guiar o autocarro como recompensa, e ele *estava* tão entusiasmado que é difícil descrever.
  'The police chief let Noddy drive the bus as a reward, and he was so excited that it is difficult to describe.'

  Por isso sentaram-se para o banquete e não levou muito tempo que os pratos *ficassem* todos vazios
  'Therefore they sat to the banquet and it did not take long until the plates were all empty'

  From *Os elefantes nunca saltam*, translation by Carlos Grifo Babo of Violet Easton's *Elephants never jump*:

  Esta resposta provocou grande excitação entre os animais e, assim que o elefante *ficou* suficientemente longe para não os ouvir, logo ali combinaram fazer um concurso, a ver quem conseguia que o elefante desse um salto.
  'This answer caused great excitement among the animals and, as soon as the elephant was far enough not to hear them, at once arranged a competition to see who would make the elephant jump'

- By looking at English originals (and performing simultaneous translation):

  From (an abridged version, Walt Disney based) *Peter Pan*:
  
  They flew on and on through the starlit sky, until at last the day was dawning.
  Voaram pelo céu estrelado até a manhã romper

  Hearing the loud ticking of the watch, the Captain fled crying out, "Argh! Help!"
  'Ao ouvir o tiquetaque do relógio, o Capitão fugiu aos gritos: — Ai! Socorro!'
References


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Presentation at Oslo, April 18th, 1997