

Setting boundaries to fuzzy adjectives: a corpus-based approach

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The present paper is an attempt to set relative boundaries to the meaning of fuzzy concepts such as scalar adjectives. For the purposes of the present investigation, three adjectives *hot*, *warm* and *cold* were studied on the basis of the BNC corpus data. The paper refutes the ‘fixed meaning’ assumption and argues that meaning is not inherent in individual words, as the framework of corpus linguistics allows us to see.

Studies of the meaning of vague language and fuzzy concepts have been based for a long time on the ‘fixed meaning’ assumption. The cornerstone of such an approach is the belief that every word has an inherent stable meaning (thus it should be possible to solve sorites paradoxes and to say how many grains make up a heap). Due to the ‘fixed meaning’ assumption, such phenomena as vagueness and fuzziness were and sometimes are still stigmatised and treated as an unwanted feature of language.

The present paper argues that fuzzy concepts cannot be analysed in isolation discarding their linguistic and situational context, which was done in both two-valued and multi-valued logic as well as in many linguistic and philosophical investigations. The meaning of fuzzy adjectives, as the present analysis demonstrates, is context dependent to a very large extent. When detached from context, such adjectives become vague. In other words, they are vague only at the level of individual words. In addition, as our data show, in order to understand fuzzy concepts, we have to rely on our world knowledge.

Corpus linguistics, which studies collocation as the basic unit of meaning, offers a suitable methodological and theoretical framework to see how context resolves fuzziness, since corpus linguistics asserts that words do not normally constitute independent selections and thus their meanings are not independent either. The present corpus-based investigation provides evidence that words and phrases have shared meanings. That is, the meaning of fuzzy adjectives most frequently depends on the noun that it collocates with. Thus it is argued that indeterminacy does exist in language, but it is solved as soon as words are put into context. This leads to the

rejection of the approach to word meaning in terms of classical meaning components that are expected to be inherent in every word.