

# Context Sensitivity and Vagueness

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## ABSTRACT

Philosophers of language are nearly unanimous in holding that the meaning of an expression is a rule for determining the contents of its tokens, where the content of a sentence token is the proposition it expresses, and the content of a token of a word or other subsentential expression is its contribution to the content of the sentence token in which it occurs. A *context-sensitive* expression is one the contents of whose tokens may vary from one context of utterance to another. Paradigm examples of context-sensitive expressions include 'I', 'here', 'she', 'this', 'yesterday', 'tall', 'Frank is ready', and 'It's raining'. For example, it might be said that John is the content of the token of 'I' he uttered, that Mary is the content of the token of 'I' she uttered, and that the meaning of 'I' for both John and Mary is the rule that the content of a token of 'I' is the speaker who produced the token. For such familiar paradigms there are plausible views about how the variable contents of an expression's tokens are determined, i.e. plausible views about the meanings of those context-sensitive expressions. I will argue, however, that not all context-sensitivity is so well behaved. More specifically, I will argue that vagueness induces vague expressions to be context sensitive in a way that can't be explained by any meaning that might be attributed to those expressions. Since virtually every expression is vague to at least some extent, this means that nothing is available to be the meaning of virtually any expression. If that is correct, it will force us to give up entrenched views about compositional semantics and the nature of language understanding, and to rethink in what the having of meaning consists.