



Seminar

PAUL EGRÉ

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*Vague Judgment:
A Probabilistic Account*

Tuesday, 1 March, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT PAUL EGRÉ

Paul Egré (born in 1975) is a CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique) researcher based at the Institut Jean Nicod, Paris and a Professor at the Department of Philosophy at the École normale supérieure, Paris. After studying philosophy and mathematical logic at Université Paris Diderot – Paris 7 and at Princeton University, he obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in 2004. Egré was hired by CNRS in 2005 and has been a member of the Institut Jean Nicod ever since.

Egré's research focuses mostly on language and cognition, with specific interests in natural language semantics, philosophical logic, epistemology and the philosophy of mind. Between 2008 and 2011, Egré led an ANR-funded (Agence nationale de la recherche) research program on the 'Cognitive Origins of Vagueness', a topic on which he has published several papers. With Benjamin Spector, he is currently the co-principal investigator of an ANR-funded project on 'Trivalence and Natural Language Meaning' (2014–2017).

Egré has been an invited professor at several universities since 2005, including the University of California, Los Angeles; New York University; and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the editor-in-chief of the *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, a quarterly journal published by Springer, and an associate editor of several journals, including the *Journal of Philosophical Logic*. Among his recent publications are the volume *Vagueness and Language Use* (eds. P. Egré and N. Klinedinst, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), and two papers: "Borel on the Heap" (P. Egré and A. Barberousse, in *Erkenntnis*, 2014), and "Moral asymmetries and the semantics of *many*" (P. Egré and F. Cova, in *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 2015).

During his stay at SCAS, Paul Egré will work on two main projects concerning the formalization of ordinary reasoning. One project is collaborative with John Cantwell and Hans Rott and aims at a better understanding of hypothetical reasoning. Another project concerns the formalization of ordinary reasoning with vague predicates, a topic on which Egré is finishing several papers and preparing a book.

ABSTRACT

Most of the words we use in ordinary language are vague in the sense that they do not appear to have determinate boundaries of application. For example, we make a difference between the persons we call "tall" and those we call "not tall", but intuitively there does not appear to be a sharp dividing line between the tall and the not tall. The same holds of a large part of our concepts and vocabulary: words like "many" and "few" convey meaning about our perception of magnitudes, but even when the context is made very precise, it seems that such words do not refer to determinate quantities.

The phenomenon of vagueness has been discussed since the Antiquity by philosophers and logicians, but it is not just a logical problem, it is actually a phenomenon we are constantly facing when having to categorize objects and situations. The phenomenon raises two interesting challenges: one is to explain the relation between our qualitative description of the world and the representation we have of quantities. The second is to explain how we manage to successfully communicate with vague expressions, despite their lack of a precise definition.

In this talk I will focus mostly on the first of those two problems. I will present two directions of my recent research on vagueness. One direction is theoretical, and concerns an elaboration of a theory of vagueness outlined by the mathematician and philosopher Emile Borel at the beginning of the 20th century. Borel, a pioneer in the promotion of statistical thinking, proposed to handle vagueness as a probabilistic phenomenon, rooted in our noisy perception of quantities. Another direction is more empirical, and concerns work I did on the representation of color adjectives. I will explain how, by a suitable elaboration of the model of categorization sketched by Borel, we can account for some of the data I collected on color categorization. Further lessons will be drawn about the nature of vagueness and about our representation of qualitative boundaries.