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When vague sentences inform: a model of assertability. (English. English summary)

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A speaker often decides whether or not to say something based on her assessment of the impact it would have on her hearer's beliefs. If she thinks it would make them better aligned with the truth, she says it; otherwise, she does not. When considering utterances of nonvague sentences these judgments normally correspond to truth-value judgments: asserting a false sentence would be misleading and asserting a true one would not, but when the sentence under consideration includes a vague predicate (for instance, "tall" in borderline cases), this correspondence breaks down.

In this paper a model of the judgments of the speakers, focussing specifically on those of vague sentences, is developed. Applicability judgments of vague words can vary across speakers and instances, even in otherwise identical contexts. Consequently, a hearer's beliefs about the conditions under which a speaker would judge a vague word applicable are uncertain. Under the simplifying assumption that an utterance only conveys a speaker's applicability judgments, a Bayesian model of an utterance's impact on a hearer's beliefs is presented. From this model the author derives a model of a speaker's judgment of whether or not an utterance would be informative. The author argues convincingly that this model of speaker's assertability judgments offers an intuitive account of the fact that speakers generally think that saying either "George is tall" or "George is not tall" would be misleading if George were borderline tall, but saying "George is tall and he isn't tall" would not be.

The paper is based largely on research by Lenhart Schubert in the 1970's and the author's doctoral dissertation in the early 1990's. It has the four following sections: (1) Introduction; (2) A model of hearer's belief revision; (3) A model of assertability; and (4) Conclusion.

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