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Ordinary Language Semantics: The Contribution of Brentano and Marty

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Abstract

This paper examines the account of ordinary language semantics developed by Franz Brentano and his pupil Anton Marty. Long before the interest in ordinary language in the analytic tradition, Brentanian philosophers were exploring our everyday use of words, as opposed to the scientific use of language. Brentano and Marty were especially interested in the semantics of (common) names in ordinary language. They claimed that these names are vague, and that this is due to the structure of the concepts that constitute their meaning: concepts expressed by such names are themselves vague, based on typicality, and have more or less similar items within their extension. After presenting the views of Brentano and Marty, this paper compares them to later accounts of meaning and concepts, notably Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblances and the prototype theory of concepts, and emphasizes the originality of the Brentanian position.

Introduction

In the standard narrative of the development of contemporary philosophy of language, when it comes to ordinary language, among the figures most often mentioned are Wittgenstein, Austin, and Grice. These philosophers had a significant influence on the research agenda, inasmuch as they initiated many discussions in analytic philosophy on the semantics of ordinary language and on pragmatics. This led to research on issues such as "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein), performatives (Austin), and meaning intentions (Grice). In the cases of Wittgenstein and Austin in particular, their theoretical interest in ordinary language was part of a broader project of showing that most of our philosophical problems arise from using our linguistic devices outside of their usual contexts, while our everyday language is in fact making adequate distinctions;

this project, developed by Ryle and P.F. Strawson, is standardly labelled "ordinary language philosophy"; the theoretical study of ordinary language, however, is independent of being an "ordinary language philosopher", as shown by Grice, who at first followed this program, but later abandoned it, while maintaining his research agenda in pragmatics (on this "loosely connected set of subtraditions", see Beaney 2012).

The sympathy for ordinary language, as it appears in Wittgenstein, is sometimes described as a break from earlier authors, Frege in particular. It is true that Frege complains about the defects of ordinary language – vagueness, to begin with – and its inability to attain the precision required for scientific investigation. However, one finds him also saying that our vague everyday linguistic devices are enough to allow for mutual understanding (1976: 183 [letter to Peano, 29.9.1896]; Puryear 2013). He even holds that ordinary language has some advantages over scientific language, namely, its broad applicability and its adaptability to circumstances; in contrast, scientific language is useful for sharp distinctions, but is unsuitable for other tasks (1993: xi). Apparently, then, Frege is not unsympathetic to ordinary language as such, but only to its use in science (on the narrative "Wittgenstein vs. Frege", see, e.g., Williamson 1994). In any case, whether there was a break or not, what is sure is that Wittgenstein, and later Austin and Grice, initiated much research on ordinary language in recent philosophy.

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, there was a parallel philosophical tradition interested in ordinary language, although it is entirely neglected in the standard narrative. Ordinary language was also explored theoretically in the School of Brentano. Interestingly, Brentano, as well as his most faithful pupil Marty, decided to describe both the semantic and pragmatic properties of ordinary language, and to compare it to scientific language. However, this did not lead them to become "ordinary language philosophers", even though Marty was tracking philosophically misleading "pictures" in ordinary language, such as the talk of entities "in the mind" and the use of abstract words, e.g. "whiteness", which led to the introduction into philosophy of intentional objects and properties (both of which he and Brentano accept in their earlier works). Yet Brentano and Marty's constructive philosophical program, containing an Aristotle-inspired ontology and a descriptive-phenomenological theory of the mind, did not rely in any important way on the distinctions of ordinary language (on these issues, see Mulligan 2019). Brentano and Marty were nonetheless theoretically exploring our everyday use of language.

Marty anticipated in many respects Grice's theory of meaning intentions, and this fact is increasingly discussed in the literature (Cesalli 2013; Longworth 2017; Recanati 2019). A much

less explored theme in the same context (despite the groundbreaking studies of Mulligan 1990 and 2012) is the analysis of the semantics of ordinary language (common) names in the Brentanian tradition. Brentano and Marty were very much interested in these questions, and made detailed and original analyses. They argued that names in ordinary language refer to more or less similar items, and that these names are "vague", in contrast to scientific names, which are "exact"; they also claimed that the conceptual content expressed by names in ordinary language is organized around typical cases. This apparently anticipates Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblances (as emphasized by Mulligan 1990 and 2012), as well as the prototype theory of concepts (Rosch & Mervis 1975), itself inspired by Wittgenstein.[1] Yet Brentanians did not merely anticipate some contemporary positions, but also had interesting theoretical insights. Among other things, they held, in a way that recalls Frege, that the vagueness of ordinary language is something positive. For Brentanians, ordinary language is often used in cases where we either do not look for exactness or have imprecise knowledge. Vagueness thus becomes an advantage, since it allows us to communicate in the cases mentioned.

In this paper, I will explore the semantics of ordinary language in Brentano and its developments in Marty. In the first part of the paper, I will present the (rather few) remarks made by Brentano on the topic, for whom the distinctive characteristic of ordinary language names is their vagueness. In the second part of the paper, I will discuss Marty, who provides many additional insights on questions only briefly addressed by Brentano. Interestingly, Marty states that the vagueness of ordinary language is based on a specific structure of the concepts that form the meaning of (common) names, and that this structure is itself based on typicality. In the third part of the paper, I compare the Brentanian view on ordinary language with later positions, notably Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblances and the prototype theory of concepts, and emphasize the originality of the account developed by Brentano and Marty.

1. Brentano: Ordinary Language and Vagueness

Brentano is known mainly for having introduced the theme of intentionality into contemporary philosophy of mind. However, he was active in many other domains of philosophy, notably logic, ontology, ethics and aesthetics. One discipline to which he did not devote a specific text or lecture course, but which nonetheless regularly appears in the corpus, is that of philosophy of language (Gauvry & Richard forthcoming). In particular, Brentano discusses this topic in his

[1] The prototype theory is an alternative to the definitional theory of "concept structure" (Margolis & Laurence 1999 and 2011).

lectures on logic given around 1870 in Würzburg and then in Vienna (2011; for more information on these lectures, see Rollinger 2011). There Brentano treats of the semantics of ordinary language, by distinguishing between "sharp" and "vague" terms. The context is a discussion of common names, although common adjectives and also adverbs are briefly mentioned.[2]

To understand Brentano's semantics, a brief detour through his theory of intentionality is required, as he uses some central notions of philosophy of mind in his explanation of how language refers to things. For Brentano, a characteristic feature of mental acts is their intentionality: all mental acts, and only mental acts, are intentionally directed towards an object. For a long time, Brentano defended the thesis that intentionality is a relation to an *immanent* object, that is, an object existing *in* the mind. Though he held that in some cases there is an external object corresponding to the immanent one, the directedness towards the immanent object is given independently of the existence of a counterpart in the outer world (1924; Chrudzimski 2001).[3]

The contrast between immanent and external object plays a crucial role in Brentano's semantics. For Brentano, names, to the extent that they refer to things, have two distinct features: their "meaning" (*Bedeutung*) and their "naming" (*Nennung*). This contrast is based on the opposition between immanent and external objects:

> The name designates in a way the *content* of a presentation as such, the immanent object. In a way, *that which is presented through the presentation*. The *first* is the meaning of the name. The *second* is that which the name names. […] It is that which, when it exists, is the external object of presentation. One names by means of (*unter Vermittlung*) the meaning. (Brentano 2011: 35)

Thus, the *meaning* of a name, for Brentano, is something *in* the mind, a "content" or an "immanent object". By contrast, what the name *names* is the external object, and it seems to be fixed by its meaning, since Brentano holds that naming is made "by means of" meaning.

How does this scheme work for common names? Brentano's view seems to be that common names have, as their meaning, a *universal* intentional object (e.g., the species *human*

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[2] I will leave aside the question of proper names, since it is not clear what theory of proper names Brentano and Marty defend. Some texts suggest that they are descriptivists (Brentano 2011: 38; Marty 1908: 438 n. 1), which would thus imply that the meaning of proper names is (at least partly) made up of the meaning of common names of ordinary language, and thus that proper names are also vague. The combination of vagueness and descriptivism might lead to awkward results, since one might be reluctant to hold that "Aristotle" is a vague name. As indicated, however, the Brentanian view on proper names requires further inquiries and I will not tackle the issue here.

[3] I follow the standard interpretation of Brentano's theory of intentionality, as presented in Chrudzimski 2001, according to which "immanent objects" are mind-dependent entities. For a different reading, see Antonelli 2001, Sauer 2006, Fréchette 2013 and Textor 2017.

being); what a common name *names*, however, is a plurality of individual objects, that is, those things instantiating the features presented in the universal intentional object (e.g., all instances of the species, that is, all human beings). Brentanian semantics differs from that of Frege, for whom a common name refers, via a "meaning" (*Sinn*), to a concept, not to its extension (Frege 1976: 96 [letter to Husserl, 24.5.1891]; Ricketts 2010). Compared to recent philosophy, Brentano's position is closer to that of Carnap, for whom common names have an intension made up of properties and an extension made up of individuals (Carnap 1956, §4).[4]

The thesis that mental acts might have as their content a universal intentional object is confirmed by the following text of Brentano:

> (The features [of an object in the external world] that are taken up in the presentation are its *content*.) It can happen that a presentation, by not taking up the object in all of its features, becomes indeterminate; that is, a plurality of objects in the outer world can correspond to it. Such presentations are called *general presentations*, *general concepts*. (Brentano 2013: 468; trans. Rollinger, modified, with my addition)

Interestingly, this text gives clues as to what distinguishes universal from non-universal intentional objects. Apparently, universal intentional objects give to the presentations of which they are the content a possible correspondence to a plurality of individual objects; this is not the case for all intentional objects, e.g., "the author of *Ulysses*". But are these universal intentional objects concrete items (e.g., the species *human being*), or abstract items (e.g., the general property of humanity)? In fact, Brentano (2011: 85-86) is careful to distinguish the meaning of concrete and abstract common names: concrete common names (e.g., "human being") mean concrete universals, whereas abstract common names (e.g., "humanity") mean abstract universals (also called "logical parts").[5]

The idea that names might *mean one* universal object in the mind as opposed to *naming a plurality* of individual objects in the outer world seems to be confirmed by notes found in Brentano's *Nachlass*, where he distinguishes between "content" or "matter of presentation" (*Vorstellungsinhalt* or *-materie*) on the one hand, and "object of presentation: what is named, what is presented" (*Vorstellungsgegenstand: Genanntes, Vorgestelltes*) on the other hand. In these notes, Brentano writes the following: "one content of presentation, often many presented things (in the case of universals)" (*Ein Vorstellungsinhalt, oft viele Vorgestellte [beim*

[4] The Brentanian view is rooted in the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition, as stated by Marty (1908: 436 n. 1; see Cesalli 2014).

[5] Note that abstract universals, or "logical parts", have as instances abstract particulars, or what Brentano calls "metaphysical parts" (e.g., this humanity), which are constituents of individual things (e.g., this human being); see again 2011: 85-86.

Universale]) (Ps 76, n. 58725). Note that the objects that are named by the common name clearly are individual items: for Brentano, "in the things, there is nothing universal" (1930: 74); universals, such as the species *human being*, exist only in the mind.[6]

How do these distinctions apply to the contrast between sharp and vague names? For Brentano, sharp names, or "sharp expressions" (*scharfe Ausdrücke*), are usual in science, and have a specific meaning structure:

> A *sharp* expression is one of which the meaning (or also the meanings) is precisely determined […]. *Technical* expressions which are constructed by science or art for their own purposes are usually sharp. (Brentano 2011: 60)

The phrase "precisely determined meaning" seems to explain the semantics of sharp names, but what does it refer to? My hypothesis is the following: a sharp name is a name to which *one* universal intentional object corresponds (e.g., the natural kind usually called "water", i.e., H_2O, taken as a kind); what it names is all and only those things instantiating the features presented in the intentional object (e.g., all instances of the kind, i.e., all H_2O molecules).

This is best understood in contrast to vague names. Whereas scientific names are usually sharp, Brentano holds that names in ordinary language are "vague" (*verschwommen*). The use of these names is described by Brentano as follows:

> One uses them over and over for objects which are more or less similar to one another in certain respects. (Brentano 2011: 60)

It is not immediately clear whether when talking of "objects" Brentano means "immanent" objects or "external" ones. I think that he is here referring to external objects, which are thus described as a network of things more or less similar to one another. This is confirmed, in my opinion, by the fact that the mental content seems to be referred to in the lines following the passage quoted just above:

> What <a vague name> *expresses* in people is a confused presentation (*verworrene Vorstellung*) of similarity between this and other objects that they are used (*gewöhnt*) to designate with the name, certain properties of something in which this and other objects that they are used to designate with the name resemble one another. (Brentano 2011: 60-61; my emphasis)

The relation of expression holds between names and mental contents: what a name *expresses* is the content that forms the meaning of the name (2011: 90). Thus, for Brentano, vague names refer to more or less similar external objects and they do so by the intermediary of a meaning which is a "confused presentation" of similarity. How should this "confused presentation" be

[6] On the thesis that common names *mean one* universal object in the mind while *naming a plurality* of individual objects, I am following Chrudzimski 2011: 33-37 and 154-160. Given the unpublished material that I quote here, this interpretation seems to me to be correct.

understood? Whereas sharp names are described as having a "precisely determined meaning", which I suggested might refer to *one* universal immanent object, do vague names have as their meaning a *series* of more or less similar universal immanent objects? This would fit quite well with the idea that names name by the intermediary of immanent objects: if a vague name refers to a series of more or less similar external objects, this is due to the specific structure of the name's meaning, which is made up of a series of more or less similar universal immanent objects.[7] Such an interpretation might also lead one to think that what is primarily vague is the complex content, the word itself inheriting its vagueness from the content; this would fit quite well with the explanatory primacy of meaning over naming. However, it is not clear that this is the right interpretation, as the text quoted above says rather that what is expressed is not so much a series of more or less *similar objects* as a *relation of similarity* (between these objects). Furthermore, wouldn't a name that expresses a series of objects be equivocal? Is vagueness thus a case of equivocation? Brentano holds that with vague words, "one does not know exactly what they mean, nor whether they have one or many meanings" (2011: 61). Thus, if it is admitted that a vague name has many meanings and is thus equivocal, the utterer will not really know these meanings. Despite this additional information about the lack of knowledge of the utterer, however, the question of the exact structure of the content expressed by vague names in Brentano is not clear. In the same spirit, note that for Brentano, the "confused presentation" expressed by a vague name seems to differ from one person to another, and even vary for the same person:

> (…) the meaning has a slightly *different shade* (*Schattierung*) *for everyone*, and even for one and the same person when talking at this or that time. (Brentano 2011: 60-61; my emphasis)

Unfortunately, there is no further explanation, in Brentano, about how this variation is to be understood. However, these remarks point towards a proto-epistemicist account of vagueness. According to epistemicism, vagueness is a consequence of our cognitive incapacities. One usual way of explaining this is to say that although vague words have a sharp meaning, we are unable to know it, because this would require knowing all the uses of the words by the community of speakers, something which is beyond our reach, especially since speakers themselves tend to change their use from one day to another (Hyde & Raffman 2018, summarizing Williamson 1994). Brentano seems to hold something similar, since he speaks of our "ignorance" of the

[7] In the last text mentioned, Brentano speaks of "properties". Does he mean that the intentional objects are abstract items (e.g., redness)? Again, I think that it depends on the kind of name that is used: concrete vague names probably evoke concrete items (e.g., a series of more or less red things for the name "something red" [*ein Rotes*]); whereas abstract vague names evoke abstract items (e.g., a series of shades of redness for the name "redness").

meaning of vague terms and notes that there are variations of meaning for one and the same speaker. As I will show, Marty will bring crucial developments and clarifications on this.

Note an important point: Brentano (2011: 62) does not say that *all* scientific names are sharp; following Mill (1974, bk. IV, ch. 7-8), he admits that scientific terminology also includes vague names. Mill holds that biological classes are built around a "core" or "standard member", which represents a fixed number of features. However, the class is not made up of all and only those things instantiating the features of the standard member: besides instances of the standard member, the class also contains non-standard members, included in the class thanks to their strong resemblance to the standard member, that is, their resembling more standard members of this class than of any other (Dewalque 2018).

Brentano (2011: 61-62) does not treat vagueness as a defect of language. On the contrary, for him, it should rather be seen as an advantage.[8] According to Brentano, some terms are deliberately made to be vague – e.g., adjectives like "big" or "fast", and adverbs of degree like "approximately" (*ungefähr*). These terms do not have a "sharp" use; e.g., one cannot ask, "How many feet make a mountain a big one?", nor "When can one still say 'approximately 1000'? At 1001, 1002, 1010?"; such questions lead to sorites paradoxes: a mountain that is one thousand feet tall is big, a mountain a thousand feet tall minus one is also big, etc. There is no precise answer, and this is not accidental, but intrinsic to the use of the word. Brentano does not mention the fact that expressions such as "big" or "fast" are context-dependent, which might explain why they do not have a fixed meaning; this supports his epistemicism, to the extent that epistemicists reject that vagueness comes from context-dependency, arguing that context-dependent words such as "I" are not vague and that context-fixedness does not sharpen vague words (Williamson 1994: 214-215). At any rate, Brentano treats vagueness as implying "borderline cases", much as contemporary authors do. He adds that vague terms are "convenient" and "useful", since they avoid an "awkward multiplication of our vocabulary deprived of any significative advantage" and allow us to talk even when we have only "imprecise knowledge". Brentano does not develop this point further here. Again, additional elements will be found in Marty.

Although Brentano's account of the semantics of ordinary language has several interesting aspects – to begin with, the advantages that it attributes to vagueness – his theory

[8] As indicated in the Introduction, this is reminiscent of Frege, who holds that ordinary language has some advantages over scientific language (1993: xi). The idea that the precision in our language should be adapted to our tasks is already found in Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* I, 3, 1094b23-27). Brentano might have been influenced by him on these issues.

leaves many questions open. First, the structure of the content expressed by vague names is not clearly described. Does a vague name express a series of more or less similar immanent objects, which constitute the meaning of that name? If yes, are vague names equivocal? Furthermore, Brentano talks of "vague names", but since names are expressions of mental contents, and refer to objects only through these contents understood as means or intermediaries, shouldn't these contents be primarily vague, the words themselves inheriting their vagueness from the contents? There are no answers to these questions in Brentano; however, his pupil Marty tackles them and thus sheds light on crucial aspects of the semantics of ordinary language. As I aim to show, Marty's main contribution is to connect ordinary language semantics with theories of concepts, and thus to explain the vagueness of words via a specific concept structure based on typicality.

2. Marty: Vagueness via Concept Structure and Typicality

Marty was Brentano's most faithful pupil. Although he followed his master's interests and worked in fields such as psychology and metaphysics, his main concern was philosophy of language. In contrast to Brentano, who never wrote a book on language, Marty's masterpiece is a treatise on this theme (1908). Marty's understanding of language is Brentanian in the sense that he strongly connects inquiries on language to psychology and explains linguistic phenomena with the help of psychological notions. Marty also borrows many themes from his master, first among which is the distinction between scientific and ordinary language, itself based on the distinction between sharp and vague names.

In his treatise on language, Marty develops in detail the semantics of common names.[9] Like Brentano, he distinguishes between what such a name means and what it names. He holds that a name has as its meaning a "content", which is also called a "concept" (1908: 530).[10] Concepts are the "objects in the narrow sense" of conceptual presentations.[11] They are universal "aspects" (*Seiten*) of individual things (1908: 448). These aspects are concrete, e.g., "something red" (*ein Rotes*), as Marty claims that one cannot present a property, e.g., "redness" (*Röte*), abstracted from something of which it is the property (1908: 478). Conceptual presentations also have "objects in the broad sense", which constitute the extension of the concept, that is, the individuals things that instantiate the aspect represented by the conceptual presentation:

[9] As indicated above, I will not treat of proper names in this paper.
[10] Note that in parallel to his notion of meaning understood as content, Marty also accepts a sense of "meaning" understood as the utterer's intention (see Cesalli 2013). I will not treat of this point further in this paper.
[11] Marty also uses "concept" (*Begriff*) in the sense of "conceptual presentation" (1908: 448), although most of the time it refers to "contents of consciousness" (see, e.g., 1908: 435 n. 1).

> Thus, for the concept white, an object in the broad sense is everything which is part of the extension, that is, the domain of its applicability, that is, everything of which, if it exists, being white can truly be predicated. (Marty 1908: 448)

The extension is what the name names. In his early theory (2011), Marty was, like his master, a defender of intentional objects. However, at the time when he was writing his treatise on language, he no longer admits such objects in his ontology. His conceptual contents are thus not immanent objects. Since he is not a realist about universals either (1908: 450-451), these contents are not things existing in the outer world.[12] So, what are they? Perhaps they are mental, but they are not "objectual", in the sense of being that towards which mental acts are intentionally directed (despite the fact that Marty calls them "objects"). Ultimately, they might be features of mental acts specifying what they are about without being themselves the "target" of the act, this target being rather the extension. The fact that the target is the extension, not the "content", seems confirmed by Marty's claim that that to which conceptual presentations have a relation of "ideal similarity" (his name for intentionality) is a "possibly unlimited multiplicity of individual objects" (1908: 451; on intentionality in Marty, see Cesalli & Taieb 2013). The idea would thus be the following: my conceptual presentations of human being and of horse have in common that they are presentations, but differ in their directedness, as one is directed towards human beings, the other towards horses; the feature in each act which is responsible for these different directions is the "content". On this interpretation, concepts will be psychological items, since they will be components of mental acts. Note also that, as in Brentano, the universality of the content is explained by the possible assimilation of a presentation with a plurality of intentional objects. At any rate, for Marty, names mean a content or concept, and they name an extension.

Most likely under Brentano's influence, Marty develops a semantics for ordinary language, mostly common names, although, like Brentano, he briefly mentions common adjectives and also adverbs. According to Marty, (common) names in ordinary language are vague. Now, Marty holds that vague names are equivocal. He describes equivocal expressions as follows:

> For all equivocations, it must be said that taken alone they do not evoke with certainty (*Sicherheit*) one meaning among a series, but only with some probability. Which one will really be awakened depends on the rest of the circumstances. (Marty 1908: 528)[13]

[12] Universals are not even mere possible entities, since for Marty (1908: 450-451) they are contradictory objects.
[13] On equivocation, see also Marty 1910: 129-130, quoted in Mulligan 1990: 21.

This reveals a contextualist position: equivocal expressions are disambiguated thanks to the context of utterance, which makes it possible to choose one among various contents. Now, with vague names too:

> it is initially undetermined which one among the different contents that can be designated is meant; however, the various possibilities have originally not the same probability, but they build in this respect a series or group with some middle or central positions and others which lie at the end, the former among them showing a greater, the latter a more and more smaller probability to belong to the domain of application of the name. (Marty 1908: 528)

Vagueness is thus, for Marty, "akin" (*verwandt*) to equivocation. Marty has a probabilistic understanding of the phenomenon of vagueness. To a vague name there corresponds a series of ordered contents – that is, some contents are more likely to be meant than others: there are central, and marginal points. Marty adds that central points are "types" (*Typen*) or "significative examples" (*prägnante Beispiele*); in other words, they are typical cases. These cases are helpful for understanding the decreasing probability, that is, the fact that it is less probable that some contents are meant by the word. Indeed, this decreasing probability is explained by means of a "variable amount of proximity to a type" (*wechselnde Masse der Annäherung an einen Typus*): the contents are more or less close to the type, and the farther a content is from the type, the lower the probability that it is what is meant by the word. The kinship with equivocation is not only that various contents correspond to one word, but also that the typical cases vary with context:

> […] in all these concepts built following examples or types it happens also that the type changes. In different circumstances, in a different context, and in different times, very different things are called big, small, fast, high. (Marty 1908: 531)

Although Marty does not do so explicitly, he would surely argue that vague names, when uttered, express not just one content, but a series of contents organized probabilistically around a type. Otherwise, it would be hard to still talk of "vague names", since they would have a sharp meaning when uttered.

Note that Marty, like Brentano, describes vagueness in the same way as contemporary philosophers, since he explicitly holds that vague names entail the existence of what are now called "borderline cases" (Williamson 1994):

> The boundary here is fluctuating (*fliessend*) in two senses. First, because it changes for different persons and groups of persons who use the name, and second, because even in *this* circle one can indeed mention some things that belong with certainty to the domain of possible application of the name and others which certainly do not belong to it, but only in such a way that it always remains a certain area with individual positions of which one can at the outset neither affirm nor

> deny with certainty that they actually belong to the undetermined concept that forms the meaning. (Marty 1908: 528-529)

So, importantly, vague names are such that their user does not exactly know how to apply them in certain limit cases. It is not just that they express a series of distinct contents, but there is a lack of knowledge as regards the exact application of these contents. This again clearly points towards epistemicism, and also confirms that Brentanians do not explain vagueness via context-dependency. Marty is happy to say that the type for vague words such as "big" depends on context, but this does not explain their vagueness; he would certainly hold that words such as "big" remain vague even when the context is fixed (e.g., when applied to children).

Marty thinks that the vagueness of ordinary language derives from the specific structure of our concepts and the way they are built:

> The meaning of the designations of popular language is not (as it is or should be in science and with "technical terms") transmitted by means of precise definitions, but it must most often be guessed from the concrete cases of its use. But then it happens very often that the concept is built in a very vague way with the help of a more or less significative present example, so that everything that one thinks is: something which is similar to this *x* or *y*. But similarity is a vague concept, which allows for more or less. (Marty 1908: 530)

Similarity, Marty adds, is given as soon as things are alike enough to recall each other (1908: 530).[14] In contrast to what is (usually) the case with scientific concepts, one learns concepts of everyday life starting with examples, which are more or less typical, and the concept has the structure, "similar to *x*". Following Brentano, however, Marty admits that some scientific concepts (and their corresponding linguistic expressions) are also vague, namely biological ones, especially the botanical classes (1908: 530-531).

But a question arises: Is the *x* in "similar to *x*" – that is, the type – an individual or a general item? One might think that Marty's types are individual, as he talks of "*this x* or *y*". Note in passing that this does not make the content of the concept an individual content, since the concept is "similar to *x*", where "similar" is universal and thus allows a plurality of things to fall under the concept. However, other passages seem to imply that types are general items. Indeed, Marty speaks of types as depending on specific circumstances, including socio-historical situations. Now, such types can hardly be individuals, as not all the people in the context in question have built their concept around one and the same particular item. So Marty apparently allows for both individual and general types. Is there a way to resolve this tension?

[14] For a broader contextualization of Marty's account of vagueness in his theory of the origin of language, see Mulligan 1990.

The concepts for which it seems difficult to accept a general item as a type are those of our most specific species. For it is unclear what species or genus could play this role: what general item will be the type for sparrows, for example? So, perhaps the concepts built around an individual item are only those for our most specific species: e.g., our concept of "sparrow" will have the structure "similar to this sparrow". By contrast, what plays the role of the type for higher-order concepts, such as "bird", is no longer an individual, but a general item, in the present case, "sparrow". But how then should we understand the phrase "similar to *x*" when *x* is no longer an individual? What are the *relata* of the relation of similarity? The idea is probably that the concept, e.g., that of bird, is made up of a series of contents that are more or less similar to the content "sparrow", and correspondingly, the extension is made up of things more or less similar to sparrows.

Another worry: apparently, Marty equates the "meaning" of the vague name with the vague concept "similar to *x*". However, this leads to a problem: on the one hand, he seems to hold (1908: 530) that vagueness is understood as "being similar to this *x* or *y*"; that is, vagueness is explained in terms of similarity. On the other hand, he claims that "similarity is a vague concept". So is there a circularity in the explanation? On a careful reading, the problem of circularity disappears. When Marty says that "similarity is a vague concept", he immediately adds the following: "which allows *for more or less*". Thus, it seems that he tends to explain vagueness not so much in terms of similarity, but more in terms of concepts that admit degrees, and to treat similarity as one sort of vagueness because it comes in degrees. In brief, similarity does not explain vagueness, but is a case of it; what explains vagueness is the admission of degrees, and similarity does admit degrees. In fact, Marty holds that vagueness appears when we refer to things allowing for "magnitude" and "intensity" in the proper or improper sense:

> We find this phenomenon of vagueness everywhere where our designations refer to something which allows for less and more or something like degrees of strength (*Stärkegräde*), whether the concepts of magnitude and intensity are understood in the proper sense or – as often happens – in a merely derived and improper sense. (Marty 1908: 528)

Although Marty does not define what he means by "magnitude" and "intensity", he gives a series of examples: "big, small, young, old, fast, slow, a bit, a lot, white, black, grey" and "names concerning the moral domain", by which he probably means terms such as "virtuous", "vicious", "courageous", "cowardly", etc. So, interestingly, things such as sensory qualities and values are also affected by magnitude and intensity, and thus are referred to in a vague way.

Marty follows Brentano in holding that vagueness is something convenient (1908: 529-530). The reasons that he gives recall those found in Brentano. First, vagueness allows us to

talk in cases where it is impossible for us to have a precise knowledge about something. As Marty affirms, in cases where what we are referring to has infinitesimal variations, an exact measurement – and thus an exact designation – is impossible. Although he himself does not give any examples of infinitesimal variations, he might be thinking here of sensory qualities. Indeed, for Marty, the qualitative distinctions between colours or sounds is infinite (2011). For example, there is an infinity of shades of yellow. It would thus be impossible to have a sharp name and concept here, since we would be unable to measure a specific shade of yellow, as it would always be itself made up of an infinity of other shades. Note that something similar would hold even if colours or sounds were not infinite. For example, we could say that even if there were something like (the atomic) shade 7238 of yellow, we could not coin a sharp name to designate it, because our perceptual apparatus is not fine-grained enough to pick out the shade in question; so we would still be glad to have the vague name and concept "yellow".[15] This would again fit with epistemicism, which claims that our incapacity to proceed to certain fine-grained distinctions leads to vagueness. For example, we describe one and the same sample of colour as red or not red (but as, say, orange) from one day to another, which means that we do not have the cognitive capacities to apply the word "red" and its corresponding concept adequately (see again Williamson 1994 and Hyde & Raffman 2018). Second, Marty holds that we are glad to use vague names and concepts when a more precise designation is not needed. This recalls Brentano's claim that vague words save us from an "awkward multiplication of our vocabulary deprived of any significative advantage". According to Marty, there is a principle of economy which rules our linguistic behaviour: we avoid fine-grained distinctions and new coinages of names whenever possible. Now, in our usual interactions, we do not need more precision than what we have thanks to words such as "big", "fast", etc. To take an example given by Brentano in a passage quoted above, in most of our conversations we manage to make enough distinctions with the words "hill" and "mountain". We could add further divisions, and coin words for twenty sharp intermediary degrees between a hill and a mountain, but it is not clear why we would need these words. Not only would these names be useless, and so the effort to create them unjustified, but their mastery would also have a high memory cost.[16] Marty adds that even in science, due to lack of time and "interest" (*Stimmung*), it happens that people coin vague terms. At any rate, vagueness is not a defect of ordinary language, but rather facilitates

[15] I am grateful to Mark Textor for this additional example.
[16] Again, I am grateful to Mark Textor for the memory cost argument.

communication: it allows us to talk even when we would be unable to give a precise description of what we are referring to and does this without overloading our memory.

Marty's developments in the semantics of ordinary language help us to answer many questions that remain open in Brentano's writings. First, we wanted to know whether in Brentano's framework the meaning of a vague name is a series of more or less similar immanent objects. Marty answers that it is indeed a series of "contents" ordered around a type, and that the more the contents are close to the type, the higher the probability that they are meant by the word. Marty thus introduces typicality to explain the semantics of vague names, which is clearly an enrichment of Brentano's view. This also helps him to explain in what sense vague names, which are similar to equivocal expressions, are distinguished from them: the meaning of vague names is sensitive to typicality and has a probabilistic structure. Another point: when reading Brentano, it was not obvious whether it is the name or the complex content expressed by the name that is primarily vague in his framework; Marty, however, seems to be clear about the fact that the name acquires its vagueness derivatively, in the sense that its meaning is itself vague; being an epistemicist, he holds that there is an uncertainty about the exact application of the name and (more importantly) of its corresponding concept.

3. Concluding Remarks: Brentanians and Later Positions

I would like to conclude by comparing the Brentanian account of the semantics of ordinary language with some contemporary positions, in order to underscore the originality of Brentano and Marty's views.

First of all, Brentano and Marty's idea that some (common) names refer to a series of more or less similar objects and are vague, is clearly reminiscent of Wittgenstein's theory of family resemblances (Mulligan 1990 and 2012). According to Wittgenstein (1953), names (e.g., "game") refer to more or less similar things and allow borderline cases. For Brentanians, however, there is a major qualification: this holds for names in ordinary language, but not for scientific expressions, at least not usually.[17] Another important aspect which distinguishes the Brentanian account from that of Wittgenstein is the fact that the variation in the meanings of words, for Brentanians, is itself explained via the structure of the content or concept that they

[17] I know of no passage where Wittgenstein holds that scientific concepts are definitional. On the contrary, one finds him saying (1963: §§67-68) that even mathematical concepts, such as that of number, can be concepts of family resemblances. Note, however, that according to Waismann (1965: 93-94 and 183, quoted in Glock 1995: 123), Wittgenstein would admit that some scientific concepts have definitional structure. Hacker (1996: 250-253), by contrast, who also draws on Wittgenstein, rejects the idea that "scientific classification yields absolute, purpose-independent, precise categories".

mean: the structure of the contents expressed by ordinary language names differs from that of scientific concepts, hence the semantics of ordinary language and of scientific language are different. Such an explanatory detour via mental contents is rejected by Wittgenstein. For him, there is no need to refer to mental entities to explain the meaning of words: the description of the way they are used in our linguistic behaviours is sufficient (1953; see Lycan 2008: 76-85).

Second, the structure of the concept expressed by names in ordinary language is "prototypical", at least in Marty. Classically, concepts were thought to have "definitional structure", that is, they represent the properties that are "singly necessary and jointly sufficient" for an individual to fall within the extension of the concept (Margolis and Laurence 1999: 9 n. 8). Inspired by Wittengstein's notion of family resemblances, an alternative theory of concepts has been developed, namely the "prototype theory" (Rosch and Mervis 1975).[18] In this theory, concepts do not represent "necessary and sufficient" properties, but *typical* properties; things in the extension resemble to a greater or lesser degree the instances of the "prototype", which is a species directly subordinated to the entity represented by the concept. For example, birds typically have the properties "flying", "singing", "nesting in trees", and "laying eggs": sparrows are thus typical birds, but penguins are not, although they still are birds, due to their resemblance to sparrows (Margolis and Laurence 1999: 27-28). Marty's account of concepts as having the structure "similar to *x*", where *x* is a "type", clearly resembles the prototype theory, but there is an interesting difference: Marty seems to be saying that some of our ordinary concepts are organized around an individual item. This is reminiscent of the contemporary "exemplar theory", according to which our concepts are based not on a prototype, but on an individual thing. Usually, the prototype and the exemplar views are opposed (Weiskopf 2009), but an interesting way of combining them might be drawn from Marty: while our concepts of the most specific species are exemplar concepts, our higher-order concepts are prototypes, since they are organized around a general item. This, by the way, solves a problem of the prototype theory: if all our concepts are organized around a subordinated species, it is not clear around which species our concepts of the most specific species are organized. A Marty-inspired answer might be that these concepts are exemplar concepts. Note that since Brentanians accept the coexistence of two kinds of general contents, or conceptual structures – namely, scientific and ordinary concepts – they anticipate "concept pluralism", that is, the view that concepts can have

[18] I leave it open whether Wittgenstein's "family resemblances" come with typicality and thus anticipate the prototype theory. For readings which go in that direction, see Baker and Hacker 2005: 213 and Glock 1995: 120-124, based on Wittgenstein 1970: 190, where it is said that when we are asked for the "essence of punishment", or of "revolution", "knowledge", etc., we do not answer by giving an "ideal", but "examples" which amount to "centres of variation"; these examples could be seen as typical cases.

different kinds of structure, e.g., definitional and prototypical (Weiskopf 2009; Margolis and Laurence 2011); moreover, the difference in the structure of the concepts implies a different semantics for the words that express these contents – namely, sharp and vague names.

Defenders of the prototype theory hold that prototype concepts are vague: things within the extension of the concept might be farther and farther from the prototype up to "borderline cases", in which the inclusion in the extension is undecidable (Hampton 2007). Marty clearly anticipates this point, as typicality is also combined with vagueness in his theory: at a certain distance from the type, borderline cases are found. More importantly, Brentanians have an interesting evaluation of vagueness: they hold that it is not a defect of our language, but on the contrary, it spares us a useless and costly multiplication of our vocabulary, and allows us to speak of things even when we lack precise knowledge. Frege thought that ordinary language has some advantages over scientific language, namely, its broad applicability and its adaptability to circumstances; during the same period, and in the same spirit, Brentanians claimed that we should see the vagueness of our ordinary language as something positive. Their interesting and original inquiries on these issues surely deserves to be better known.[19]

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