Precisification by Means of Vague Predicates

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My main theses are that (a) it is impossible for all of language to be vague, and (b) some precise predicates can be defined in terms of vague predicates. These propositions are the negations of two used by Bertrand Russell to criticize the suggestion that the problems posed by vague predicates can be solved by precisifying definitions. After reviewing this criticism, I argue for (a) in the second section and (b) in the third. The next section examines the impact of (b) on current theories of vagueness. I argue that while it is bad news for the many-valued approach and the view that vague predicates are incoherent, it is good news for the supervaluational and epistemic theories of vagueness. In the last section I show that Russell's criticism fails for a reason that strengthens Patrick Grim's more recent attack on precisificationism. So I ultimately come to share Russell's pessimism about solving the sorites through precisification.

1   Russell's criticism of precisificationism   Everyone agrees that the source of sorites puzzles, such as the following, lies in the vagueness of the inductive predicate.

 1. One minute after noon is noonish.
 2. If n minutes after noon is noonish, then so is $n + 1$ minutes.

 3. 600 minutes after noon is noonish.

By redefining 'noonish' as 'any time within 15 minutes of noon', we can reject the second step of the argument. Similar precisifying definitions can be offered for other vague predicates playing a crucial role in sorites arguments. Precisificationism is the view that this strategy of redefinition constitutes a solution to the sorites paradox.[1] Those skeptical of this solution sometimes appeal to an objection made by Russell in [8]. Russell argued that since all of language is vague,