Vagueness in Political Discourse

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Abstract. The paper presents two studies on vagueness in political discourse. The first is a qualitative analysis of the commonsense definition of vagueness and related notions in political discourse. Participants were submitted two fragments of real political argumentations and a questionnaire asking to rate them as to vagueness, sincerity, persuasiveness and other criteria. They showed that two aspects are relevant for a political discourse not to be considered vague: presence of an ideological principle and presence of specific information. The second study tested the relevance of these criteria in voting intentions. Four fragments of argumentation, with and without ideological principle and specific information, were submitted to participants. Results show that higher voting intention is determined by the presence of an ideological principle, but the combination of principle and specific information results in less voting intention, perhaps being seen as confusing.

Keywords: Vagueness, concreteness, precision, political discourse, vote intentions.

1 Introduction

When someone argues for the course of action to take, to persuade us to do something, our future action is not only determined by what s/he says, but also by the impression we have of the Speaker. As research in rhetoric and persuasion has shown from Aristotle on, we are persuaded not only through logos – the rational arguments carried by the Orator, but also through pathos – the emotions s/he makes us feel, and by ethos, the image of honesty, sincerity and benevolence we make up of the Orator himself.

A peculiar intertwining between logos and ethos can be found in the vagueness of argumentative discourse. When a Speaker is vague in his discourse, both the rational part of his argument and the image we make up of him may be at risk: on the one side, his vagueness may obscure the clarity of his arguments, subtracting consequentiality to their logical chains, on the other side it may be felt as reticence – we may suspect he is vague on purpose – hence spoiling his image of sincerity and honesty. In both cases, this may make argumentation less effective. On the other hand, vagueness might introduce a nuance of indetermination, give the impression of mental
freedom and become particularly effective through a pathos effect by inducing admiration, enthusiasm, ideal elation.

What do we think when a politician speaks in a vague way? But before this, how do we realize his/her speech is vague? What criteria define political discourse as vague, and what are the effects of vagueness in political persuasion? Though vagueness is a flaw often attributed to political discourse, it has not been investigated from a cognitive point of view.

This work investigates the commonsense definition of vagueness and related notions like precision, specificity, concreteness, and their effects in political discourse. Sect. 2 overviews previous work in the area of vagueness, Sect. 3 presents a qualitative analysis of the commonsense notions of vague, generic, precise, sincere, persuasive, and a quantitative study investigating the effects of vagueness in political argumentation on voting intentions.

2 The Area of Vagueness

When people talk they are reciprocally committed to convey the required and pertinent quantity and quality of information. Sometimes, though, they may themselves have less information than expected, or else be willing to convey less than they actually know to the interlocutor, so what they communicate may be generic or vague instead of specific and precise.

The notion of vagueness has been investigated in philosophy ([1]; [2]), that starting from the sorite paradox (how many sand grains make a heap of sand? [3]) sees vagueness as stemming from the Speakers' knowledge limitation. In linguistics it is seen as a foundational property of language, e.g. in the lack of clear-cut boundaries between categories (see for instance Labov's [4] continuous transition between cups and bowls), that leaves room for creativity and innovation [5].

In cognitive terms, vagueness is defined by Poggi and Vincze [6], according to a model of mind and communication in terms of goals and beliefs [7], as a property of knowledge and/or a property of a Speaker's communication: a lack of detail in what one knows, and/or in what one communicates about something. Vagueness differs from uncertainty, since we may have a vague knowledge, a vague idea, a vague memory of something, but still be certain of it; it is the opposite of precision, defined as having beliefs on the details of a topic. Different from approximation, that is a lack of precision concerning quantitative aspects of the topic, vagueness concerns qualitative aspects. In communication, one may be vague – i.e., convey vague knowledge – either because one has a vague knowledge oneself (no power to be precise), or because one deliberately chooses to convey it in a vague way: in this case, vagueness is a tool for reticence and deception, whether aimed at protecting the Interlocutor (see euphemism or vagueness in inauspicious diagnoses) or others (being vague to protect others' privacy), or to defend oneself from the Interlocutor's reaction.

Beside characterizing mental states in the area of vagueness, [8] and [9] analyzed the “vagueness signals”: words, gestures, postures, facial expressions that convey the meaning “I am being vague” or “You are being vague”, used during discourse, respectively, either when the Speaker wants to acknowledge (even, to apologize) that s/he is being less detailed or accurate than the Cooperative Principle and the maxim prescribe [10], or when s/he accuses the Interlocutor of being vague [11]. They distinguished the signals of vagueness from those of word-search, approximation, , singling out their characterizing features. [12] analyzed verbal and multimodal signals of vagueness in political discourse.
3 Vagueness and its Effects in Political Persuasion

Research above provides a stipulative definition of vagueness, but what is the commonsense notion of vagueness? what do people mean by vagueness and other notions like precision or unspecificity? how do they define these notions in a naive way? how do they identify as vague a sentence, a discourse, a gesture or other communicative event, or even a mental event – a feeling, an idea, a dream – and what are the features that characterize such events as vague? Other interesting issues to investigate here and in future are: is vagueness generally accepted in discourse? Do differences in personality, culture or other variables affect its acceptance? How often do people take vagueness as deceptive, and what cues induce this suspicion? And what are the effects of vagueness in persuasion?

A quite common case of vague communication is political discourse; therefore, to investigate the notion people have of vagueness, how they understand that a discourse is vague, and what are its persuasive effects, we conducted two studies on cases of political discourse: a qualitative and a quantitative one, that, though being preliminary studies, yet open interesting issues for future investigation.

3.1. Study 1: the Commonsense Notion of Vagueness

To investigate the commonsense notions people have of what is vague, generic, precise, and what are their criteria to consider a political discourse vague or generic, we first designed a preliminary qualitative study.

Method
17 Participants, all female of age ranging between 19 and 24, were submitted fragments of discourse from a real political debate, drawn from a debate during the primary elections of the Italian Democratic Party, where the five candidates, all standing on a podium, had to answer, one after the other, the same question put by a single journalist. We only chose the answers of two different candidates, R and V, to a single question, making two fragments of 174 and 152 words respectively. Participants had to read the question and the answers of both candidates, without knowing who they were; then they assessed each answer in terms of 9 aspects (vagueness, concreteness, clarity, interest, genericity, persuasiveness, precision, sincerity and sharing of his opinion) along a 7 point Likert scale, and for each aspect, they were asked to write down the reason for their assessment.

Given the status of a preliminary study, only 17 participants answered the questionnaire, and all females since we did not want to take into account the gender issue at this stage of the research. Moreover, only two fragments were submitted to judgment because open answers on the 9 aspects took more than 20 minutes.

Our qualitative analysis aimed at finding out the criteria Participants relied on to rate the discourse as vague precise, concrete or not and so on, which can be drawn from the answers to the question “why?” asking to motivate ratings of both R’s and V’s discourse, whether high or low.

The qualitative tagging of the answers was performed by two independent coders, trying to find out, for each aspect, what were the criteria used by participants to define it.

Results
In this work we only overview the qualitative analysis of answers concerning vagueness, genericity, precision, the Candidate’s perceived sincerity, and persuasiveness of his discourse.
Vague
A discourse is not vague to the extent to which it is:
- **pertinent** (e.g., 16R the candidate does not focus on the question... he wanders around it!)
  But even more than pertinent, it is
- **up to the point** (5R he is not beating about the bush, 1V he gets straight to the point)
The recurrent metaphor for what is not vague is one of hitting the center, the target, of being straight and not wandering about. One more condition not to be vague is to contain information about
- **details**: (4V he goes into details, 16 V he answers item by item).
  But one that is not up to the point may also be one who does not deal with the topic in its
- **completeness** (15R not taking all cases into account).
More generally a condition not to be vague is
- **clarity**, often represented by words like to explain and clear (1R he explains his reasons quite well, 6R he answers clearly).
Yet, non-vagueness does not only concern purely informative but also argumentative discourse. In this case a Speaker is not vague when he provides
- **support** to his statements (17R he relies on data, 9V he explains the reason why).
Finally, not to be vague a discourse should clarify the Speaker’s
- **position** (4R he explains his position clearly).
- **conclusion** (11V leaving his thought without a real conclusion).

Generic
Participants consider a fragment as not generic when it is
- **pertinent** (2R he does not really answer the question; 13R he speaks of the 59 articles without focusing on what might answer the question).
- **up to the point** (13V he hit the target).
- **not general** (4V he tends to speak more of the problem in general) But they consider too general also something that only deals with a unique topic or case, they would like at least two (8R he deals with two different reforms).
- **detailed** (1R he goes into details).
But also, at the same time,
- **precise** (1V because he is precise).
- **concise** (10R the candidate expresses the problem of work in a concise way).
- **complete** (7V he does not possibly provide alternatives, but only defines why the reform should be abolished). Completeness may also imply in-depth analysis (11V some points that instead required a deeper reflections are not dealt with in depth).
- **clear** (5R even if brief it lets you understand his position well).
- **concrete** (12R because there are data that give concreteness to the answer).

Precise
Similar criteria are used to define precision of discourse.
- **pertinence** (7V he does not wander; but remains on the topic; 16V he does not get lost in useless parentheses).
- **to the point** (1R because he immediately comes to the point).
- **clarity** (9V even if he does not literally answer the question what he holds is clear).
- **details** (14R, he provides detailed data).
- **in-depth analysis** (8R he does not go in depth into his motivations).

We quote answers in English translation, because our focus is on their conceptual aspects.
Strangely enough, two subjects make a difference between precision and presence of details: 5R says: he singles out the key points in a precise though not detailed way; 7R says he only reports data. One more unexpected criterion is one possible effect of precision: to elicit interest (15V, [precise enough] as to have people become interested in the debate).

_Sincere_

The cues that, according to Participants, testify to the Speaker’s sincerity are the following:
- **self confidence** (4R he has no hesitation in what he is saying) **self-conviction** and **emotional participation** (8V he states what he believes); (4V he seems to say things that actually touch him).
- **details** (13R because he talks of statistical data). **competence** (5R I acknowledge sincerity from several technical terms).
- **coherence** (7R substantial incoherence emerges).
- **no exaggeration** (16R he displays percents and tall talk without giving a real answer).

_Persuasive_

The qualitative analysis highlights two interpretations of the word “persuasive” in participants: some interpreted the question as: “how much do you think this discourse was intended to persuade?” (persuasive intention), others as: “How much did it convince you?” (persuasive effect). To the former, the reasons to view a discourse as having a persuasive intention are:
- **explicit persuasive intention** (9R because he tries to convince).
- **discourse structure**, seen as made up, typically, of an informative and a requestive part (5R he starts talking of the Fornero reform and then he comes to his proposal).

These participants have different views of an intentionally persuasive discourse: some have a quite negative and coercive one, viewing persuasive discourse as one not even bearing arguments (6R I think not so persuasive in fact, he quite explains his view); others mean “persuasive” as a discourse that actually persuades them, thanks to the following elements:
- **actual persuasive effect** (4R by his proposals he convinces people to want to change something).
- **one’s own previous sharing** (15 V when one shares the same ideas it is easier for me to be persuaded).
- **Audience’s goals** (12V he deals with the topic ... while also thinking of the future of the youth).
- **pertinence and data** (7R persuasive because it anyway reports significant and positive data concerning the theme of work; 9R he uses numbers, therefore concrete things).
- **ground truth** (10V what happens in Italy is true, and the candidate is perfectly right).
- **clarity** (16V he looks much more persuasive than candidate X just because he is clearer, more precise and concrete).
- **sound arguments** (3V the logic in his discourse strikes the reader).
- **non-generic** (16R not so persuasive because generic).
- **speaker’s conviction** (11R the politician is convinced of the truth of his statements).
- **emotional induction** (17 R he does not touch sensitive points in people).

_Vague_ and _generic_ are not so clearly distinguished by participants, in that both ratings are justified by the same or very similar criteria; the same for _precision_, which
confirms to be seen as the opposite of vagueness. The criteria to assess the Speaker’s sincerity include some aspects of the discourse, like coherence, but more importantly the Receiver’s impressions on the Speaker, like self-confidence and self-conviction. The answers concerning sincerity and persuasiveness show somehow nicely complementary: while a relevant aspect of sincerity is sensing the Speaker’s self-conviction and emotional participation, a relevant feature for persuasiveness is emotional induction in the Receiver. Further, persuasiveness includes some of the features of non-vagueness and non-genericity, like pertinence, clarity, and soundness of argumentation.

These answers support a view of persuasion [13] as an act of proposing an action useful to the Audience’s goals, that exploits the three strategies of logos (regarding content – pertinence, data, ground truth, and regarding discourse structure – speaker’s clarity, valid arguments, non-generic discourse), ethos (speaker’s conviction), and pathos (emotional induction).

3.2. Study 2: the Effects of Vagueness on Voting Intentions

After the above qualitative Study 1, the resulting aspects of a discourse’s vagueness, concreteness or precision will be investigated one by one. Here we present a Study 2, testing how two aspects of a discourse can determine the impression of vagueness. Since important conditions for non-vagueness resulted to be the Speaker’s clarifying his position and providing details, we made the hypothesis that a political discourse is felt as vague either when it does not provide an ideological principle, or else when it does not provide relevant details. We also wanted to control the dispositional trait called “need for cognitive closure”, a set of “epistemic motivations such as needs for order, structure, and closure and the avoidance of uncertainty or threat”, [12-13] [14], that, according to our hypothesis may result in higher sensitivity and less tolerance to vagueness.

Experimental design and procedure

48 participants (32 females and 16 males, mean age 30.5, age range 15-65), were randomly assigned to four experimental conditions, consisting in four different messages, so each participant read a different message accordingly the assigned condition.

Due to the low number of participants we did not check the moderating effect of age and gender, but 16 females and 9 males are between 26 and 35; 12 females and 4 males are 18-25, while 4 females and 3 males above 35).

The experimental design is bifactorial 2x2 between subjects. Independent variables are presence vs. absence of an ideological principle and presence vs. absence of pertinent details.

Four versions of a fragment of political discourse were constructed, as shown below:

1. One with both an ideological principle and pertinent details (+P+D)
2. One without an ideological principle but with pertinent details (-P+D)
3. One with an ideological principle but without pertinent details (+P-D)
4. One without an ideological principle and with non-pertinent details (-P-D).
Question:
Moderator: Let us come back to talk about work, and I ask you: should the reform by the Labour Minister be abolished, adjusted, or kept as it is?

+P+D
I would recommend adjusting it. I am one of those who believe that the new reform of labor has been in the end a positive thing, with all its limits and weaknesses. But one could have done it differently since I think that first of all there are some rights, like the right to work, that cannot be exchanged for money, that cannot be traded for other things.

We propose a simple thing: the code of 59 articles developed by P.I., the well-known professor of labor law; it is the progressive protection Flex Security law, and it provides tools to invest in Green Economy. 38% of jobs, the new jobs created in 2011 just comes from this field, on the web, that has created 700,000 jobs in the last few years, in the cultural fields. Nowadays the norms of labor law are more than 2000; the journals of companies’ law working in this field are 12. My proposal is let us give those 59 norms simplicity and transparency.

-P-D
Actually I do not like it, I would recommend adjusting it. I am one of those who believe that the new reform of labor has implied an insult to the civilization of work in our country. The previous law imposed to re-employ the persons fired without a just cause; with this reform, instead of re-employment we have a handful of money. I think that first of all there are some rights, like the right to work, that cannot be exchanged for money, that cannot be traded for other things. Further I believe that in this field, having kept the jungle of atypical contracts, mainly for the youth, means a depreciation of labor.

-P-D
The present reform is a long path of change within the system of labor and retirement. The crisis and the international economic trend have contributed to generate, all across Europe, this kind of laws, that is, devices connected to re-programming the system of work and money contribution. My own view, as a person working in this domain, is well-known, I expressed it in various cases with a great clarity and determination, and I think I have received good feedbacks from the various agencies involved. The system of labor laws is then going toward a global re-arrangement and can be viewed as a constantly changing process.

The four versions were submitted to different participants together with the questionnaire about vagueness, concreteness, clarity etc. of the message and of its Sender.

The independent variables were presence vs. absence of the ideological principle and presence vs. absence of pertinent details. The dependent variables were voting behavior and assessment of the message as being more or less vague, concrete, coherent, generic, persuasive, precise.

The hypothesis was that the fourth condition (-P-D) would be perceived as more vague and generic and less precise, coherent and persuasive, while the first condition (+P+D) would be assessed as the more tangible and persuasive one.

Participants had to read one of the four messages and to answer a questionnaire where they had to assess, along a 7 point Likert scale, the message in terms of vagueness, concreteness, clarity, interest, genericity, persuasiveness, precision, sincerity and agreement with the politician’s opinions; for each aspect, they were asked to write the reason of their assessment. This requirement of motivating all their answers was meant to check individual differences, if any, in the concepts of vagueness, genericity, coherence, persuasiveness, precision and to explore whether conceptual differences between vagueness and genericity, vagueness and precision, vagueness and concreteness are shared amongst laymen and are applied to political
communication. We also included a manipulation check as part of the study, assessing the degree to which the message was perceived as evaluative, ideological, informative and technical.

In order to check how dispositional variables might influence the dependent variables in the experimental setting, participants also had to fill in the “need for closure” scale [13] in its Italian version [14].

Results

1 Control variable and Manipulation check

The “need for closure scale” was subjected to factorial analysis (excluding the decisional items) and the variant explained by the first factor (42%), as well as the saturation of factors above .30 favoring the creation of a dichotomic variable (high and low need of closure scale for subjects having an average of 4.23). The political orientation had an influence, though not significant, on the need for closure scale, right-oriented participants having a higher need for closure than left-oriented participants (80% vs 33%; p<0.08).

No significant results emerged after controlling the political orientation, also because the number of the participants assigned to the conditions was not uniform.

The results of the manipulation check items (technical, evaluative, ideological, informative) show a main effect of the variable “presence of the ideological principle” on the items: “evaluative” and “ideological” (p<0.05), showing how messages were perceived as more evaluative and ideological in the condition “presence” as compared to “absence” (respectively 3.60 vs 2.84; 3.65 vs 2.88).

Moreover, it also emerges a main effect of the information on the ideological item: in the condition “absence of details”, the message is perceived as more ideological (2.81 vs 3.60; p<0.05). Further, a main gender effect emerges: females perceive messages as more ideological than males do: 3.63 vs 2.43 (p<0.05), especially in the condition with the ideological principle expressed.

On the basis of these results we can state that messages are differently perceived according to the experimental conditions and that the manipulation has been successful.

2 Voting behaviour

The voting behaviour is influenced by the “ideological principle”: participants are more inclined to vote when the ideological principle is present, as compared to when it is absent (2.95 vs 2.20; p<0.05). Such a tendency is nonetheless specified by the interaction between ideological principle and detailed information (p<0.05): curiously enough, participants would vote for a candidate that states an ideology principle in his discourse and takes a stand on the issue but who does not provide detailed information, but also for a candidate who does not mention a principle but provides detailed information instead (3.30 vs 2.75). This result contradicts the initial hypothesis that participants would be more inclined to vote for a candidate who provides both an ideological principle and detailed information.

Furthermore, we conducted a linear regression analysis by addition of the need for closure. The results, although not significant, are nonetheless interesting: (F=2.55; p<0.08): the regression coefficient indicates that the higher the need for cognitive closure, the lower the vote intention.
The perception of vagueness, concreteness and persuasiveness of political discourse is subjected to the effect of the principle (p<0.005; p<0.025): the message lacking the principle, and not so much the one where the principle is present, is perceived as more vague (5.64 vs. 3.90; p<0.005), less concrete, tangible (3.57 vs. 2.24; p<0.025) and less persuasive (2.60 vs. 3.30; p<0.05).

It needs to be mentioned the significant effect of the interaction between the principle and the detailed information on the perception of vagueness, genericity, concreteness, precision and persuasiveness. As hypothesized, the message is perceived as more vague and generic when both principle and detailed information are missing, but also when both variables are present (5.64 vs. 4.72).

This result seems to support the hypothesis that in presence of both types of information (principle and details), participants are subjected to cognitive overload, where too much information may end up by confusing them.

The interaction between the items concreteness, precision and persuasiveness determines an opposite direction: the message is perceived as concrete, precise and persuasive mainly in presence of the principle and in absence of information or when the information are present but the principle is absent. (respectively, concrete: 3.90 vs. 3.16; precise: 4.00 vs. 3.58; persuasive: 4.10 vs. 3.41; p<0.05)

As far as the need for cognitive closure is concerned, it seems to improve the model through a positive influence on the items vague and generic: the regression analysis highlights a contribution of this variable (respectively r²= 49; F=2.31; p<0.025; r²= 43; F=1.94; p<0.05). The analysis highlights how participants’ need for cognitive closure increases the perception of the message as vague and generic and confirms the idea that such a disposition can be an instrument to better determine and analyze political messages as far as it allows to find hidden ambiguity.
Figure 2. Vague and generic

Figure 3. Concrete – precise – persuasive
Discussion

From the present data it emerges that the presence of an ideological principle in the political message influences the participants’ impressions more than the presence of detailed information. Perceiving the communication of a political candidate as vague seems more dependent on his lack of stand and not so much on the fact that he does not explain his political action into details. Generally speaking, the results outline two different communicative profiles of the politician and two main conditions in which, he is not perceived as vague: on the one side the ideological politician who does not waste time on details and on the other side the “technical” politician who confines himself to giving details without making a connection between details and his political vision.

The perception of vagueness when both principle and details are present could be explained by the cognitive difficulties in managing the complexity of a political message. It is not fortuitous that the “need for closure” scale seems to be a good predictor of vagueness perception: where such a disposition is present, there is a higher evaluation of vagueness and genericity of the message.

Subsequent research will replicate the preliminary studies here on a larger scale, with participants of different age and more balanced for gender, but it will also take into consideration variables such as political orientation and level of expertise in political communication and practices, to check whether a person expert in politics and accustomed to the language of politicians has a higher tolerance to vagueness than a student. Further, cross-cultural differences will be tackled, to assess if in some cultures concrete details are more typically preferred to ideological issues.

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