Indeterminacy in grammar: drawing the boundaries
Proposed workshop at SLE 2025 (Bordeaux)
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Workshop description

Indeterminacy, a notion that encompasses ambiguity, vagueness, polysemy and underspecification, is a frequently employed phenomenon across all linguistic levels that represents a central mechanism in grammatical change (cf. Ágel 2009, Espinal & Villalba 2015). Research into grammaticalization theory (e.g., Diewald 2002, Heine 2002, Traugott 2010) assigns a central role to ambiguity in the development of grammatical structures. The concept of underdetermination is also described in grammaticalization theory (e.g., Ferraresi 2005). The multifunctionality of parts of speech and their subdifferentiation also play a central role in research that addresses the classification of parts of speech (e.g., Vogel 2005, Wasow 2015, Zifonun 2017).

   Grammatical indeterminacy is characterized as involving morphosyntactic and lexical elements that allow for (at least) two possible readings, i.e., two distinct grammatical classifications (cf. Pinkal 1985, Ellsäßer 2024), as illustrated for German in (1).

(1)   *Sie hat am Wochenende viel Staub gewischt.*
      ('She did a lot of dusting over the weekend.'/ 'She dusted a lot over the weekend.')

In this example, the expression *viel* ('a lot') in German can either function as a determiner of the noun *Staub* ('dust') [*viel Staub*]NP ('lots of dust') or as an adverb modifying the action of dusting [*viel*ADV[*Staub*]NP ('a lot of dusting'). This structural ambiguity leads to different grammatical analyses depending on whether *viel* is classified as a determiner or adverb. The preferred reading of the sentence is typically, though not necessarily, clarified by context.

   Further examples of indeterminacy include quantifiers, ellipsis, anaphora, irony, and scare quotes, as illustrated in (2a-e) below.

(2)   a.   *Few students read every book.*
      b.   *James invited Sarah to the concert, but I don't know who else.*
      c.   *Sarah told Julia that she would win the award.*
      d.   *What a great evening!*
      e.   *John is a real 'genius' when it comes to fixing cars.*

These phenomena can serve as a testing ground for grammar-based approaches to indeterminacy. While philosophical approaches (see e.g., Frege 1884, Chomsky 2002) have laid the groundwork for understanding indeterminacy phenomena, with a substantial amount of research on ambiguity resolution, key terminology in empirical studies of indeterminacy is often inconsistently defined and empirical research lacks a unified theoretical framework. Further, limited attention has been on integrating grammatical theorizing in empirical studies and there is no widely accepted empirical operationalization within grammatical frameworks.

   In our workshop, we aim to bridge the gap between grammatical theories and empirical research, addressing the need for exploring how theoretical grammar can be used to systematically classify and investigate indeterminacy (cf. Winkler 2015). The following research questions will be discussed in our workshop:

- Which phenomena of indeterminacy (ambiguity, vagueness and polysemy) can be found in grammar? On which linguistic levels (word types, sentence structure, morphological structures) are they located?
- To what extent is grammatical indeterminacy disambiguated (e.g., by context)?
- How can phenomena of indeterminacy and their disambiguation be investigated empirically?

We particularly invite theoretical approaches and case studies on various phenomena in different languages. By fostering collaboration between theoretical and empirical researchers, this workshop seeks to develop a more integrated and comprehensive framework for studying indeterminacy in grammar.

Abstract submission

The proposed workshop for the 58th Annual Meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea*, to be held from 26-29 August 2025 in Bordeaux, will focus on the topic of indeterminacy in grammar. We invite abstracts in English (300 words excluding references) that present theoretical and empirical research on phenomena of indeterminacy in language. Please submit your abstract to Natascha Raue (nraue@uni-osnabrueck.de) by 10 November 2024. We will send notifications for abstract submissions by the end of November, and a 500-word abstract will be required in case the workshop is accepted for the SLE 2025.

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