Linguistic Meaning is Gradual and Approximate
even when Common Sense Denotation is not

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Two important distinctions historically shaped the contemporary conception of linguistic meaning: the first one, owed to Gottlob Frege's work, differentiates meaning (*Sinn*) from denotation (*Bedeutung*), while the second one, essentially due to the work initiated by Émile Benveniste, separates the semantic value of an utterance (its *sens*) from that of the linguistic form used for that utterance (its *signification*). In both cases, one of the important tasks that was undertaken was to explicate the complex relationship between the two concepts that were differentiated: the way *Sinn* and *Beteutung* are interrelated, and the way *sens* and *signification* are interconnected. The very notion of *linguistic meaning* (or *phrase meaning*), which will be positioned (for the running of the discussion) somewhere between *Sinn* and *signification*, relies on the assumption that linguistic units (simple or complex) are partly (and only partly) responsible for the way their utterances are understood. In most of the work acknowledging both distinctions, that 'responsibility' is taken to be a set of *instructions* or *constraints* that each sign of a given human language imposes on the way one has to build the understanding of the utterances (its *utterance meaning*) which contains it, out of what (s)he considers to be the relevant elements of the situation.

From that 'instructional' conception of linguistic meaning, it follows, as I will show, that, even when a word or a phrase of a human language *can* be used in utterances understood as referring to a very precise entity (say, for instance, a geometrical object), the same word or phrase is necessarily also usable in utterances understood as vaguely referring to approximate entities (for instance, the approximate shape of that geometrical object). What 'instructs' the hearers to point to a precise entity, when they do, will be shown to be taken from the situation, not from the linguistic meaning. The conceptual flavour of this proof might seem suspicious to several hearers/readers; moreover, it is valid under the assumption that the 'instructional' conception of meaning is adopted and the surprising nature of what is proven (call it $\mathscr{P}$) under that assumption could be taken (in a sort of weakened *modus tollendo tollens* argument) as a reason to reject the assumption. Unfortunately (or fortunately, according to one's point of view…), I will show that, as a matter of fact, $\mathscr{P}$ is what empirically is the case: the 'suspicious' proof will then turn out to be welcome, and the 'instructional' conception of meaning will resist this rejection attempt. In the discussion, I will also give independent reasons for $\mathscr{P}$ (that is, reasons to admit $\mathscr{P}$ without assuming the 'instructional' conception).

I will then propose theoretical tools which take $\mathscr{P}$ into account and allow to describe linguistic meaning in terms of constraints on how selected aspects of the situation must be seized. With these tools, meaning will be seen to be not only approximate, but also gradual: the form of these constraints is such that they cast a gradual order on the aspects of the situation which have to be considered.

Icing on the cake, I will defend the idea according to which these tools can help us get rid of the irritating paradoxes of metaphors in ordinary uses of language: according to that idea, the metaphoric 'feeling' of an utterance is not due to the meaning of some item, but to the distance between how the situation is usually seen and how it must be seen in order to be able to apply the semantic instructions.