



Vagueness and Approximation: A Case Study of *Genre* in French and *Tipo* in Spanish

Vaguedad y aproximación: un estudio de caso de genre en francés y tipo en español

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Recibido: 1-11-2024 / **Aceptado:** 04-07-2025

DOI: 10.4151/S0718-09342025011901353

Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of intentional linguistic vagueness, whereby certain linguistic elements are used to achieve communicative goals by positioning utterances along a spectrum of vagueness. Two such elements, *genre* in French and *tipo* in Spanish, have undergone a diachronic process of semantic change, shifting from their original taxonomic meanings to functions associated with approximation. This exploratory study examines the evolutionary process that led these forms to acquire approximative uses. It then further explores the relationship between approximation and vagueness, with particular attention to their role in expressing numerical approximation. Finally, the paper outlines the criteria for distinguishing vagueness, analyzing how *genre* and *tipo* produce a vague reading in this specific context. From a methodological point of view, the study relies on linguistic criteria that provide access to verifiable semantic properties. The analysis draws on a diverse range of data, including examples from existing linguistic literature, attested instances of usage, and constructed examples tailored for argumentative purposes. Through this approach, the study aims to shed light on the mechanisms underlying intentional vagueness in language.

Keywords: intentional vagueness, numerical approximation, taxonomic noun, *genre*, *tipo*

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el fenómeno de la vaguedad lingüística intencional, entendida como el uso de determinados elementos lingüísticos que, con una finalidad comunicativa, sitúan el enunciado en el que se insertan dentro de un espectro de vaguedad. Dos de estos elementos, *genre* en francés y *tipo* en español, han experimentado un proceso diacrónico de cambio semántico, que los han llevado a adoptar funciones relacionadas con la aproximación a partir de significados

taxonómicos iniciales. Este estudio, de carácter exploratorio, examina en primer lugar el proceso evolutivo que ha conducido a estas formas a asumir funciones relacionadas con la aproximación. Posteriormente, profundiza la relación entre aproximación y vaguedad, con especial atención a su empleo en la expresión de la aproximación numérica. Finalmente, se clarifican los criterios de distinción de la vaguedad, analizando cómo *genre* y *tipo* generan una lectura vaga en este contexto específico. Desde un punto de vista metodológico, el análisis se sustenta en criterios lingüísticos discriminitorios que permiten acceder a rasgos semánticos verificables. Para ello, se examinará una variedad de datos que incluye ejemplos extraídos de la literatura lingüística existente, ejemplos atestiguados en el uso real y ejemplos contruidos con fines argumentativos. A través de este enfoque, se pretende proporcionar nuevas claves para el entendimiento del fenómeno de la vaguedad intencional en el lenguaje.

Palabras clave: vaguedad intencional, aproximación numérica, sustantivo taxonómico, *genre*, *tipo*

INTRODUCTION

Linguistic vagueness has long fascinated linguists, who have viewed it as both a natural property of language and a deliberate discursive strategy employed by speakers. This paper explores the features of intentional linguistic vagueness, which involves the strategic use of specific linguistic elements to create a spectrum of vagueness for communicative purposes. Some of these elements have undergone a diachronic process of semantic change, leading to functions associated with approximation. This theoretical reflection, exploratory in nature, aims to investigate the relationship between vagueness and approximation, while also contributing to the characterization of forms that introduce vagueness into an utterance. From an onomasiological perspective, this study seeks to identify the repeatable constitutive properties that define vagueness. From a semasiological viewpoint, it analyzes the semantic-pragmatic functioning of two linguistic units, *genre* in French and *tipo* in Spanish, which are likely to function as mechanisms of vagueness. These forms exhibit significant vitality, representativeness, and discursive richness, making them worthy of study as linguistic markers of vagueness.

The terms *genre* in French and *tipo* in Spanish have undergone significant growth in recent decades, as numerous studies have demonstrated¹. Initially, these words were used primarily in a nominal sense, drawing on their taxonomic roots and characteristic of formal, cultured language. However, in more spontaneous and informal speech, innovative uses have emerged, revealing a range of pragmatic functions that depart from their traditional taxonomic role. These functions often prioritize orality.

In addition to their growth, *genre* and *tipo* have also been found to introduce vagueness into discourse, due to their approximation value². A closer examination of this phenomenon reveals an evolution, as these terms have shifted from being used to categorize elements with taxonomic meanings to serving as a means of approximation. This phenomenon is not unique to French or Spanish, as similar patterns can be

observed in other languages, where taxonomic nouns are used as a lexical source. For example, English uses *kind of* and *sort of*, while Portuguese employs *espécie* and *género*, and Italian records *specie*, *tipo*, and *sorta*. This global phenomenon raises important questions about interlinguistic transfer and the ways in which linguistic concepts are shared across languages.

This article is structured as follows: first, a concise overview of the evolutionary process that has led the taxonomic forms *genre* and *tipo* to acquire functions related to approximation is presented. Next, we discuss the relationship between approximation and vagueness, examining approximation as a deliberate semantic operation that identifies a referent by comparing it to a precise representation, and which thereby incorporates a ‘vague’ semantic component in contrast to a ‘precise’ one. Our analysis focuses on the use of numerical approximation with *genre* and *tipo*, where the referent to be identified is a quantity. Finally, we explore the criteria for distinguishing vagueness, aiming to determine whether *genre* and *tipo* generate a vague reading in this context by distinguishing vagueness from related semantic phenomena, such as ambiguity and generality.

In order to address these aims, this exploratory study combines attested examples with others constructed for argumentative purposes, alongside data drawn from existing linguistic literature. The analysis is grounded in linguistic criteria that make it possible to identify verifiable semantic features. This approach supports a reasoned interpretation of the phenomenon and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of its semantic and pragmatic dimensions.

1. From taxonomy to approximation

The French term *genre* and the Spanish term *tipo* both originate from taxonomic nouns that have undergone a reinterpretation process, resulting in the acquisition of new functions that go beyond their traditional taxonomic structure. The mechanisms underlying the emergence of these functions are the subject of ongoing debates among linguists, with various theoretical approaches being proposed to account for them, including grammaticalization, pragmaticalization, conventionalization, and co-optation. Mihatsch (2007, 2018, 2021) has shed light on the communicative strategies that drive the semantic changes affecting terms that denote various taxonomic levels. These changes often arise from a shift from scientific to everyday language, where new functions emerge. This process can be seen as a form of progressive conventionalization of discursive functions that signal what Mihatsch calls “loose talk”. Studies by André (2022), Cheshire and Secova (2018), among others, have noted that this evolution toward pragmatic-discursive functions is particularly prominent in informal spoken language and in youth speech contexts.

The research presented here draws on the key characteristics of this process as identified by Mihatsch, which are outlined below³.

a) In the natural sciences, the term *genre* refers to a specific taxonomic level used to categorize groups of elements that share common characteristics. In contrast, *tipo* does not denote a specific level, but rather the specimen that most fully embodies the essential features of its group. This classification model, based on resemblance to a prototype, has its roots in Antiquity (Biville, 1997, as cited in Mihatsch, 2018). Its influence is obvious in the definitions found in *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* (Rey-Debove & Rey, 2003, p. 1176) and *María Moliner* (Moliner, 1998, p. 1238), respectively.

Genre (XV^e) DIDACT. Idée générale d'un groupe d'êtres ou d'objets présentant des caractères communs. DIDACT. SC. NAT. Subdivision de la classification (taxinomie) des êtres vivants, située au-dessous de la famille. (PR)

Tipo : 1. Ejemplar de una especie, teórica o existente en la realidad, que reúne en el más alto grado y con la mayor pureza las cualidades peculiares de ella. 2. Modelo que sirve para valorar o graduar las cosas de la misma especie que él. (ML)

b) From a taxonomic reading in scientific contexts, it can be seen how a category emerges in everyday language. This occurs when a problem arises in conceptualization or naming, leading to an element being identified as belonging to a superordinate category.

(1) Bueno, creo que la película debe hablar por sí sola, pero sí creo que es importante que se tenga en cuenta, al verla, que está, como casi todas las películas, bueno, como **todas las películas de este tipo**, artesanales, siempre están hechas con un gran cariño. (CREA, ORAL, 1987. Paragraph n° 208, El ojo de cristal, 20/01/87, TVE 2, Spain, Entrevistas, as cited in Mihatsch, 2005, p. 277).

In example (1), the form *tipo* is used to signal the inclusion of a referent in question (*la película*) within a superordinate category (*todas las películas de este tipo*). Here *tipo* approaches the concept of an abstract model, akin to the meaning of 'species' or 'genus', to indicate a higher-level classification. This usage illustrates a shift from referring to an exemplary model, which defines the characteristics of a category, to denoting the category itself, thereby reflecting a semantic reinterpretation of *tipo*. In this construction, the taxonomic noun loses its head status (Mihatsch, 2021, p. 381), as evidenced by constructed examples (2) and (3), where the verb frequently agrees with the second noun, *películas*.

(2) **Las películas de este tipo** siempre están hechas / *está hecho con un gran cariño.

(3) **Este tipo de películas** siempre está hecho / están hechas con un gran cariño.

However, according to Mihatsch (2021, p. 382), the anaphoric construction in question expresses different taxonomic relationships depending on the position of the taxonomic noun in the construction. Specifically, when the taxonomic noun follows

the second noun, as in (1) and (2), it expresses one type of relationship, whereas when it precedes the second noun, as in (3) and (4), it expresses a different one:

(4) C'est pas **le genre de blague qui me dérange**.

(Dufaye, 2014, p. 53)

Examples (3) and (4) illustrate a pseudo-partitive construction that establishes the subordination of a sub-category, whereas in (1) and (2), the focus is on assigning an exemplar or subtype to a superordinate category, effectively placing *películas* within a broader category. However, the use of a definite article in (4) suggests a previously established subcategory or individual, which creates an ad hoc implicit superordinate category that bears on a specific type of joke that is particularly bothersome.

c) The gradual conventionalization of this usage in everyday language has led to a shift away from vertical hierarchical structures of inclusion and towards a more approximate, horizontal categorization based on comparison. In other words, the categorization process has moved from defining membership to a superordinate category by possessing all its characteristics (as in biological taxonomies) to categorization by resemblance with another element within the same domain, presented as closer to the prototype or simply as a term of comparison. In this process of semantic change, taxonomic nouns have partially relinquished their taxonomic properties and now function as modifiers of the following noun, as seen in examples such as *genre de* (e.g., *La salade César est un genre de salade composée*) or *espèce de* (e.g., *La salade César est une espèce de salade composée*). In these contexts, *genre de* is reinterpreted as a marker of approximative similarity, conveying ad hoc categorization by making the category boundaries of a lexical expression more flexible when referring to entities that do not exactly match an established category. This specific categorization occurs in situations where stable categorization is difficult due to the reliance on subjective criteria, or when the categorization is not precise but rather a strategy employed by the speaker, who can only manage to give a rough approximation. It is a classification that is imprecise, subjective, or strategic. For example, consider the following:

(i) La première [société industrielle] citée date de 1852; et cette société, continuant à être précurseur avait organisé **un genre de “loi Loucheur”** [*sic*]. (Mihatsch, 2021, p. 386)

In this example, the aim is to express a relationship of approximate similarity between a law promoted in the 19th century by the aforementioned industrial society and a 20th-century law, the *Loucheur Law*, which serves as the term of comparison.

In the case of the form *tipo de* in Spanish, it appears that it does not correspond to this approximative reading, nor does *género de*, or at least it is not established as such.

This is not the case with *especie de*. This discrepancy is evident when comparing the fabricated examples under series (6).

- (6) a. La fabada es **una especie de cassoulet**⁴.
- b. ?La fabada es **un género de cassoulet**.
- c. ?La fabada es **un tipo de cassoulet**.

However, in certain ambiguous utterances such as (7), noted by Mihatsch (2007, p. 234), the author identifies a strategic use of a spontaneously emerging classification:

- (7) El hecho de haber renunciado desde el primer momento de la Restauración a montar una **un tipo de Corte o algo parecido** de lo que fueron las tradiciones protocolarias de la Familia Real española... [sic]
(CREA, La Corona y su imagen popular, Madrid, 09/05/91)
- d) When taxonomic nouns take on approximative functions, they often lose their grammatical status as nouns, resulting in the disappearance of preposed determiners and subordinate elements, such as prepositions. This can lead to a paratactic usage in practice. For instance, in French and Spanish, *genre* and *tipo*, respectively, exhibit this phenomenon, whereas *espèce* and *especie* do not. In example (8), *tipo* functions as a preposition, directly linking two noun phrases:
- (8) Texturas y materiales de lujo para este apartamento de diseño **tipo hotel**.
(<https://www.revistainteriores.es>, September 2024)

Mihatsch (2007) notes that approximative conceptualization can be cognitively less demanding, as it connects two elements at the same level of generalization: the first being the more generic *apartamento de diseño* (or, more subjectively, what each person considers a design apartment) and the second *hotel*, which serves as an elaboration or illustration, evoking an approximative paradigm⁵. This referential restriction, which can be paraphrased as 'something like', is already evident in example (8). Furthermore, the subsequent text explicitly clarifies this relationship:

- (8') Texturas y materiales de lujo para este apartamento de diseño **tipo hotel**.
En la primera reunión que mantuvo con los propietarios, estos le plantearon el deseo de tener un ambiente 'como en un hotel'.

This gloss reveals that the comparison established by *tipo* does not establish an equivalence relation, but rather an approximative similarity. It exemplifies a case of comparative reference by resemblance, where the addition of *tipo hotel* guides the interpretation towards characteristics that facilitate identifying the referent *apartamento de diseño*.

Interestingly, the best translation of (8) into French would likely be *genre* or even *style*, as seen in example (9)⁶:

- (9) Des textures et des matériaux luxueux pour cet appartement design **genre hôtel / style hôtel / ?type hôtel**.

Curiously, a similar phenomenon to that observed with *tipo* in Spanish has also occurred with *genre* in French, but not so much with *type*. *Genre* can function as a preposition, directly connecting two elements. Mihatsch (2021, pp. 398-399) notes this distinction, highlighting that in languages such as Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian, cognates of *type* are preferred in this construction and serve as the basis for the pragmaticalization of certain functions that emerge later.

In this context, *genre* develops a function that Danon-Boileau and Morel (1997, p. 196) term "détermination qualitative." In essence, *genre hôtel* in example (9) assumes an adjectival value, qualitatively determining the properties of the noun phrase *appartement design*. Depending on the context, *genre* can take on different values, such as modifying a verbal phrase (10) or another (11).

- (10) Oui, bien kiffé, bien moité, bien soupiré et j'en passe, mais comme elle est hyper orgueilleuse et qu'elle pressent qu'il s'est fait plein d'autres nanas quand il était à Paris, ça lui défrise grave sa petite moustache de bonne sœur et elle le harcèle de toutes les façons possibles pour qu'il lui dise, **genre à genoux et en s'accrochant à son jupon de bure**: Well, oui... c'est vrai... j'en ai sauté d'autres... Mais c'était juste pour l'hygiène, tu sais...

(Gavalda, 2015, p. 59)

- (11) Donc ça, c'est un pont qui a été construit, euh, il y a, euh, longtemps, **genre, euh, deux cents, trois cents ans**

(Isambert, 2012, p. 9)

The contrast between examples (9) and (11) highlights a progression in the process of conventionalization. The meaning conveyed by *genre* evolves from referential restriction (*un appartement design*) through spontaneous categorization (*hôtel*) to approximative reformulation (metalinguistic) of a first element (*longtemps*) by a second (*deux cents, trois cents ans*)⁷.

It is noteworthy that *género* in Spanish has not been conventionalized in this approximative use, serving as a link between two noun phrases. Substituting *tipo* in example (8) with *género* in example (12) produces a statement that is questionable, if not entirely unacceptable:

- (12) ?Texturas y materiales de lujo para este apartamento de diseño **género hotel**.

In the course of the conventionalization of this approximative use, *genre* and *tipo* may come to link other types of constituents (13) and (14):

- (13) Des questions sur le NazeJournal, je suis sûr que vous ne vous en posez pas. Vous avez bien raison, y a bien d'autres trucs à faire dans la vie. Mais quand

même, moi je sais que des fois, **genre, je me ballade, et hop!**, je me pose une question à la con, et puis ça reste, enfin jusqu'à ce que j'ai autre chose à faire, enfin voilà.

(*frTenTen178*)

- (14) [...] y a las seis de la mañana haces lo que se llama el bajón que es **tipo el así vas y comés a las seis de la mañana una hamburguesa** y después se van todos a su casa a dormir
(Fernández, 2017, pp. 92-93)

The citation function is then derived from this usage (15), (16):

- (15) La frange dans les yeux. Au ras des sourcils. Aussi appelée frange pas téméraire, **genre « si j'en ai marre dans deux mois j'ai plus rien »**
(*frTenTen17*)
(16) [...] yo llegué al Grand Canyon y fue **tipo wow soy muy chiquita**
(Fernández, 2017, p. 94)

(15) assumes that *si j'en ai marre dans deux mois j'ai plus rien* reproduces the thought attributed to an unspecified speaker, without claiming that this is the speaker's exact thought. This aligns with the "quoted attitude" observed by Fleischman and Yaguello (2004). The purpose of this reproduction is to clarify the type of fringe being referred to, with *genre* serving as an introducer of an expansion that exemplifies the preceding noun.

From this, it follows that approximation appears as a semantic operation performed by the speaker, who makes use of a comparison with a reference element while indicating the existence of a gap. Simulative comparison is, as such, approximative. In the functions described in constructions X *genre/tipo* Y, characterized as illustrating, exemplifying, and specifying, the choice of Y assumes the existence of alternative elements with a certain degree of similarity, allowing for a relatively imprecise interpretation of X.

2. Approximation and vagueness

The evolutionary trend illustrated above shows how certain taxonomic nouns in various languages have evolved to serve as linguistic means of expressing approximation functions, transitioning through the presentation of imprecise categorization under an appearance closer to taxonomic classification. Mihatsch (2005) refers to this phenomenon as *desterminologización* (determinologisation), where scientific taxonomic 'terms' are incorporated into everyday language as 'nouns', losing the properties associated with traditional hierarchies. This diachronic process of semantic change also reveals that the approximative uses noted earlier can lead to further specialized uses as markers of approximation.

The linguistic elements that signal approximation adapt lexical expressions or numerals to the needs of a given speech situation, making them more flexible. As a result, they can assume new pragmatic functions, to the extent that discursive functions may take precedence and the approximative function may be lost in certain functions (Mihatsch, 2021). The nouns *genre* and *tipo* have undergone a diachronic process of semantic change, losing their syntactic head function as noun phrases and instead taking on semantic-pragmatic functions related to vague language (Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2007), as their conditions of applicability and validity are not calculable *a priori*.

From this point forward, we will focus specifically on the use of numerical approximation with these two forms (e.g., *Max a ramassé un champignon énorme genre 2 kilos... ça va lui faire une belle omelette* and *Los exámenes de este profesor suelen ser largos, tipo veinte preguntas*). This use definitively moves beyond *ad hoc* superordinates, as it is difficult to imagine a superordinate possessing common properties for these examples. Additionally, it should be noted that in this context we can observe the specialization of *genre* and *tipo* as markers of approximation, as there is no reference to a comparison between two entities.

Examples (17), (18), (19), and (20) illustrate the prototypical function of vagueness, as *genre* and *tipo* indicate that the term they modify is not clearly bounded. In this usage, the meaning of *genre* and *tipo* is akin to that of expressions without scalar orientation, such as *environ* or *más o menos*, which revolve around a reference axis by indicating the trajectory of an interval that lies on either side of the reference limit.

(17) Max prévoit **genre quinze jours** pour finir le boulot.

(18) Apparemment ça faisait **genre cinq ans** qu'ils étaient ensemble.

(19) Podemos quedar esta tarde **tipo cinco**, ¿vale ?

(20) Hacen falta **tipo veinte horas** para editar un vídeo de una hora y media.

Genre and *tipo* typically pertain to quantified phrases or noun groups with numeral adjectives, usually representing whole numbers, resulting in imprecise quantification. These forms no longer construct categories, but instead signal approximation in the quantity or numerical indication denoted. At the syntactic level, *genre* and *tipo* directly modify the quantified phrase, operating intrapropositionally. The modification introduced implies relaxing the interpretation of the numerical indication, which selects a precise point within a scale, while reducing its precision⁹. As a result, they function as linguistic indicators that generate a semantic interval of vagueness. This type of vagueness, related to expressions that denote a point on a scale, such as numerals, is referred to as 'scalar vagueness' in Sauerland and Stateva (2011) (also discussed by Prince et al., 1982, as 'rounders')¹⁰.

Our approach to this topic is grounded in two key premises: a) the use of linguistic mechanisms provided by language to introduce vagueness reflects the speaker's

intention; b) the analysis of these mechanisms can facilitate our understanding of the phenomenon of vagueness. This perspective suggests that in examples (17), (18), (19), and (20), we are dealing with a deliberate strategy employed by the speaker to introduce vagueness using *genre* and *tipo* —which are not required by the argument structure— as additives of vagueness (Channell, 1994). This aligns them with the *aproximadores* identified by Pardo Llibrer (2023), which he includes in the phenomenon of vagueness, as they are used to diffuse meaning¹¹. These added elements correspond to Voghera's (2013) concept of *vaghezza intenzionale*, or the speaker's deliberate intention to be vague in their statement. This is distinct from *vaghezza sistemica*, which is inherent to the semantics of the sign and relates to predicates with fuzzy epistemological boundaries (e.g., *bald*, *tall*, *young*...).

Additionally, studies on hedging, particularly drawing from Lakoff's (1973) work, investigate the linguistic forms and structures that modify the meaning and/or function of an utterance by introducing vagueness¹². The interest that linguists have in these forms encompasses both the ability of certain expressions to blur the boundaries of another linguistic expression and their capacity to weaken the illocutionary force of an utterance. In this way, the use of *genre* and *tipo* can replicate within a proposition the properties of vague predicates for pragmatic-discursive purposes. In other words, these mechanisms not only affect the propositional content but also have pragmatic consequences for illocutionary force and image management (Overstreet, 2011). Semantic flexibilization is accompanied by discursive effects.

In the previous examples, the speaker employs *genre* and *tipo* to indicate approximation, whether genuine or feigned (to soften the impact of what is being said). It is in the latter case that we encounter a hedge¹³. This hypothesis is supported by example (18), where the presence of *apparentment* alongside *genre* suggests that the speaker is drawing on external information that is not entirely reliable. This evidential comment allows the speaker to distance themselves from the assertion, thereby mitigating the force of the statement. Evidentiality serves to mitigate the statement. Moreover, evidentiality can also be used to create semantic flexibility, enabling speakers to convey approximation through implicature. This finding reinforces the connection between the semantic domains of approximation and evidentiality, which involve evaluating the content of a statement and revealing the speaker's attitude towards what they are saying.

From a linguistic perspective, the phenomenon under study operates at the crossroads of semantics and pragmatics. Numerical approximation invites a more flexible interpretation of the modified element, which is not based on conceptual resemblance but rather on the proximity of numbers on a scale. Resemblance does not lend itself to softening quantities. Mihatsch (2018) argues that the numerical approximation function of *tipo* in Spanish arises from its use as a mitigator, which weakens epistemic certainty regarding an expression. This metalinguistic distancing

effect is similar to what she observed with *como* (e.g., *La casa la llevan haciendo como tres años*) (Mihatsch, 2010)¹⁴. Mihatsch (2021) proposes a similar approach for the numerical approximation function of *genre*.

In the examples provided (17), (18), and (20), the speaker strategically attempts to reduce their degree of responsibility regarding the plausibility of the quantities denoted, or simply to soften an illocution (a suggestion in the case of (19)). It is noteworthy that the described use exhibits features of the various subtypes of intentional vagueness established by Voghera (2013), including informative vagueness, which relates to propositional content, and relational vagueness that concerns the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

3. Distinguishing vagueness

The concept of vagueness in language is often shrouded in ambiguity, making it challenging to define and distinguish from related semantic phenomena¹⁵. The literature on this topic is extensive, including studies that aim to differentiate the concept of vagueness from other notions that also involve underdetermination (Égré & Klinedinst, 2011; Fine, 1975; Keefe, 2000; Ludlow, 2014; among others). Despite varying definitions of vagueness, several perspectives agree that it is closely tied to the existence of borderline cases, as discussed by Sorensen (2018). These are instances where it is impossible to assign a specific value because we cannot determine whether they fall within the extension of the predicate. For example, predicates like *tall* or *red* are considered vague because they lack a clear boundary for application. In other words, we cannot establish the extension and anti-extension of the concept. Moeschler and Reboul (1994) point out that the issue lies in determining the criterion to follow in applying a predicate.

A statement is considered vague when it fails to meet the principle of bivalence, which requires a statement to be either true or false. By extension, a vague expression is likely to create an exception to bivalence for a statement. The indeterminacy implied by the fact that the extension is not objectively determined once and for all should not be confused with ambiguity. Ambiguity involves multiple, mutually exclusive meanings for a term (and correspondingly different possible extensions). It affects the choice between different intensions, whereas vagueness concerns the choice between different extensions (Fine, 1975).

In the case of *genre* and *tipo*, the changes in the meaning they introduce do not stem from a predicate with unclear boundaries. However, like vague predicates, they render semantic analysis impossible, as they prevent the assignment of clear truth values to a proposition. This is distinct from statements involving ambiguity. Let's consider the following examples from this perspective:

(17) Max prévoit **genre quinze jours** pour finir le boulot.

(20) Hacen falta **tipo veinte horas** para editar un vídeo de una hora y media.

When examining the term affected by *genre* and *tipo*, they operate on a quantified entity, giving them an extensional scope. In example (17), the introduction of the numerical indication *quinze jours* by *genre* suggests a continuous rather than discrete boundary between the extension and anti-extension. One key characteristic that distinguishes the use of *genre* and *tipo* from other forms of numerical approximation, such as *presque*, *à peine*, *casi*, and *apenas*, is that it does not preclude the interpretation of a value either higher or lower than the one indicated by the modified element.

(17') Max prévoit **genre quinze jours** pour finir le boulot, peut-être plus, peut-être moins. (= Max plans ?seven days / twelve days / sixteen days / twenty days / ?thirty days, ...)

As a result, the blurred boundary between the extension and anti-extension of the statement suspends the assignment of truth values, making the statement neither definitively true nor definitively false. This linguistic expression represents a borderline or indeterminate case, where the application of the predicate is neither clearly affirmed nor denied. This can be verified through the criterion of presuppositional inconsistency, as outlined by Pardo Llibrer (2019). In such cases, two contradictory presuppositions arise: a presupposition of truth and a presupposition of falsehood, which are inferred from the statement containing the vague form.

- (17'') a. (asserts) It may be true, and it may be false, that Max plans for fifteen days to finish the work.
b. (presupposes) It is true that Max plans for fifteen days to finish the work.
c. (presupposes) It is false that Max plans for fifteen days to finish the work.

The suspension of truth value assignment can also be formalized by invoking the sorites paradox. According to the criterion of susceptibility to the sorites paradox, a predicate *P* is considered vague if a soritic argument can be constructed from it (Keefe, 2000)¹⁶. The sorites paradox employs inductive reasoning (or by recurrence) while exploiting the semantic vagueness of predicates, which we aim to test in relation to the vagueness imparted by *genre* to a numerical quantification¹⁷. While reasoning by recurrence may be correctly applied in mathematics, when applied to semantic vagueness, this induction results in a paradox (17'''):

(17''') Max prévoit **genre quinze jours** pour finir le boulot.
If $n=15$ days is true, then $n\pm 1$ is true
[...]
0 days is true

Similarly, in (20), there is a modification of the propositional content, as the use of *tipo* before *veinte horas* suspends the assignment of truth values. This is clear in the application of the criteria for presuppositional inconsistency and the sorites paradox:

- (20') a. (affirms) It may be true, and it may be false, that it takes twenty hours to edit a one-and-a-half-hour video.
 b. (presupposes) It is true that it takes twenty hours to edit a one-and-a-half-hour video.
 c. (presupposes) It is false that it takes twenty hours to edit a one-and-a-half-hour video.
- (20'') Hacén falta **tipo veinte horas** para editar un vídeo de una hora y media.
 If $n =$ twenty hours is true, then $n \pm 1$ is true
 [...]

 0 hours is true

Unlike the previous examples, utterance (21) may not be linguistically ambiguous, given that contextual cues can resolve any potential ambiguity:

- (21) Il me faut un **avocat**.

In a linguistic exchange, contextual information plays a crucial role in enabling speakers to understand what they are discussing. For instance, suppose Max is preparing a salad for dinner, opens the refrigerator, and then addresses Léa. Given this context, Léa can easily infer what Max is referring to the ingredient Max would like to add to the salad, specifically avocados, given their shared love for the fruit. The shared knowledge between Max and Léa allows Léa to accurately identify the reference of the noun *avocat*, making it possible to assign a truth value to the utterance.

In contrast to vagueness, which remains unaffected by contextual additions, ambiguity can be resolved through context. This highlights the distinction between the two concepts. Furthermore, it is essential to note that, when translating a sentence from one natural language to another, vagueness persists, but ambiguity does not. For example, consider the translations of (17), (20), and (21) into (22), (23), and (24), respectively:

- (22) Max prevé **tipo quince días / como quince días** para terminar el trabajo.
 (23) Il faut **genre vingt heures** pour éditer une vidéo d'une heure et demie / Le montage d'une vidéo d'une heure et demie prend **environ vingt heures**.
 (24) Necesito un **aguacate**.

To better comprehend the phenomenon of vagueness, it is essential to distinguish it from generality. Vagueness cannot be reduced to the issue of specifying extension alone. Some concepts may not be vague, yet their extension may still be challenging to determine. For instance, mathematical terms like *prime number* illustrate that a term can be general without being vague. Generality refers to the insufficient level of

informativeness in a statement, which does not necessarily affect its communicative usefulness. The extension of the predicate *prime number* can be precisely described using a recursive function, distinguishing it from vagueness. For example, "*n* being divisible only by 1 and itself" provides a clear definition of a prime number. A standard generic statement like "Prime numbers have no divisors other than themselves and one" is an analytical statement that admits no exceptions. It is impossible for a number to be prime and have divisors other than itself and one. Although the extension of this concept is not entirely known, as it applies to an infinite set of numbers, there is always a definite answer to the question of whether a number is prime or not.

In contrast, terms like *red* when referring to color present a different challenge. Unlike the concept of *prime number* where the uncertainty lies in determining the extension, the uncertainty surrounding *red* is more fundamental. We cannot determine with certainty whether a particular shade of red qualifies as red. This is because the boundaries of *red* are inherently fuzzy, making it difficult to draw a clear distinction between what is and what is not red. Consequently, the uncertainty regarding the extension of *prime number* is not the same as for *red* (Égré & Klinedinst, 2011, p. 1)¹⁸.

This distinction is well-illustrated by the following exchange:

(25) (Father) – Qui t'a fait mal à la récréation ?

(Child) – a. Un enfant de l'autre classe.

(Child) – b. Un petit garçon de l'autre classe **genre** sept ans.

Response (a) is not maximally informative because it fails to identify the specific element or exhaustive set of elements that answer the question. The imprecision in the extension of the predicate is due to the generalization induced by the term *enfant*, which encompasses both boys and girls. Nevertheless, such a response can still be useful in communication. A more detailed response from a semantic perspective might be counterproductive for the child's communicative needs, as they may not wish to provide additional information. However, if necessary, this incompleteness can be resolved through pragmatic procedures that draw on contextual information. In contrast, the uncertainty represented by response (b) arises from the fact that the provided information is insufficient to determine, for each potential boy, whether the term applies to him or not. The existence of borderline cases and its relation to the sorites paradox distinguish a response like (b) from a response like (a).

At this point, we partially align with Sánchez Jiménez (2021, pp. 6777-6778), who echoes the distinction between inherent vagueness, which he associates with a "*definición estricta de vaguedad*" and generalization vagueness. While inherent vagueness is characterized by semantic continuum and establishes a contrastive opposition with blurred boundaries between the application and non-application of a predicate, generalization vagueness sets an inclusion relationship with other semantically more

intentional terms (such as boy and girl in the case of *enfant*)¹⁹. There is no doubt that the differences between the two responses in example (25) exhibit the characteristics mentioned. In the case of (25b), as previously noted, it would not be an inherently vague predicate, yet it shares with them the feature of semantic continuum highlighted by Sánchez Jiménez.

The properties of vagueness examined so far naturally give rise to an additional observation that underscores its distinct nature. A vague predicate can induce hesitation in judgments, as the speaker may be torn between affirming or denying an object's membership in the predicate's extension. In some cases, they may even express doubt. This phenomenon is exemplified when attempting to rephrase examples (17) and (20). In these instances, it is impossible to definitively declare whether it is true or false that Max plans to finish the job in fifteen days or that it takes twenty hours to edit a ninety-minute video, except to later retract the statement. This demonstrates the instability of our judgments in borderline cases:

- (26) Max prévoit **genre quinze jours** pour finir le boulot, c'est-à-dire à peu près quinze jours / ?c'est-à-dire quinze jours, pas un de plus pour finir le boulot.
- (27) Hacen falta **tipo veinte horas** para editar un video de una hora y media, o sea entre quince y veinticinco horas / ?o sea veinte, ni una más ni una menos.

This observation brings us back to Mihatsch's hypothesis (2018, 2021), discussed above, which suggests a link between the use of numerical approximation with *genre* and *tipo* and metalinguistic distancing. In such a case, the expression of vagueness would appear to be tied to modalization, as it reflects the speaker's reflection on their own communicative activity.

In this respect, we suggest, by way of an exploratory lead, the comparison between the use of *genre* and that of *disons*, even though these two forms belong to different diaphasic and even diastratic varieties, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (28) A- [...] Quand et où se rencontre-t-on?
 B- Terminus d'autobus de Trois-Rivières, il y a un café en face.
 A- Le Café de la gare. Oui, je connais.
 B- Très bien. Demain matin, ça vous va? *Disons* 8h 30? (Quesnel, 2023)
- (29) Le départ de la Mini-Transat est reporté à Lundi... Donc demain pas de contrainte à 14h comme prévu. Pour les talmondaïs on part ensemble? *Genre* 8h30 carrefour devant chez JC?
 (<https://retrobecanevendee.forumactif.org>, 25/09/2021)

Example (28) illustrates the speaker's attempt to pre-empt potential disagreement. The use of *disons* highlights its function in contexts of pragmatic mitigation and semantic vagueness. By metalinguistically qualifying the following temporal expression, *disons* achieves a reduction in precision by assigning it an approximative

value. However, its effect is not limited to the semantic level: it also mitigates the illocutionary force of the directive act, thereby blurring the boundary between the propositional content and the act of enunciation.

Similarly, in example (29), the forum poster proposes a meeting time using *genre*, thereby anticipating potential disagreement or renegotiation. The use of *genre* introduces flexibility into the temporal reference, signaling that the proposal is open to adjustment.

In both cases, the evocation of vagueness would stem from the speaker's attitude towards the information, which is presented as non-literal and therefore modifiable. The functional affinity between *genre* and *disons* in these contexts underlines the connection between the conceptual domains of approximation and mitigation, as both relate to the speaker's attitude towards their communicative act.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings presented here are intended to contribute to the linguistic study of the phenomena under consideration, focusing on the forms *genre* in French and *tipo* in Spanish. This study has explored the relationship between the conceptual domains of vagueness and approximation, focusing especially on their expression in numerical contexts, and has examined their connections to broader notions such as modalization and evidentiality. Although the investigation remains exploratory in nature, we believe the insights it provides offer a useful foundation for future research. Our goal has been to highlight aspects we consider central, most notably, the significance of vagueness as a communicative strategy worthy of focused linguistic analysis. We conclude by summarizing the main points derived from this research.

The forms *genre* and *tipo* have undergone a gradual process of reinterpretation which, despite some divergences, converges in fundamental ways, as it reflects shared communicative strategies that have triggered their semantic shift. Originally taxonomic nouns used in specialized, scientific discourse, both terms have been progressively conventionalized in everyday language to function as operators of spontaneous categorization, facilitating approximation through similarity-based comparison. This evolution has given rise to specialized semantic-pragmatic functions, including numerical approximation. Certain features of these functions correspond to what has been described as intentional vagueness.

In fact, research on forms like *genre* and *tipo* from a theoretical perspective on vagueness often points to examples of numerical approximation. These uses are characterized by the introduction of imprecision into measurable domains, thereby establishing a gradual semantic continuum between values, which is related to the notion of informative vagueness. The analysis of these patterns, based on identifiable

formal and contextual criteria, shows that numerical approximation plays a crucial role in how these forms contribute to utterance meaning.

Additionally, the diachronic process by which *genre* and *tipo* come to express quantitative approximation reveals features suggestive of their role in attenuating illocutionary force, an effect interpretable as relational vagueness through modalization.

In such contexts, the speaker's use of approximation often reflects not just informational imprecision but also a pragmatic stance, anticipating negotiation or signaling interpersonal caution. This raises an important question: should these forms be classified as vague quantifiers, as modal markers, or as hybrid elements occupying both roles? Addressing these issues would require further theoretical refinement, particularly in formalizing the interaction between propositional approximation, which affects a specific component of the utterance, and speech-act level attenuation.

To build on the findings of this study, future research could adopt more systematic methodologies. This piece of work has identified key traits of *genre* and *tipo* in their numerically approximative uses, offering a solid foundation upon which large-scale corpus studies could build to achieve broader empirical validation. Moreover, investigating regional and sociolinguistic variation would provide deeper insight into the conditions that favors this usage, which appears closely associated with informal and youth-oriented modes of speech.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is a contribution to project PID2023-146508NB-I00, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the State Research Agency, and the European Union (European Regional Development Fund, ERDF).

NOTES

¹ Below, a non-exhaustive list is provided of some notable publications on the forms *genre* and *tipo* over the past eight years: André (2022), Berbinski (2018), Mihatsch and Hennecke (2022), Vladimirska (2016) and Vigneron-Bosbach (2024) for the form *genre*; De Luca (2022), Fernández (2017), Mihatsch (2018) and Mihatsch and Vazeille (2024) for the form *tipo*.

² See Berbinski (2018), Borreguero Zuloaga (2020), Fernández (2017), Huseby (2010), Mihatsch (2007) and Vladimirska (2016).

³ In this article, we will focus on the evolution of certain taxonomic nouns into markers of approximation. We will not delve into the various uses to which these forms, *genre* and *tipo*, are put, nor the recent trend of pragmaticalization towards mitigation. It is essential to note that new uses often emerge simultaneously and coexist, influencing one another, as Isambert (2012) observed in the case of *genre* in French. While tracing a distinct or linear evolution for innovative uses may be challenging, it does not diminish the development of functional properties.

⁴ *Fabada* is a culinary speciality from Asturias (Spain) that resembles *cassoulet* but is not a subclass of *cassoulet*.

⁵ Mihatsch (2005, p. 280) suggests that data from language acquisition studies, speech errors, aphasia-related errors, and word association tests provide evidence that, in everyday language, horizontal approximative comparison is cognitively more fundamental and therefore more natural than the vertical relation of logical inclusion.

⁶ According to Chauveau-Thoumelin (2016), *style* can sometimes be used in place of *genre* in certain contexts. However, *genre* is by far the more commonly used term, accounting for approximately 48% of cases. For a detailed analysis of the differences between *genre* and *style*, we refer readers to Danon-Boileau and Morel (1997).

⁷ This semantic shift is a classic example of grammaticalization, where the referential meaning of an expression gives way to conveying the speaker's stance and the organization of discourse.

⁸ This web corpus contains internet texts collected in 2017.

⁹ For the sake of our discussion, we will set aside the issue of numerals that allow for an interpretation consistent with a larger segment of the scale (Krifka, 2007).

¹⁰ Sauerland and Stateva (2011) differentiate between 'scalar vagueness' and 'epistemic vagueness'. For a detailed analysis of approximators from the perspective of scalarity (or non-scalarity), we recommend consulting Fuentes Rodríguez (2016), Mihatsch (2010), or Sauerland and Stateva (2011).

¹¹ Theoretical approaches to analyzing these additions have varied widely, encompassing logic of fuzzy concepts (Lakoff, 1973), interactive approaches (Channell, 1994), and variationist perspectives (Mihatsch & Albelda, Coords., 2016), among others.

¹² « For me, some of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness -words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. I will refer to such words as ‘hedges’ » (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471).

¹³ In addition to the term ‘hedge’, which encompasses a pragmatic-discursive category, some studies have also introduced the term ‘vagueifier’, which is more narrowly focused on the semantic category.

¹⁴ In a later work, Mihatsch (2021, p. 408) further nuances this hypothesis.

¹⁵ Our approach to vagueness combines the philosophical and formal aspects with linguistic development. We adopt a descriptive approach, focusing on the characteristics of vagueness that Égré and Klinedinst (2011, pp. 1-2) identify as central: the presence of borderline cases, the lack of a sharp boundary between the extension and anti-extension of a predicate, and susceptibility to the sorites paradox. We will not explore the various interpretations and attempts to address vagueness, which have led to diverse perspectives on these properties.

¹⁶ Pardo Llibrer (2023, p. 57) observes that this test is transparent when applied to quantitative expressions, but its applicability to other types of statements may require reevaluation.

¹⁷ The sorites paradox poses a classic problem: it is impossible to pinpoint the exact number of additional grains of sand or the exact number of fewer grains needed for a heap of sand to cease being a heap. Similarly, it is impossible to determine the precise number of hairs at which a person stops being bald, and the predicate *bald* switches from describing a true state of affairs to describing a false one.

¹⁸ This refers to Peirce (1902, p. 748, as cited in Channell, 1994, p. 7) and to the notion of intrinsic uncertainty inherent to vagueness:

A proposition is vague when there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition. By intrinsically uncertain we mean not uncertain in consequence of any ignorance of the interpreter, but because the speaker’s habits of language were indeterminate.

¹⁹ Sánchez Jiménez (2021, p. 6780) proposes a continuum of meanings that spans from the most distinct meanings represented by homonymy to the most similar meanings embodied in inherent vagueness. Polysemy and generalizing vagueness are situated along this spectrum.