Ambiguity and Intellectual Engagement
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Abstract

Despite modernity’s love affair with precision, ambiguity persists not only in humor and politics, but all areas of contemporary life including scholarship and science. Here we explore how knowledge cultures differ in their precision of expression and the consequences of ambiguity for those cultures. We develop a measure of ambiguous expression that draws on computational linguistics and information theory. Then we show that ambiguous claims lead to greater social integration and less fragmentation among those who reference them, drawing competing interpretations into conversation with one another. Ambiguity, and the uncertainty that follows, stimulates social learning and so ironically plays a crucial role in focusing modern knowledge and building community.