

(Just) about: an analysis

Sauerland and Stateva (2007) compare the approximators *about* and *approximately* and suggest that *about* occurs in a particular subset of *approximately*-contexts. Here I highlight two complications for the analysis they put forth: *about* is infelicitous in *approximately*-felicitous contexts that imply speaker certainty, and *about* is felicitous with select maximum-standard gradable adjectives. To account for these, I propose that *about* has an epistemic possibility component, and when *about* appears with a maximum-standard adjective, it is actually an instance of *just about* with a covert *just*.

Previous analysis Sauerland and Stateva (2007) claim that the approximator *approximately* can only combine with non-endpoint expressions as shown in (1), and the approximator *about* is restricted to a subset of these expressions, specifically, numerals and temporal expressions, as shown in (2).

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|-----|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| (1) | a. | approximately three/north/the same | (non-endpoint) |
| | b. | #approximately dry/pure/white | (endpoint) |
| (2) | a. | about three, at about noon, at about midnight, at about the same time | (non-endpoint) |
| | b. | #about north/open | (non-endpoint) |
| | c. | #about clean | (endpoint) |

This characterization of *about*, however, seems simultaneously not restrictive enough and too restrictive. First, not all numerals and temporal expressions are felicitous with *about*, demonstrated by the expressions in (3), which many speakers find marked.

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|-----|----|--------------------------------------------|----|---------------------------|
| (3) | a. | ?There were about two people at the party. | c. | ?It's about Thanksgiving. |
| | b. | ?He'll arrive on about Tuesday. | d. | ?It's about 2010. |

Second, not all endpoint expressions are infelicitous with *about*. Notably, many maximum-standard gradable adjectives are felicitous, shown in (4a) (Rotstein and Winter, 2004, a.o.).

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|-----|----|---------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------|
| (4) | a. | about full/empty/straight | b. | about ?dry/?certain/?closed/#invisible/#pure |
|-----|----|---------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------|

Epistemic content To account for the data in (3), I propose that *about* marks speaker uncertainty. This epistemic component is apparent in contexts like (5), where the speaker is assumed to know his own age.

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|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| (5) | [The speaker is 23 years old, and someone is seeking a 25-year-old] | |
| | a. I'm approximately 25. | b. ? I'm about 25. |

As expected in this new analysis, felicity of *about* improves when the context supports speaker uncertainty. If the speaker in (5) just awoke from a coma and does not know how old he is currently, *about* becomes felicitous. In (3a), the infelicity may be related to the fact that people are less likely to be uncertain about small numbers of atomic nouns; if only two people were at the party, you could easily count them, but if the numeral is less countable (e.g. *fifty*), felicity improves. Similarly, if (3b) is uttered in a context where schedules are sufficiently vague, its felicity improves (e.g. *John is stopping by our house on his cross-country bike ride. His schedule depends heavily on the weather, but he thinks he'll arrive about Tuesday.*). Likewise, making the examples in (3) temporally more remote (i.e. such that the speaker is not expected to remember precisely) improves their felicity (e.g., *It was about Thanksgiving/1990 because it was right around the time my brother was born.*)

Additional support for assigning an epistemic component to *about* can be seen in its interaction with epistemic predicates like *might* and *seem*. Here, as shown in (6), *about* (but not near-synonym *approximately*) gives rise to modal concord readings.

- (6) a. John is about six feet tall. $\approx(6b,d)$, $\not\approx(6c,e)$
 b. John might be about six feet tall. c. John might be approximately six feet tall.
 d. John seems about six feet tall. e. John seems approximately six feet tall.

This epistemic behavior is captured in (7) and (8), where *about* and *approximately* differ in that only *about* directly expresses that the uttered numeral is epistemically possible, implicating lack of speaker certainty.

$$(7) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{about} \rrbracket = \lambda n_d. \lambda D_{\langle dt \rangle} : \exists m_d \in \{y | n - \sigma \leq y \leq n + \sigma\}. D(m) \ \& \ \diamond D(n)$$

- (8) $\llbracket \mathbf{approximately} \rrbracket = \lambda n_d. \lambda D_{\langle dt \rangle} : \exists m_d \in \{y | n - \sigma \leq y \leq n + \sigma\}. D(m)$
 ‘presupposes that *D* is true of some degree that falls within some contextually-determined distance (σ) from the uttered degree’

(Just) about To account for the data in (4) I propose that these examples contain instances of directional *just about* with a covert *just*, not approximative *about*. Note that when *about* modifies a maximum-standard adjective, it behaves similar to other directional modifier (*just about*, *almost*, *nearly*, etc.): following Nouwen (2006), it has a polar component, shown in (9), but this polar component is not prominent, shown in (10).

- (9) a. just about full \rightarrow not full (10) a. #Fortunately, the glass was just about full when it fell.
 b. about full \rightarrow not full b. #Fortunately, the glass was about full when it fell.
 c. (about ten \nrightarrow not ten) c. (Fortunately, the glass was not full when it fell.)

So, when *about* appears with certain maximum-standard adjectives, it patterns like *just about*, not like approximative *about*, supporting the analysis of this *about* as being a conventionalized form of *just about*. And while this form has been established for adjectives in (4a), it has not been for those in (4b). I assume that this distinction is frequency-based; note that many paraphrases are infelicitous with *about*.

- (11) a. about full/?brimming/?saturated/?adequate/?loaded b. about empty/?vacant/?blank/?barren

Conclusion Here we have glimpsed Sauerland and Stateva (2007)’s take on *approximately* and *about*, as well as some ostensible problems. While I maintain that approximative *about* occurs in a subset of contexts allowed by *approximately* (directional, not approximative, (*just*) *about* occurs with adjectives), the presence of an epistemic component requires some revamping of their proposed licit contexts and denotation for *about* (which, like their *approximately*, simply adjusts scale granularity, $\llbracket \mathbf{about} \mathbf{D} \rrbracket^{\text{gran}} = \text{coarsest}(\text{gran})(\llbracket \mathbf{D} \rrbracket)$).

Interestingly, this epistemic *about* parallels Geurts and Nouwen (2007)’s analysis of *at most*: both assert that expressed numeral is possible, but (unlike assertions) neither seems to allow direct denial of this content. In (5), neither (5b) nor *I’m at most 25* is felicitous, but neither can be directly denied (*You’re wrong, you know you’re not 25* vs. *Hey, wait a minute, don’t you know how old you are?*). And while this epistemic content does not show pure at-issue behavior, it does not exhibit the projection behavior of presuppositions or CIs. This behavior, however, appears general to epistemic expressions (*I might be 25* shows the same deniability pattern), affirming the proposed epistemic content in *about* and *at most*.

References Geurts, B., and R. Nouwen. 2007. At least et al.: The semantics of scalar modifiers. *Language* 83(3):533-559. • Nouwen, R. 2006. Remarks on the polar orientation of almost. *Linguistics in the Netherlands* 23(1):162-173. • Rotstein, C., and Y. Winter. 2004. Total adjectives vs. partial adjectives: Scale structure and higher-order modifiers. *Natural Language Semantics* 12:259-288. • Sauerland, U., and P. Stateva. 2007. Scalar vs. epistemic vagueness: Evidence from approximators. In *Proceedings of SALT 17*, 228-245. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications, Cornell University.