

# *(Just)about*: an analysis

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## 1 Introduction

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*.

## 2 Previous analysis

Sauerland and Stateva (2007) claim:

- *approximately* can only combine with non-endpoint expressions
  - (1) a. approximately three/north/the same (non-endpoint)
  - b. #approximately dry/pure/white (endpoint)
- *about* is restricted to a subset of these expressions, specifically, numerals and temporal expressions
  - (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)

But this characterization of *about* is not restrictive enough

- Not all numerals and temporal expressions are felicitous with *about*, demonstrated by the expressions in (3), which many speakers find marked [Addressed in Section 3]
  - (3) a. ?There were about two people at the party.
  - b. ?He'll arrive on about Tuesday.
  - c. ?Today is about Thanksgiving.
  - d. ?The year is about 2010.

And it is too restrictive

- Not all endpoint expressions are infelicitous with *about* – many maximum-standard gradable adjectives are felicitous, shown in (4a) (Rotstein and Winter, 2004, a.o.)  
[Addressed in Section 4]

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

### 3 Epistemic content

To account for the data in (3), I propose that *about* marks speaker uncertainty (as well as approximation).

Independent support for *about* as uncertainty marker:

1. Infelicitous when context establishes knowledge – e.g. in (5), *about* (but not near-synonym *approximately*) is infelicitous where the speaker is assumed to know his own age

- (5)    [The speaker is 26 years old, and the addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]  
       a.    I'm approximately 25.  
       b.    ?I'm about 25.  
       c.    #I'm maybe 25.

Cf. (6)

- (6)    [The speaker is 26 years old but is suffering from amnesia such that he does not know his age, and the addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]  
       a.    I'm approximately 25.  
       b.    I'm about 25.  
       c.    I'm maybe 25.

2. Interacts epistemically with epistemic predicates *might* and *seem* – e.g. in (7), *about* (but not near-synonym *approximately*) gives rise to modal concord readings (Geurts and Nouwen, 2007, a.o.)

- (7)    John is about six feet tall.  
       a.    ≈ John might be about six feet tall.  
       b.    ≈ John    seems    about six feet tall.

- (8) John is approximately six feet tall.  
a.  $\not\approx$  John might be approximately six feet tall.  
b.  $\not\approx$  John seems approximately six feet tall.
3. Interacts epistemically with rising intonation (following Gunlogson, 2008; Zaroukian, 2011) – e.g. in (10), *about* (but not near-synonym *approximately*) gives rise to modal concord readings

- (9) Amy: How many books did John bring?  
Ben:  
a. 10?  
b. About 10?  $\approx$ (9a)  
c. About 10.

Similarly

- (10) Amy: How many books did John bring?  
Ben:  
a. 10?  
b. Maybe 10?  $\approx$ (10a)  
c. #Maybe 10.

Contrastively

- (11) Amy: How many books did John bring?  
Ben:  
a. 10?  
b. Approximately 10?  $\not\approx$ (11a)  
c. Approximately 10.

Can *about*'s epistemic content explain (3)?

*About* improves when the context supports speaker uncertainty, worsens when context supports certainty (though this is not the only factor)

**(3a) ?There were about two people at the party.**

- People are less likely to be uncertain about small numbers

(3a) ?There were about two people at the party.

(12) ??There were approximately two people at the party.

- If the numeral is less countable (e.g. *fifty*), felicity improves

(3a)' There were about fifty people at the party.

(13) There were approximately fifty people at the party.

- Both *about* and *approximately* prefer rounder numbers (or reference points)

(3a)" ?There were about forty-nine people at the party

(14) ?There were approximately forty-nine people at the party

- *About*, not *approximately*, infelicitous when it conflicts with knowledge

(15) You think two people came? Actually, three people came, but I guess...

- a. there were *approximately* two people at the party.
- b. ?there were *about* two people at the party.

**(3b) ?He'll arrive on about Tuesday.**

- *About*, not *approximately*, infelicitous when it conflicts with knowledge

(16) You think he'll arrive Tuesday? He'll actually arrive on Monday, but I guess...

- a. he'll arrive *approximately* Tuesday.
- b. ?he'll arrive *about* about Tuesday.

- *About* improves in a context that supports uncertainty

(3b)' 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 on about Tuesday.

- Doesn't behave quite the same as *approximately*

(17) ?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 on approximately Tuesday.

**(3c) ?It's about Thanksgiving.**

- *About*, not *approximately*, bad when it conflicts with knowledge

(18) You think today is Thanksgiving? It's November 30th, but I guess...

- a. today is *approximately* Thanksgiving.
- b. ?today is *about* Thanksgiving.

- *About* improves in a context that supports uncertainty – e.g. more remote

(19) Since it was right around the time my brother was born, I'd say it was about Thanksgiving.

(20) ?Since it was right around the time my brother was born, I'd say it was approximately Thanksgiving.

### (3d) ?It's about 2010.

- *About*, not *approximately*, bad when it conflicts with knowledge

(21) You think it's 2010? It's actually 2012, but I guess...

- it's *approximately* 2010.
- ?it's *about* 2010.

- Improves in a context that supports uncertainty – e.g. more remote

(22) Since it was right around the time my brother was born, I'll say it was about 1990.

(23) ?Since it was right around the time my brother was born, I'll say it was approximately 1990.

This epistemic behavior is captured in (25) and (24), where *about* and *approximately* differ in that only *about* directly expresses that the uttered numeral is epistemically possible, implicating lack of speaker certainty.

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

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

## 4 (*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*

*Just about* is an 'almost modifier' (cf. *almost*, *virtually*, *nearly*, *damn near*, *pretty much*, *not quite*, and *just about* (Morzycki, 2001))

*Almost* modifiers are felicitous with maximum-standard adjectives

- (26) a. just about full/empty/straight  
b. just about dry/certain/closed/invisible/pure

Cf. *about*

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

*Almost* modifiers have both a proximal and a polar component (Nouwen, 2006)

- (27) The glass was just about full.  
a. Proximal – The glass was close to being full  
b. Polar – The glass was not full

- Polar component is not prominent, as can be seen in the infelicity of (28a) (cf. (28b))

- (28) a. #Fortunately, the glass was just about full when it fell.  
b. Fortunately, the glass was not full when it fell.

*About* patterns the same – has both a proximal and a polar component

- (29) The glass was about full.  
a. Proximal – The glass was close to being full  
b. Polar – The glass was not full

- Polar component is not prominent

- (30) a. #Fortunately, the glass was about full when it fell.  
b. Fortunately, the glass was not full when it fell.

Does not pattern with numeral/temporal-modifying *about*, which lacks a polar component

- (31) a. almost ten → not ten  
b. just about ten → not ten  
c. about ten ↗ not ten

Propose: *about* is an *almost* modifier with a phonologically null *just*

I assume that this distinction is frequency-based; note that many paraphrases are infelicitous with *about*

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

#### 4.1 Relation between *almost*-modifier (*just*) *about* and numeral/temporal-modifying *about*

Can one be derived from the other?

Perhaps, but

- *just about* is 1-sided proximal, numeral/temporal-modifying *about* is 1-sided proximal

- (33) a. John is about 25. → John's age is close to 25 (2-sided)  
(i) John is just about 25. → John's age is close to 25 (1-sided)

- *just about* is polar, numeral/temporal-modifying *about* is not

- (34) a. John is about 25.  $\nrightarrow$  John is not 25  
b. John is just about 25. → John is not 25

- relatedly, *just about* is compatible with speaker certainty, numeral/temporal-modifying *about* is not

- (35) [The speaker is 24 years old, and addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]  
a. ?I'm about 25.  
b. I'm just about 25.

#### 4.2 *Almost*-modifier version of *approximately*?

Does *approximately* have something analogous to *about*'s covert-*just* form?

Perhaps

- Patterns distributionally like directional *about*

- (36) a. approximately full/empty/straight  
b. approximately ?dry/?certain/?closed/#invisible/#pure

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

But

- There's no comparable *just approximately* form

- (37) a. just about full/empty/straight  
b. just approximately full/empty/straight (contrastive reading only)

- (38) a. just about full  $\rightarrow$  not full  
b. just approximately full  $\rightarrow$  not full

- *Just approximately* is 2-sided proximal, unlike *almost* modifiers

- (39) a. just about 10  $\rightarrow$  close to 10 (1-sided)  
b. just approximately 10  $\rightarrow$  close to 10 (2-sided)

- Adjective-modifying *about* is polar, adjective-modifying *approximately* is not

- (40) a. about full  $\rightarrow$  not full  
b. approximately full  $\nrightarrow$  not full

- No contrast in certainty as with (*just*) *about*

- (41) [The speaker is 24 years old, and addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]  
a. ?I'm about 25.  
b. I'm just about 25.  
c. I'm approximately 25.  
d. I'm just approximately 25.

(Relatedly, Sauerland and Stateva (2007) note contrast *exactly full* < *absolutely full*)

## 5 Conclusion

Here we have glimpsed Sauerland and Stateva (2007)'s take on *approximately* and *about*

- *Approximately* can only combine with non-endpoint expressions
- *About* is restricted to a subset of these expressions: numerals and temporal expressions

As well as some ostensible problems.

- (3) a. ?There were about two people at the party.  
b. ?He'll arrive on about Tuesday.  
c. ?Today is about Thanksgiving.  
d. ?The year is about 2010.

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

- 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).

$$(42) \quad \llbracket \text{approximately} \rrbracket^{gran}(G) = G(\text{coarsest}(gran))$$

(Sauerland and Stateva, 2007, p. 233)

$$(43) \quad \llbracket \text{about } D \rrbracket^{gran} = \text{coarsest}(gran)(\llbracket D \rrbracket)$$

(Sauerland and Stateva, 2007, p. 242)

Cf. Another case of epistemic content in quantifiers – Geurts and Nouwen (2007)’s analysis of *at most/least*

- Both *at most/least* and *about* express that the uttered numeral is possible

$$(44) \quad \begin{array}{ll} \text{[The speaker is 26 years old, addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]} \\ \text{a. I'm approximately 25.} & \text{c. I'm older than 24.} \\ \text{b. ?I'm about 25.} & \text{d. ??I'm at least 25.} \end{array}$$

- but (unlike assertions) neither seems to allow direct denial of this content

$$(45) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{A: I'm \{at most/about\} 25.} \\ \text{B: \#You're wrong, you know you're not 25.} \\ \text{B': Hey, wait a minute, you know how old you are!} \end{array}$$

- This epistemic content also does not exhibit the projection behavior of presuppositions or CIs

$$(46) \quad \text{It's not the case that I'm \{at most/about\} 25.}$$

- This behavior, however, appears general to epistemic expressions (*I might be 25*), supporting the proposed epistemic content in *about* and *at most/least*

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