(*Just*) *about*: An analysis

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Abstract

Aim: Explain the distribution of the approximator *about*

Proposal:
- *About* expresses speaker uncertainty
- *About* has a covert-*just* form

This explains:
- Infelicity in contexts that establish speaker certainty
- Felicity with (some) maximum-standard adjectives

Expanding on Sauerland and Stateva (2007)

Sauerland and Stateva (2007) claim:

- *approximately* can only combine with non-endpoint expressions (Sauerland and Stateva, 2007, p. 241)

  (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 (Sauerland and Stateva, 2007, p. 242)

  (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*   [Addressed in Column 2]

  (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*

  Especially (some) maximum-standard gradable adjectives (Rotstein and Winter, 2004, a.o.)
  [Addressed in Column 3]

  (4)   a.   about full/empty/straight
          b.   about ?dry/?certain/?closed/#invisible/#pure
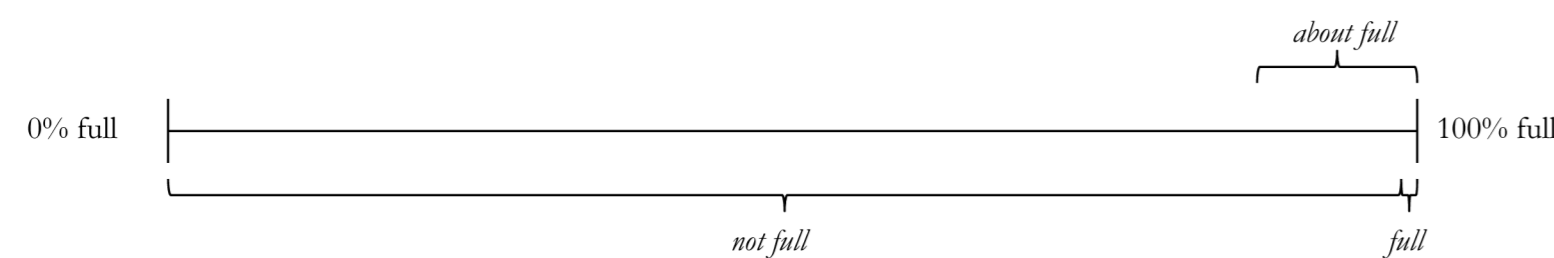
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Nouwen, Rick. 2006. Remarks on the polar orientation of *almost*. *Linguistics in the Netherlands* 23(1):162–173.

Rotstein, Carmen, and Yoad Winter. 2004. Total adjectives vs. partial adjectives: Scale structure and higher-order modifiers. *Natural Language Semantics* 12:259–288.

Sauerland, Uli, and Penka Stateva. 2007. Scalar vs. epistemic vagueness: Evidence from approximators. In *Proceedings of SALT 17*, 228–245. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications, Cornell University.

Epistemic behavior

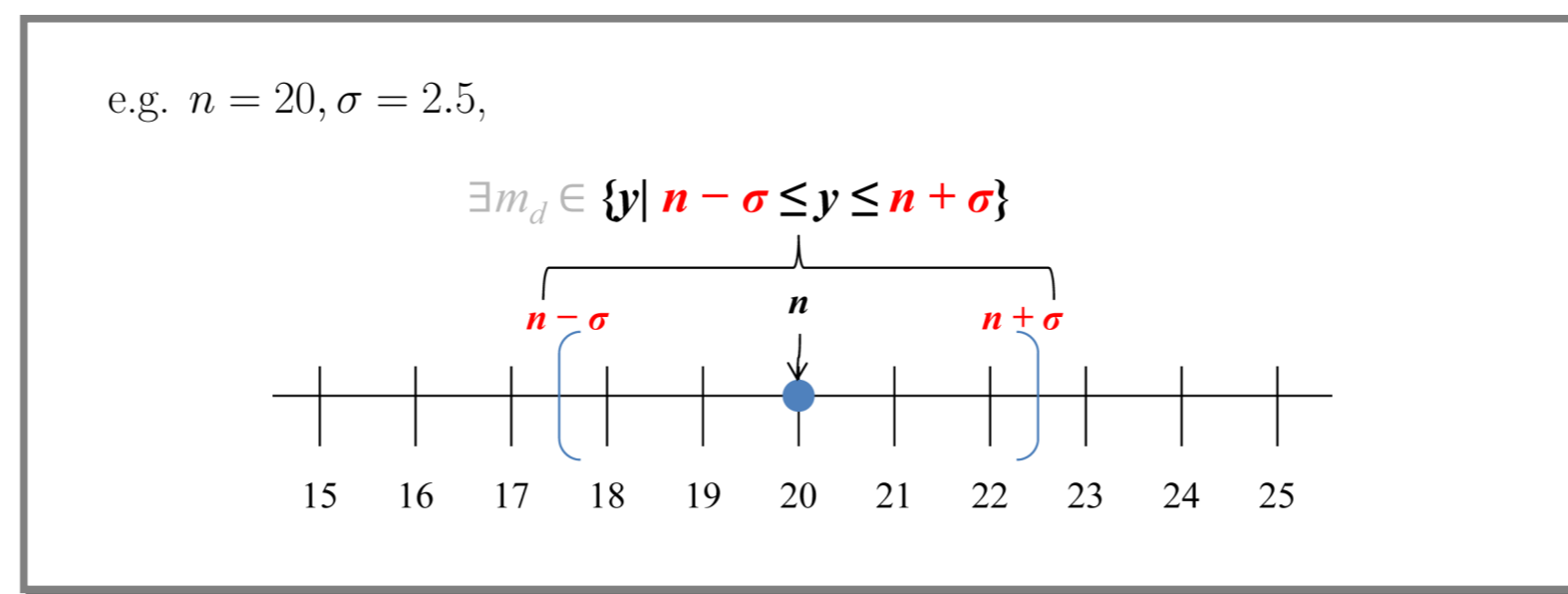To account for the data in (3), I propose that **about** marks approximation and speaker uncertainty

Independent support for *about* as an uncertainty marker:
- 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, addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]
          a.   I'm approximately 25.
          b.   ?I'm about 25.
          c.   #I'm maybe 25.

- Interacts epistemically with epistemic predicates *might* and *seem* – e.g. in (6), *about* (but not near-synonym *approximately*) gives rise to modal concord readings (Geurts and Nouwen, 2007, a.o.)

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

  (7)   John is approximately six feet tall.
          a.   ≉ John might be approximately six feet tall.
          b.   ≉ John seems   approximately six feet tall.

If certainty is established, *about* contrasts with *approximately*

(3a′)   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′)   You think he'll arrive Tuesday? He'll actually arrive on Monday, but I guess...
  a.   he'll arrive on *approximately* Tuesday.
  b.   ?he'll arrive on *about* Tuesday.

(3c′)   You think today is Thanksgiving? It's November 30th, but I guess...
  a.   today is *approximately* Thanksgiving.
  b.   ?today is *about* Thanksgiving.

(3d′)   You think the year is 2010? It's actually 2012, but I guess...
  a.   the year is *approximately* 2010.
  b.   ?the year is *about* 2010.

Proposal: *about* expresses speaker uncertainty

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

e.g. $n = 20, \sigma = 2.5,$

$\exists m_d \in \{y | n - \sigma \leq y \leq n + \sigma\}$

(9) $[\![\textbf{about}]\!] = \lambda n_d.\lambda D_{\langle dt\rangle} : \exists m_d \in \{y | n - \sigma \leq y \leq n + \sigma\}.D(m)$ & $\diamond D(n)$

About and *approximately* differ in that only *about* directly expresses that the uttered numeral is epistemically possible, implicating lack of speaker certainty

Cf. Sauerland and Stateva (2007), where both $[\![\textbf{approximately}]\!]$ and $[\![\textbf{about}]\!]$ adjust scale granularity to 'coarsest'

If context supports speaker uncertainty, *about* improves

(3a″)   Based on how much food was eaten, I'd say about two people came to the party.

(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.

(3c″)   Since it was right around the time my brother was born, I'll say it was about Thanksgiving.

(3d″)   Since it was right around the time my brother was born, I'll say it was about 1990.

(*Just*) *about*

When *about* occurs with maximum-standard adjectives, it is actually a form of *just 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 gradable adjectives

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

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

(11)   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 (12a) (cf. (12b))

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

About patterns like *just about* when modifying maximum-standard adjectives

(13)   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

  (14)   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

(15)   a.   almost ten → not ten
          b.   just about ten → not ten
          c.   about ten ↛ not ten

Proposal: *about* is the *almost* modifier *just about* with a phonologically null *just*

Conclusions

Sauerland and Stateva (2007) analysis does not account for (3) and (4)
- These data highlight
  - Epistemic contribution of *about*
  - Separate covert-*just* form of *about*

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

  (5′)   [The speaker is 26 years old, addressee is seeking a 25-year-old]
            a.   I'm approximately 25.   c.   I'm older than 24.
            b.   ?I'm about 25.   d.   ??I'm at least 25.

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

  (16)   A: I'm {at most/about} 25.
            B: #You're wrong, you know you're not 25.
            B′: Hey, wait a minute, you know how old you are!

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

  (17)   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*