

## *Approximately vs. about: epistemic possibility in approximation*

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

**Previous analysis** Sauerland and Stateva (2007) claim that the approximator *approximately* can only combine with non-endpoint expressions (*approximately three/dry*), and the approximator *about* is restricted to a subset of non-endpoint expressions, specifically, numerals and temporal expressions.

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 expressions like *?It's about 2010*, which many speakers find marked. Second, not all endpoint expressions are infelicitous with *about*; notably, many maximum-standard gradable adjectives are felicitous (e.g. *about empty*).

**Epistemic content** To begin to account for the data above, I propose that *about* and *approximately* differ in that only *about* directly expresses that the uttered numeral is epistemically possible, implicating lack of speaker certainty. The utterance *It's about 2010* sounds strange, then, because speakers are generally assumed to know what year it is. As expected in this new analysis, felicity of *about* improves when the context supports speaker uncertainty. For example, if the speaker had been in a coma for several years, his utterance of *It's about 2010* is less marked.

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

**(Just) about** To account for the felicity of *about dry*, I propose that this contains an instance 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 (*(just) about full* → *not full*), but this polar component is not prominent.

**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*, 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,  $[[\text{about } \mathbf{D}]]^{\text{gran}} = \text{coarsest}(\text{gran})([[\mathbf{D}]]))$ ).

Interestingly, this epistemic *about* parallels Geurts and Nouwen (2007)'s analysis of *at most*: both assert that the expressed numeral is possible, but (unlike assertions) neither seems to allow direct denial of this content. Neither *It's about 2010* nor *It's at least* is particularly felicitous, but neither can be directly denied (*You're wrong, you know it's not 2010* vs. *Hey, wait a minute, don't you know what year it is?*). 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 (*It might be 2010* shows the same deniability pattern), affirming the proposed epistemic content in *about* and *at most*.