

Approximators as polarity items: empirical findings

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Natural languages have a wide variety of lexical items that serve to regulate the level of (im)precision at which a numerical expression is interpreted, examples being English *about, roughly, exactly* and German *ungefähr*. A little-investigated aspect of the behavior of such ‘approximators’ is that they are polarity sensitive: in simple numerical expressions, they tend to pattern as positive polarity items (PPIs), whereas when embedded in comparative quantifiers they are negative polarity items (NPIs).

- a. Lisa has about 50 sheep.
b. ??Lisa doesn’t have about 50 sheep.
- a. ??Lisa has more than about 50 sheep.
b. Lisa doesn’t have more than about 50 sheep.

In the environments where they are licensed, approximator-modified numerals produce weaker assertions than the corresponding bare numerical expressions (e.g. (2b) is semantically weaker than *Lisa doesn’t have more than 50 sheep*). As such, approximators belong to the class of attenuating polarity items (Israel 1996), whose behavior is not easily accounted for by leading current theories of polarity sensitivity (e.g. Chierchia 2013).

In this talk, I present the initial results of a program of corpus-based and experimental research aimed at better understanding the factors that contribute to the felicity of approximators across syntactic and discourse contexts. Exploring this topic will require us to take a closer look at the functions of approximation, and the pragmatics of numerical constructions in interaction with negation.

Drawing on these findings, I outline a preliminary semantic/pragmatic account according to which the polarity sensitivity of approximators derives from their competition with simpler unmodified alternatives, and discuss how such an account might be extended to other members of the attenuating class.

References

Chierchia, G. 2013. *Logic in grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Israel, M. 1996. Polarity sensitivity as lexical semantics. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 19:619:666.