

snippets

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More or less an approximator

Stephanie Solt · Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft

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In an important and enjoyable paper, Sauerland and Stateva (2007) investigate the class of *approximators*, modifiers that serve to make vague assertions more or less precise. All of these items, they propose, function by regulating the level of *granularity* at which the modified expression is interpreted, though they do so in different ways, the result being combinatorial restrictions that distinguish members of the class from one another. A case in point is *more or less*, which – like *about* and *approximately* – yields a coarse-grained, approximate interpretation of the expressions it composes with, but which is seemingly limited to modifying scalar endpoints:

- (1) More or less dry / pure / clean / #tall / #three

I have always considered this to be a puzzling sort of restriction. Why should a modifier that intuitively describes values either greater or less than some point be specialized for precisely those cases where there *are* no higher scalar values, only lower ones? It turns out that the facts are actually more complicated, but looking at a broader range of data suggests a solution to the puzzle, and also points to some more general conclusions. *More or less* does not compose only with maximum standard gradable adjectives such as *dry* and *clean* but also with universals of all sorts (*more or less everyone*; *more or less forever*), expressions of equality (*more or less the same*), and nominal and verbal expressions, including non-scalar ones for which a granularity-based analysis seems unlikely.

- (2) It's more or less a hangout for the kids.
- (3) I more or less told him that.

It is also not completely precluded from modifying midpoint-denoting expressions, occurring felicitously with spatial expressions (4), adjectival equatives (5), and proportional measures (6):

- (4) She stood more or less in the middle of the room.
- (5) The plutonium is shaped into a ball more or less as big as a grapefruit.
- (6) More or less half / ??twenty of the students supported the decision.

The generalization seems to be that *more or less* composes with *relative but not absolute* measures. This suggests that it does not operate on granularity at all, but rather invokes indeterminacy in the reference point or standard of comparison. That is, in *more or less dry*, the approximating effect does not derive from a coarse-grained interpretation of an endpoint standard but rather via coercion of the location of that standard to some lower scalar position, with respect to which the measured value could be either higher or lower. The other felicitous examples can be taken to involve a similar sort of indeterminacy, e.g. regarding the size of grapefruits, the precise location of the center of the room, or the maximal domain over which *every* or *half* quantifies. Even the nominal

and verbal cases plausibly derive from an underlying flexibility of interpretation. But the scalar position of an absolute measure such as *20* cannot be shifted; hence *more or less* is degraded.

If this line of argumentation goes through, it would mean that scale granularity is not the only mechanism by which (im)precision is encoded. From the infelicity of *#more or less tall* we might also be tempted to suspect (contrary to the prevailing view) that the interpretation of relative gradable adjectives does not actually involve comparison to a threshold or standard. The challenge as always is to formalize these rather imprecise intuitions.

References

Sauerland, Uli, and Penka Stateva. 2007. Scalar vs. epistemic vagueness: evidence from approximators. In *Proceedings of the 17th Semantics and Linguistic Theory Conference (SALT 17)*, ed. Tova Friedman and Masayuki Gibson, 228–245.

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Stephanie Solt
solt@leibniz-zas.de
Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft
Schützenstr. 18
10117 Berlin
Germany