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THE ROLE OF APPROXIMATORS IN LINGUISTICS

Approximators are regarded as an important subgroup of hedges that regulate propositional content and express the speaker's degree of precision, uncertainty and communicative intention. They occur at different language levels, including phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels, and play a significant role in everyday communication as well as academic and professional discourse. In English, approximators are among the most frequently used linguistic devices because they enable speakers and writers to convey meanings that are intentionally imprecise while remaining sufficiently accurate for communicative purposes. Their semantic and pragmatic properties make them one of the most complex and insufficiently investigated phenomena in contemporary linguistics.

The semantics of approximators remain difficult and understudied. The abstract syntactic model is "Appr+X". "Appr" – is an approximator, "X" – is the main word and this model acts as a nominative unit and plays an important role in the functional semantic field of approximation.

The article examines the concept of approximation, its linguistic status, and its relationship with the broader category of hedging. It also analyzes the main functions of approximators in discourse, including expressing numerical and qualitative estimation, reducing categorical force, indicating uncertainty, mitigating statements, maintaining politeness, and facilitating interpersonal interaction. Particular attention is paid to the semantic, pragmatic, and cognitive dimensions of approximation. The study demonstrates that approximators modify the strength of propositions without changing their core meaning and therefore serve as an essential means of achieving communicative effectiveness. The research also highlights the relevance of approximators in discourse analysis and emphasizes their importance for understanding language use in different communicative contexts.

Keywords: *approximators, hedges, semantics, relevance, modality, the process of speech, understanding.*

Introduction. Approximation is an inherent characteristic of natural language that enables speakers and writers to express meanings that are intentionally imprecise, flexible, or context-dependent. Rather than presenting information as absolutely accurate, language users frequently employ approximative expressions to indicate that a proposition represents an estimate or a value sufficiently close to reality for communicative purposes. Such expressions contribute to the effectiveness of communication by allowing interlocutors to adjust the degree of precision according to contextual, cognitive, and pragmatic requirements.

In contemporary linguistics, approximative expressions have attracted considerable scholarly attention because of their multifunctional nature and their close relationship with semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics. They operate not only at the lexical level through items such as *about*, *around*, *approximately*, and *roughly*, but also at mor-

phological, syntactic, and textual levels, reflecting the dynamic interaction between linguistic form and communicative intention. Although approximators are often associated with hedging devices, these categories perform different communicative functions. They indicate inexactness or proximity to a factual value, hedges mitigate the speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition, thereby expressing politeness, uncertainty, or interpersonal sensitivity.

The study of approximators is particularly significant within speech act theory, where the interpretation of an utterance depends not only on its literal meaning, but also on the speaker's communicative intentions. Approximation influences the illocutionary force of speech acts by modifying the precision of information while maintaining communicative relevance. Consequently, approximators contribute to successful interaction by balancing informational accuracy with pragmatic appropriateness [11, p. 232].

Despite the growing interest in pragmatic markers and hedging strategies, the linguistic status of approximators remains insufficiently explored. Their semantic boundaries, classification principles, and pragmatic functions continue to generate theoretical discussion, especially regarding their distinction from related categories such as hedges, shields, adaptors, and rounders. Furthermore, the rapid development of corpus linguistics and cognitive-pragmatic approaches has created new opportunities for investigating approximation in authentic discourse.

The present study aims to examine the semantic and pragmatic characteristics of approximators in English speech acts, to analyse their functional classification, and to identify their role in constructing meaning during communication. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between approximation and hedging, as well as to the contribution of approximative expressions to effective discourse organisation and speech interpretation. Pragmatic markers are utilized has traditionally been taken to be the context being discussed. Moreover, relying on the speaker or the communal context in which they are used, pragmatic indicators can also possess a variety of creative interpretations [8, p. 63].

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications.

The phenomenon of approximation has been investigated from various theoretical perspectives, including semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics. Although researchers generally agree that approximators indicate inexactness or proximity, considerable differences remain regarding their linguistic status, classification, and relationship with other pragmatic devices. Recent studies have demonstrated that approximation is not merely a lexical phenomenon but a multidimensional category functioning across several levels of language structure.

One of the most influential contributions to the study of hedging and approximation belongs to G. Lakoff, who introduced the concept of hedges as linguistic elements that make meanings «fuzzier» rather than categorically true or false [6, p. 258]. His work established the theoretical foundation for later investigations into vague language and demonstrated that linguistic categories often possess prototype structures rather than rigid boundaries. Building upon this approach, E. Prince, J. Frader and C. Bosk proposed the distinction between approximators and shields, arguing that approximators modify propositional content, whereas shields reduce the speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition [9, p. 91]. This distinction remains fundamental in contemporary pragmatic research.

Subsequent studies have expanded the analysis of approximation within discourse and communication. L. Khanbutayeva considers hedging as an essential component of pragmatic competence, enabling speakers to maintain interpersonal harmony and manage communicative responsibility [10, p. 324]. K. Hyland demonstrates that hedging devices, including many approximative expressions, play a crucial role in academic discourse by allowing writers to present claims cautiously, negotiate knowledge, and engage readers effectively [5, p. 207]. His corpus-based analyses reveal that approximation contributes significantly to academic persuasion and disciplinary conventions.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, R. Langacker argue that approximation reflects fundamental cognitive mechanisms of categorisation and conceptualization [7, p. 289]. Human cognition rarely processes reality through absolute categories; instead, it relies on prototypes, gradients, and fuzzy conceptual boundaries. Consequently, approximative expressions mirror the cognitive processes through which speakers perceive, evaluate and verbalise reality.

Recent corpus-driven investigations have further enriched the understanding of approximation. D. Biber et al. demonstrate that approximators exhibit systematic distributional patterns across different genres and communicative settings. Their findings indicate that lexical items such as *about*, *around*, *almost*, *nearly*, and *roughly* perform not only quantitative functions, but also discourse-organising and interpersonal functions depending on context [1, p. 48]. Corpus evidence confirms that approximators are significantly more frequent in spontaneous spoken interaction than in formal written discourse, reflecting their close relationship with real-time communication and interactional pragmatics.

Although numerous studies have examined vague language and hedging, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the functional-semantic characteristics of approximators within speech acts. Questions concerning their interaction with modality, evidentiality, speaker commitment, and discourse organisation remain open for further investigation. Therefore, the present research seeks to integrate semantic, pragmatic and cognitive approaches in order to provide a more comprehensive description of approximators as multifunctional linguistic units in English communicative practice.

Methodology. The present study employs a qualitative descriptive approach complemented by elements of discourse and corpus analysis. The primary objective is to investigate the semantic and pragmatic functions of approximators in authentic English

speech acts. The analysis is based on naturally occurring language collected from the British National Corpus (BNC), and selected examples from contemporary academic, conversational speech.

The data consist of frequently occurring English approximators, including *about*, *around*, *approximately*, *roughly*, *almost*, *nearly*, *practically*, and *virtually*. The examples were selected according to their frequency, contextual relevance, and functional diversity. Each occurrence was analysed from three perspectives: (1) semantic meaning, (2) pragmatic function within the speech act, and (3) communicative intention of the speaker.

The analytical framework integrates semantic analysis, pragmatic analysis based on Speech Act Theory and contextual interpretation. Particular attention is given to the interaction between approximation, speaker commitment and communicative effectiveness.

Task Statement. The purpose of this study is to investigate the semantic and pragmatic characteristics of approximators in English speech acts and to determine their role in the construction and interpretation of meaning in communication.

To achieve this aim, the following research objectives are addressed:

1. To define the linguistic nature of approximators and distinguish them from related pragmatic categories, particularly hedges and shields.
2. To examine the semantic properties of approximative expressions and identify the linguistic levels at which they function.
3. To analyse the pragmatic functions of approximators in different types of English speech acts.
4. To investigate the interaction between approximation, speaker commitment and communicative intention.
5. To demonstrate how approximators contribute to discourse organisation, interpersonal communication and effective information exchange.

The object of the research is approximative expressions in contemporary English, while the subject of the research is the semantic and pragmatic functioning of approximators in English speech acts.

The methodological framework combines semantic analysis, pragmatic analysis, contextual interpretation, discourse analysis, and descriptive methods. Examples are drawn from contemporary English corpora and authentic communicative discourse to illustrate the functional diversity of approximative expressions.

Outline of the main material of the study. Approximation is a universal linguistic phenomenon that enables speakers to express information without committing

themselves to absolute precision. Since natural language reflects human cognition rather than mathematical exactness, communicative situations frequently require expressions that denote estimated values, approximate quantities or conceptual proximity. Approximators fulfil this function by indicating that the information conveyed should be interpreted as sufficiently accurate rather than completely exact [2, p. 111].

From a semantic perspective, approximators modify the meaning of lexical items by introducing the notion of closeness to a reference point. They typically occur with numerical expressions, temporal references, spatial descriptions, measurements, frequencies and qualitative evaluations. Examples include *about*, *around*, *approximately*, *roughly*, *nearly*, *almost* and *more or less*. Although these expressions share the general meaning of approximation, each possesses distinct semantic features that influence its interpretation.

For instance, *about* and *around* generally indicate an estimated numerical value:

/The meeting lasted about two hours//.

/Around fifty students attended the lecture//.

In contrast, *almost* and *nearly* express proximity to the completion of a scale or event:

/She almost finished the report//.

/The temperature nearly reached 40°C//.

Unlike these forms, *roughly* often signals an intentionally simplified estimate rather than numerical proximity:

/The project will cost roughly one million dollars//.

These semantic differences demonstrate that approximators can't be regarded as interchangeable lexical items but represent distinct categories of approximative meaning.

From a pragmatic perspective, approximators perform several important communicative functions. First, they reduce the level of informational precision when exact data are unavailable, unnecessary or irrelevant. Second, they protect speakers from making inaccurate statements by signaling estimation rather than certainty. Third, they contribute to conversational efficiency because precise numerical information is often unnecessary for successful communication.

Within speech act theory approximators influence the interpretation of illocutionary force by modifying the informational content of an utterance without changing its fundamental communicative purpose. In representative speech acts, approximators indicate that the speaker presents information as an estimate rather than an exact fact:

/There were about two hundred participants at the conference//.

In directive speech acts approximation may soften requests or recommendations:

/Please arrive around nine o'clock//.

In commissive speech acts speakers frequently employ approximators when discussing future plans whose exact parameters remain uncertain:

/We will complete the project in approximately three weeks//.

Approximators also occur in expressive and declarative speech acts, although their frequency is considerably lower than in representatives and directives.

An important aspect of approximation concerns its relationship with hedging. Although these notions are closely related, they are not identical. Approximators primarily modify propositional content by indicating numerical or conceptual inexactness, whereas hedges reduce the speaker's degree of epistemic commitment [10, p.126]. Let's compare:

/About fifty people attended the meeting/. (approximation)

/I think about fifty people attended the meeting//. (hedging + approximation)

In the second example, *I think* functions as a hedge expressing uncertainty, while *about* functions as an approximator indicating numerical estimation. Their coexistence illustrates that approximation and hedging operate on different pragmatic levels.

Contemporary corpus studies further demonstrate that approximators are considerably more frequent in spoken discourse than in formal written communication. Everyday conversation is characterised by spontaneous production, limited planning time, and continuous negotiation of meaning, making approximation a natural communicative strategy. Academic and legal discourse, by contrast, generally favour greater precision, although approximators remain common when discussing statistical data, research findings, and estimated values.

The semantic and pragmatic analysis confirms that approximators constitute a multifunctional linguistic category. They facilitate effective communication by balancing informational precision with communicative flexibility, enabling speakers to adapt their utterances to contextual requirements while maintaining clarity and relevance [3, p. 89]. Consequently, approximators should be viewed not merely as indicators of vagueness, but as essential pragmatic resources that support successful interaction and discourse organisation.

The analysis demonstrates that approximators perform considerably broader functions than merely

expressing numerical inexactness. Their semantic and pragmatic behaviour varies according to discourse context, speech act type, and communicative purpose.

First, approximators function as indicators of quantitative or qualitative proximity. Lexical items such as *about* and *around* primarily denote approximate numerical values, whereas *almost* and *nearly* indicate that an event or state approaches but does not reach completion.

Second, approximators contribute significantly to pragmatic interaction by reducing excessive precision while preserving the essential informational content. In assertive speech acts, they allow speakers to present information realistically without claiming absolute certainty. In directives and commissives, approximation softens expectations and increases communicative flexibility.

The findings further reveal that approximators frequently overlap with hedging devices; however, they should not be considered identical categories, while hedges mainly reduce epistemic commitment, approximators primarily modify the degree of precision. Nevertheless, both categories cooperate in minimizing communicative risk and facilitating successful interpersonal interaction and findings support the view that approximators represent multifunctional pragmatic devices whose interpretation depends on contextual, semantic, and cognitive factors rather than lexical meaning alone [4, p.22].

Corpus observations indicate that approximators occur most frequently in spoken discourse, interviews, conversations, and informal communication, whereas academic writing favours more formal expressions such as *approximately* and *roughly*. This distribution confirms that approximation is strongly influenced by register and communicative context.

Conclusions. The findings demonstrate that approximators not only express numerical or conceptual proximity, but also influence the interpretation of speech acts by modifying precision, managing interpersonal relations, and enhancing discourse coherence. Their interaction with hedging devices illustrates the complexity of pragmatic meaning construction in authentic communication.

The research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of approximation within contemporary linguistic theory by integrating semantic, pragmatic and corpus-based perspectives. Future studies may extend this research through cross-linguistic comparisons, experimental pragmatics, and computational corpus analysis to investigate approximation in multilingual and digital communication.

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Ханбутаєва Л. М. РОЛЬ АПРОКСИМАТОРІВ У ЛІНГВІСТИЦІ

Апроксиматори розглядаються як важлива підгрупа засобів, що регулюють зміст пропозицій та виражають ступінь точності, невизначеності та комунікативного наміру мовця. Вони зустрічаються на різних мовних рівнях, включаючи фонологічний, морфологічний, лексичний, синтаксичний, семантичний та прагматичний рівні, і відіграють значну роль у повсякденному спілкуванні, а також в академічному та професійному дискурсі. В англійській мові апроксиматори є одними з найчастіше використовуваних лінгвістичних засобів, оскільки вони дозволяють мовцям та письменникам передавати значення, які навмисно є неточними, залишаючись достатньо точними для комунікативних цілей. Їхні семантичні та прагматичні властивості роблять їх одним із найскладніших та недостатньо досліджених явищ у сучасній лінгвістиці.

Семантика апроксиматорів залишається складною та маловивченою. Абстрактна синтаксична модель – «Appr+X». «Appr» – це апроксиматор, «X» – це головне слово, і ця модель виступає як номінативна одиниця та відіграє важливу роль у функціонально-семантичному полі апроксимації.

У статті розглядається поняття апроксимації, її лінгвістичний статус та її зв'язок із ширшою категорією хеджування. Також аналізуються основні функції апроксиматорів у дискурсі, включаючи вираження числової та якісної оцінки, зменшення категоріальної сили, позначення невизначеності, пом'якшення тверджень, підтримку ввічливості та сприяння міжособистісній взаємодії. Особлива увага приділяється семантичним, прагматичним та когнітивним вимірам апроксимації. Дослідження демонструє, що апроксиматори модифікують силу пропозицій, не змінюючи їхнього основного значення, і тому служать важливим засобом досягнення комунікативної ефективності. Дослідження також підкреслює актуальність апроксиматорів у дискурс-аналізі та наголошує на їх важливості для розуміння використання мови в різних комунікативних контекстах.

Ключові слова: апроксиматори, хеджування, семантика, релевантність, модальність, процес мовлення, розуміння.

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