THE APPROXIMATORS ABOUT, AT LEAST AND NEARLY AS INTERPERSONAL DEVICES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOMEN'S INSTRUCTIVE TEXTS[1]

Elena Quintana Toledo
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, España

Abstract: This paper aims at describing how about, at least and nearly are used in the nineteenth-century subcorpus of the Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English, which gathers instructional texts exclusively written by women. While still retaining their approximative sense, about, at least and nearly have a large potential to build and maintain writer-reader interpersonal relationships. The most frequent collocational patterns have been firstly identified by using corpus tools to later analyse the major pragmatic functions of specific examples following Zhang's (2015) framework for elastic language. Findings reveal that collocations with numerical expressions are common to about, at least and nearly while other patterns only emerge with about and nearly. It also seems that pattern and function are tightly interwoven. In general, the approximators surveyed here fulfil a variety of interpersonal functions, most notably, just-right elastic, rapport elastic, mitigating elastic, self-protection elastic, and intensifying elastic.

Key words: approximators, women's instructive texts, nineteenth century, elastic language, collocational patterns, interpersonal functions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Approximators are a standard case of highly vague language. They have been given several names in earlier literature including *approximate quantities* (Crystal & Davy, 1979), *approximations* (Channell, 1980), *approximators* (Wachtel, 1981; Channell, 1994; Biber et al., 1999, 2021), and *rounders* (Prince et al., 1982). Their semantics has been addressed widely since the publication of Lakoff's (1973) pioneering article on hedges, but it was not until the seminal work of Channell (1994) that their pragmatics was first approached. For Channell (1994), approximators are expressions which denote some degree of imprecision of quantity, quality or identity.

This study draws attention to three approximators, i.e., *about*, *at least* and *nearly*, and their use in the nineteenth-century subcorpus of the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English*. The focus will be on the collocational patters most frequently used with them as well as on their potential as interpersonal devices following Zhang's (2015) framework for elastic language. To the best of my knowledge, there are but few studies which have specifically explored the interpersonal dimension in specialised texts exclusively written by women. Notable exceptions include Alonso-Almeida (2023) or Alonso-Almeida and Álvarez-Gil (2021).

The hypothesis is that collocational patterns may have an impact on the functions performed by these approximators. Taking all of the above into consideration, I will address the following research questions:

1) Can the approximators *about*, *at least* and *nearly* be attested in nineteenth-century instructive texts written by women? If so, what are the most common collocational patterns with them?

2) What interpersonal functions do they perform?

3) Is there a correspondence between collocational patterns and interpersonal functions?

The structure of the paper is as follows: section 2 discusses the relationship between vague language and approximators by reviewing some of the most referenced works within the foundational scholarship on the topic. Zhang's (2015) approach to vague language in terms of elasticity will be looked into here. Section 3 describes the corpus and the methodology used. Section 4 presents the results of the analysis and discusses the interpersonal functions of *about*, *at least* and *nearly*. Section 5 offers some tentative conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of approximators seems to be inevitably linked to theoretically complex notions such as hedging and vague language, which, in turn, stand as rather elusive concepts in the light of the various definitions, categorisations and functions associated to them in earlier and current literature.

Drawing on Zadeh's (1965) *Fuzzy Sets Theory*, Lakoff (1973) paved the way for research on the semantics of hedges. In the Lakoffian framework, hedges are "words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness – words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1973:471). Fuzziness (or vagueness) is tackled here in terms of the degree to which concepts in natural language match a specific category or class. The author illustrates the point using Heider's "hierarchy of birdiness" where five statements of prototypical classification are ranked from most true to false. Lakoff (1973) shows that the inclusion of the hedge *sort of* adds some fuzziness which results in a change in meaning:

a.   A robin is a bird.   (true)

b.   A chicken is a bird.   (less true than a)

c.   A penguin is a bird.   (less true than b)

d.   A bat is a bird.   (false, or at least very far from true)

e.   A cow is a bird.   (absolutely false) (Lakoff, 1973:460)

a.   A robin is a sort of bird.   (False – it is a bird, no question about it)

b.   A chicken is a sort of bird.   (True, or very close to true)

s.   A penguin is a sort of bird.   (True, or close to true)

d.   A bat is a sort of bird.   (Still pretty close to false)

e.   A cow is a sort of bird.   (False) (Lakoff, 1973:471)

A robin is considered a prototypical member of the class of birds, a chicken and a penguin are less prototypical members, and a bat and a cow are not prototypical ones at all. However, the presence of *sort of* makes the boundaries of classification fuzzier or, at least, less rigid, because it modifies the category membership of the words *chicken* and *penguin*, making the statements *A chicken is a sort of bird* and *A penguin is a sort of bird* more plausible than *A chicken is a bird* and *A penguin is a bird*. Lakoff (1973:472) notes that "In order for [speakers] to do this, they must have been able to make an underlying distinction in degree of birdiness between robins on the one hand and chickens and penguins on the other".

Similarly to Lakoff (1973), other scholars like Prince et al. (1982), Brown and Levinson (1987), Channell (1994) and Caffi (2007) approach hedging as a phenomenon whose basic qualities are fuzziness and vagueness. Prince et al. (1982) observe that, while all hedges contribute to fuzziness, they do so in essentially two different ways: on the one hand, hedges can operate on the propositional content and, consequently, affect the truth conditions of the proffered proposition, i.e. *approximators*. This type of hedge "contribute[s] to the interpretation by indicating some markedness, that is, non-prototype, with respect to class membership of a particular item" (Fraser, 2010:19). Approximators are further divided into (i) *adaptors*, e.g. *almost*, *somewhat* or *sort of*, which involve class membership, and (ii) *rounders*, e.g. *about*, *approximately* or *something between*, which communicate a range. On the other hand, hedges can qualify "the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition conveyed" (Prince et al., 1982:85), i.e. *shields*. Within this type, there are (i) *plausibility shields*, e.g. *I think*, *probably* or *seem to*, which are related to doubt, and (ii) *attribution shields*, e.g. *according to* or *presumably*, which serve to attribute the information to someone other than the speaker.

Hübler (1983) adopts the distinction between propositional hedging and speaker hedging and uses the labels *understatement* and *hedge* as close equivalents to the approximators and shields in Prince et al. (1982). Nevertheless, this distinction is not readily accepted by later linguists. One case in point is Skelton (1988) who notices that, depending on the context, approximators could function as shields since the latter "appear to have an indefinitely large potential domain and certainly one that can comfortably extend over more than one sentence" (Skelton, 1988:38). Along the same lines, Caffi (2007) challenges the binary distinction between propositional hedging and speaker hedging. In fact, she rejects the idea that "approximators belong[…] to semantics and shields belong[…] to pragmatics" as "a weakened (marked) precision in the reference act has the effect of weakening the commitment to the truth of the proposition and this in turn has the effect of weakening the subscription of the whole speech act" (Caffi, 2007:70).

Caffi (1999, 2007) and Contreras-Fernández (2021) delve into hedging from the standpoint of *mitigation* (or the twin term *attenuation*). Caffi (2007:16) defines mitigation as "the result of a weakening operation on one of the interactional parameters. […] mitigation is one of the two directions of modulation, as opposed and complementary to the direction 'reinforcement'". In her view, mitigating devices can affect (i) the propositional content by reducing the precision, i.e. *bushes*, (ii) the illocutionary force of the speech act by reducing the speaker's commitment to the propositional content, i.e. *hedges*, and (iii) the source of the utterance by shifting away responsibility from the speaker to someone else or even by giving it up, i.e. *shields*. Caffi's (2007) bushes, hedges and shields roughly correspond to approximators, plausibility shields and attribution shields in Prince et al. (1982).

Dubois (1987) and Hyland (1998) privilege a related outlook on approximators, emphasising their nature as hedging devices. Dubois (1987:531) states that "hedges are a means of diminishing precision […] of quantity", which, rhetorically "can foreground what speakers consider to be more important" (Dubois, 1897:537). Hyland (1998:139), on his part, posits that "a great deal of hedging in science involves the manipulation of precision in quantification". Both authors explicitly associate the imprecision conveyed by approximators with the expression of uncertainty and/or lack of complete commitment to the truth of the propositional content, which means that these imprecise numerical expressions can provide us with relevant information regarding the speaker's stance.

Approximators have been addressed with an eye on vagueness as well. As Zhang (2015:30) points out, they "are a conventional part of the study of V[ague] L[anguage], and there is little controversy on the status of this category as a prototype of V[ague] L[anguage]". Channell (1994) takes them as a manifestation of vague language as they express vagueness of amounts or quantities. In her work, a word or an expression counts as vague under the following circumstances: "a. it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition; b. it is 'purposely and unabashedly vague'; c. its meaning arises from the 'intrinsic uncertainty' referred to by Pierce" (Channell, 1994:20). Although approximations may show up in a variety of forms, Channell (1994) identifies a commonly used structure, that is, an approximator + an exemplar number + a measure noun, e.g. *about eight feet*. In view of this, an approximator can be generally defined as "a lexical category that precedes a cardinal number to make the number less specific" (Ruzaite, 2007:44).

According to Zhang (2015:28), approximators may fall into three categories depending on the lack of specificity conveyed. Items in the first category mark that the quantity being referred to may be either smaller or bigger than the one represented in the exemplar number, i.e. *about*, *approximately* or *around*. The second category comprises approximators which indicate that the quantity is bigger than the exemplar number, i.e. *at least*, *or so* or *over*. Items which signal that the quantity is smaller than the exemplar number, i.e. *almost*, *at the most* or *nearly*, fall into the third category.

Going a step further in vague language research, Zhang (2015) regards approximators as examples of elastic language. Elastic language items are those linguistic units "which have an unspecified meaning boundary, so that its interpretation is elastic in the sense that it can be stretched or shrunk according to the strategic needs of the communication" (Zhang, 2015:5). Consequently, elasticity is an interactional strategy to the extent that it provides a ground for negotiation of meanings between speakers/writers and listeners/readers.

Aligned with the maxims described in Zhang (2011), Zhang (2015) puts forward a six-category classification of the functions of elastic language: (i) just-right elastic, i.e. it provides just the right amount of information, (ii) rapport elastic, i.e. it contributes to building solidarity between speakers/writers and listeners/readers, (iii) mitigating elastic, i.e. it softens claims, (iv) intensifying elastic, i.e. it strengthens claims, (v) self-protection elastic, i.e. it safeguards the speakers'/writers' face, and (vi) evasive elastic, i.e. it shows that information is being deliberately withheld. This classification will guide the analysis in section 4.

3. CORPUS DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this research have been drawn from the nineteenth-century subcorpus of the *Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English* (henceforth CoWITE19) (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2023), which is being compiled by the research group *Discourse, Communication & Society* at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. They were exclusively written by women and derive from books, in both printed and manuscript form, which are located at several UK and USA libraries. Complete references are given in the Appendix. The total amount of words analysed is 487 136.

In order to describe the texts in CoWITE19 in detail, the concepts of genre, text type and register must be brought to the foreground. Following Alonso-Almeida (2013:70) who, in turn, follows a systemic functional model, a "[g]enre is understood as a cultural construct" which encapsulates the specific purpose a text fulfils in a particular sociohistorical context. In this sense, the texts in CoWITE19 belong to the recipe genre as they were aimed to guide readers in the preparation of certain products.

The concept of text type, in contrast, applies to the rage of grammatical features which characterise a text and, depending on the specific linguistic variables, text types can be descriptive, narrative, expository, argumentative and instructive (Werlich, 1975). In CoWITE19 the texts are primarily instructive. Lastly, "[r]egister is related to the situational context of a particular communicative event, and this constrains the stylistic choices in an actual text" (Alonso-Almeida, 2013:71). The recipes analysed belong to varied registers including pharmaceutical, medical, culinary or cosmetic.

It should be noted that there are some sociocultural aspects which cannot be covered in the present study and which may have an impact on the selection of the language choices made by the authors, i.e. the texts are representative of American and British English. As I shall explain in due course in this paper, these aspects constitute a matter of further research in order to evince their potential on these choices. Every effort has however been made to take them into account during the analysis when this information has been available. The complete corpus is still underway and, upon completion, we may have a much clearer picture leading to an accurate description of the language choices made by the women who wrote these texts.

In order to make the texts searchable by corpus tools, they were transferred into electronic documents by using OCR software or by keying them manually, and saved as plain text files. Laurence Anthony's *AntConc* (Anthony, 2019) was used for the computerised searches for the approximators *about*, *at least* and *nearly*. Each of them represents an example in the three categories identified by Zhang (2015).

A collocation analysis was carried out to determine similarities and differences in proximity to the selected approximators. Apart from the Key-word-in-context tool, the Collocate tool has been used to retrieve the collocates ordered by frequency on the right or left of the search terms, which has proved especially helpful in the case of *at least*, whose collocates had to be examined on both sides. Manual checking has been in order to differentiate between the adverbial use of *about* in its approximating sense from the prepositional ones.

4. DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The approximators *about*, *at least* and *nearly* have been searched for using *AntConc* in CoWITE19. The total number of tokens found is 626, which represents 12.8 cases per 10 000 words. *About* exhibits a noticeably higher frequency with 513 occurrences (10.5 cases per 10 000 words). *Nearly* and *at least* are used less profusely with 89 occurrences (1.8 cases per 10 000 words) and 24 occurrences (0.4 cases per 10 000 words), respectively. The abundance of *about* may be accounted for in terms of its versatility in the expression of an approximation since it can express that the quantity being referred to may be either smaller or bigger than the one represented in the exemplar number. As shown in section 2, this property does not apply to *at least* and *nearly*, so our female authors may have perceived *about* as more suitable in a larger set of contexts.

As regards the linguistic patterns co-occurring with the approximators surveyed here, clusters with numbers are the most frequent, in particular, those involving whole numbers and fractions as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Whole numbers combining with about, at least and nearly in CoWITE19.

	about		at least		nearly	
	Raw	N.	Raw	N.	Raw	N.
Whole numbers	321	6.5	24	0.4	12	0.2
Fractions	111	2.2	0	0	5	0.1
Other structures	81	1.6	0	0	72	1.5
det. + noun + of + det. + noun	47	0.9	0	0	0	0
as + adjective + as + (det.) + noun	21	0.4	0	0	5	0.1
past participle	8	0.2	0	0	39	0.8
time expression	5	0.1	0	0	1	0.02
adjective	0	0	0	0	23	0.5
imperative	0	0	0	0	4	0.08

The whole numbers these three approximators most frequently collocate with are those from *one* to *ten*, being *one* and the interchangeable structure with the indefinite article *a(n)* the most frequent of all with 101 instances combining with *about*, 24 with *at least* and 12 with *nearly*. Other interesting approximations involve combinations of *about* with two exemplar numbers coordinated by the conjunction *or*. While this structure still remains vague because it "explicitly signals the existence of two possibilities" (Álvarez-Gil & Quintana-Toledo, 2022:227), an interval is specified. In CoWITE19, these intervals may range from one or two to five.

As stated above, clusters with approximated fractional numbers do occur as well, specifically with *about* (2.2 cases per 10 000 words) and *nearly* (0.10 cases per 10 000 words). Our female authors approximate mostly halves (1.2 cases per 10 000 words with *about* and 0.06 cases per 10 000 words with *nearly*) and quarters (0.9 cases per 10 000 words with *about* and 0.04 cases per 10 000 words with *nearly*), which seem to be more manageable than thirds, eighths and fifths whose approximation in the corpus is marginal.

In CoWITE19, approximators can co-occur with a variety of structures other than numerical expressions which retain their approximating sense. They are difficult to categorise, but there are some recurrent patterns which are summarised in Table 1. The most frequent patterns involve what I have labelled *approximation by comparison*, where the place of the exemplar number and the measure noun are replaced by either (i) a noun phrase (determiner + noun + *of* + determiner + noun) which refers to a quality of a specific item, i.e., *about the size of two fingers* (Rundell, 1806), *about the consistency of cream* (Wittenmyer, 1864) or *about the thickness of a florin* (Toogood, 1866), or (ii) the comparative structure *as* + adjective + *as* + (determiner) + noun, which again refers to a specific item, i.e. *about as big as an egg* (A Lady, 1818) or *nearly as clear as water* (Leslie, 1854). In both cases, the specific items and their features act as a benchmark against which other items can be measured. The structure in (i) combines with *about* in 0.9 cases per 10 000 words; the structure in (ii) co-occurs with *about* in 0.4 cases per 10 000 words and with *nearly* in 0.1 cases per 10 000 words.

Nearly rather than *about* co-occurs more often with the other structures identified. These structures entail verbal forms such as past participles, i.e., *about done* (Child, 1841) or *nearly done* (Leslie, 1854), or imperatives, i.e., *nearly fill your bowl* (Haslehurst, 1814), as well as adjectives, i.e., *nearly brown* (Randolph, 1824) and time expressions, i.e., *about the end of August* (Cobbett, 1835) and *nearly midnight* (Campbell, 1893). It is worth noting that *at least* does not combine with any of these structures.

4.1. Interpersonal functions of about, at least and nearly

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.), *about* can express approximation so its meaning is close to "[n]early, approximately, more or less". The uses related to approximation are spelt out as follows:

III.8 With numbers, measures and quantities: approximately.

III.9 With general expressions of quantity and quality: very nearly, pretty much; more or less.

III.9.a Modifying adjectives and quantifiers […].

III.9.b Modifying comparatives of equivalence […].

III.9.c Modifying superlative adjectives.

III.10 Modifying verbs: very nearly. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.)

As seen in the general definition, *nearly* can be taken as a near-synonym of *about*, probably because, as noticed by Zhang (2015:210), "stretchers such as *about* tend to modify utterances horizontally, approximating neighbouring meaning". In other words, its meaning can be stretched either upwards or downwards, and therefore *more or less* is synonymous with *about*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) supplies the following approximating meanings of *nearly*:

> 5. With a close degree of agreement or similarity.
>
> 6.a. With close approximation or near approach (to some state or condition, etc.).
>
> 6.b. Almost, all but, virtually. (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.)

The sense in 6.b. evinces that this approximator "is semantically equivalent to *almost*" (Gribanova & Gaidukova, 2019:94). The other two senses emphasise the idea of closeness, whether in amount or level of similarity, or in quality. However, Zhang (2015:98) remarks that "*nearly* excludes the meaning of *no more than*".

Similarly, *at least* sets a lower limit for quantities and further implies "possibly more than". With special reference to vague quantifying expressions, Jucker at al. (2003:1752) highlight that "any expression from a set that can be arrayed on a scale can convey information not only about the position of an event on that scale but it can also convey a scalar implicature, that is, an implication based on the part of the scale above it". The *Oxford English Dictionary* (n.d.) captures its approximative meaning in entry P.1.a.i, which reads "Modifying a designation of quantity or extent, indicating that the amount is the smallest admissible or is otherwise a minimum, e.g. *at least two*, *at least once*, *at least double*".

In general, vague language items have the potential to perform a wide range of pragmatic functions. In Jucker et al.'s (2003:1739) words, "[v]agueness is not only an inherent feature of natural language but also- and crucially-it is an interactional strategy". The remainder of this section is devoted to describing the pragmatic functions the approximators under survey fulfil in CoWITE19.

4.1.1. Just-right elastic

Zhang (2015:127) notes that approximators can be used strategically to provide the right amount of information. This interpersonal function concerns the approximation of quantities when speakers/writers estimate that, under certain circumstances, it may not be necessary to actually achieve precision, or a deliberate lack of precision may be even more effective. Another reason why speakers/writers may opt for providing the right amount of information is because they are simply uncertain about the exact quantities. Examples (1)-(3) illustrate this function of *about* in the corpus:

1. Put **about** a pint of water in a skillet to boil; stir up a large spoonful of arrow-root powder in a cup of water; pour it into the skillet while the water is boiling [...] (Child, 1841).

2. Put into a pan six pints of milk and two of water, a stick of cinnamon **about** three or four inches long; place it over a low fire to boil [...] (Everard, 1890).

3. Strawberries and raspberries should then be boiled from twenty minutes to half an hour, according to the quantity and size of the pan; rhubarb, gooseberries, plums, and black currants take **about** ten or fifteen minutes longer [...] (Everard, 1890).

About is used to approximate quantities related to volume in (1), length in (2) and time in (3). Approximators like *about* always convey "a range of possible values for the quantity being described" (Ferson et al., 2015:20). The interval of imprecision in (1) seems to range from slightly less than a pint of water to slightly more than a pint of water, which contextually implies that, as long as the cook does not exceed these lower and upper limits, the recipe may still be successful. Hence, no more precision is necessary. The same applies to examples (2) and (3), but here the range is made explicit by the use of the conjunction *or* to coordinate the two exemplar numbers. In both cases the focus is on an increase in the number, i.e., *three or four* in (2) and *ten or fifteen* in (3). In (3) specifically, contextual information is key in accounting for the lack of precision as cooking time varies depending on *the quantity and size of the pan*.

As commented on when describing our findings, whole numbers stand as the most salient numbers which combine with *about*, *at least* and *nearly*. In the case of *about* and *nearly*, patterns with fractions were also found in CoWITE19, as in (4)-(6):

4. Gather fine scarlet strawberries when they are just ripe, bruise, and put them into a preserving pan, with **about** a fifth part of red currant juice [...] (Cobbett, 1835).

5. […] add a little water and make it into a stiff paste, then turn it out on to a floured board, and cut the paste in two, rolling each portion out till it is about the eighth of an inch thick, place half a sausage to the paste, fold the paste over and press the ends together […] (Clarke, 1886).

6. […] When this is done, chop the onions finely; add to them the bread crumbs, sage, half a teaspoonful of salt, **nearly** a quarter of a teaspoonful of pepper, and the liver […] (Everard, 1890).

By definition, a fraction is either a very small part of something or a very small amount of something. This is especially evident in small fractions such as *a fifth part* in (4), *the eighth of an inch* in (5) and *nearly a quarter of a teaspoonful* in (6). Ruzaite (2007:168) notices that approximators occurring in patterns in which "the focus […] is on […] the smallness or largeness of something", imply that precision is either unfeasible or unnecessary for the purposes of communication. In (5)-(6) above, both *about* and *nearly* are just-right elastic items which provide a level of non-specificity which is contextually appropriate for readers to entertain a general idea of the quantities being talked about.

About can be just-right elastic in CoWITE19 when combined with a past participle (often inserted in time clauses introduced by *when*) and a time expression as illustrated in (7)-(8):

7. When the meat is **about** done, pour these drippings into a skillet, and let it boil (Child, 1841).

8. **About** the end of August fill a wide mouthed bottle with fresh leaves of basil, cover them with sherry and let them stand for ten days […] (Cobbett, 1835).

In (7) and (8) *about* is used to introduce generalisations regarding the level of doneness of the meat when making gravy and the adequate time of the year to make basil wine. According to Rowland (2007:82), "[g]eneralization is a case of inductive reasoning that is recognizing what a number of particular cases have in common". In our examples, the generalisations may well be based on what is typical or usual in the writers' experiences, and as such, no more precision can be attained.

4.1.2. Rapport elastic

The notion of rapport is mostly interactionally grounded, and it can be defined as "a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships" (Tannen, 1990:77). It seems that, in the context of scientific and specialised texts, rapport is particularly relevant because "in principle, writers and readers belong to the same community and, as such, the text itself is the space where meanings can be negotiated, and relationships can be established and maintained" (Álvarez-Gil & Quintana-Toledo, 2022:228). Zhang (2015) precisely draws attention to the fact that vagueness can certainly play a role in rapport building. Consider (9)-(12):

9. […] divide this dough into equal portions, and roll them in your hands into little balls **about** the size of a large hickory nut (Leslie, 1854).

10. Strew flour heavily on the board and over the paste, which roll out **about** the thickness of half-a-crown and cut it into shapes (Hooper, 1883).

11. […] then take a piece of butter **about** as big as an egg, rolled in flour, put it in, and cover it close for five or six minutes (A Lady, 1818).

12. Some people put in crackers; some thin slices of crust, made **nearly** as short as common shortcake; and some stir up two or three eggs with milk and flour, and drop it in with a spoon (Child, 1841).

As shown at the beginning of this section, *about* and *nearly* do not only co-occur with numerical expressions; they can also express approximation by comparison when used with the structures excerpted in examples (9)-(12). These structures explicitly mark that there is some degree of shared knowledge between writer and readers or, at least, that the latter are familiarised with the specific items and the qualities involved in the comparison. In fact, if readers wish to replicate the recipes, their choice of the quantities will largely depend on knowing about the size of hickory nuts, the thickness of half-crowns, the size of eggs or the thickness of a shortcake. What is more, sharing the same epistemological space, whether totally or partially, precisely allows writers to use this interpersonal strategy, otherwise a higher level of precision would have been needed.

4.1.3. Mitigating elastic and self-protection elastic

Mitigation has been traditionally defined as "a reduction in the degree of illocutionary force of a speech act and/or the speaker's commitment to what is said" (Albelda-Marco & Estellés-Arguedas, 2021:72). It is by far the function most frequently associated to approximators and to vague language in general, but as Zhang (2015:135) observes,

"[w]hile most E[lastic] L[anguage] can mitigate, certain types of stretcher may do it more often than others". Mitigating elastic and self-protection elastic are both addressed in this subsection because "the protection of the self-image is intrinsic to mitigation" (Albelda-Marco & Estellés-Arguedas, 2021:77). Take (13)-(14) as examples:

13. Stir these well into the wort, and keep it on a good hard boil for **at least** an hour; being very particular to make it boil all the while (Cobbett, 1835).

14. take half a pound of sago (which takes longer to cook than tapioca), boil it in the strained stock for an hour **at least**; season with pepper and salt to taste (Everard, 1890).

From the set of approximators investigated in this paper, *at least* is the only one which can either precede or follow a numerical expression as evinced in examples (13) and (14). It can potentially have two readings, i.e., concessive or epistemic (Nakanishi & Rullman, 2009). In our examples, the interpretation of *at least* is epistemic because of its co-occurrence with a numeral. Both *at least an hour* and *an hour at least* seem to automatically induce a scale which, in turn, conveys the implicatures that one-hour boiling time is good enough and, at the same time, that boiling for an unspecified amount of time higher than one hour would be an acceptable practice as well. As a result, *at least* is a mitigating elastic approximator by virtue of the scalar implicatures it generates in this context. As such, it reduces the impact of imposition and purposely leaves room for readers to decide on the boiling time, which additionally enhances rapport in these examples.

4.1.4. intensifying elastic

According to Zhang (2015:140), [i]ntensifying elastic increases the strength of a claim" emphasising the writers' conviction in what they say. In this sense, intensifying elastic items can be considered as boosters, but, as Zhang (2015:141) notes, "[t]he assertive function of E[lastic]L[anguage] is, however, overlooked as it is not commonly perceived as an E[lastic]L[anguage] function". It should be borne in mind that elasticity theory rests on the principles of fluidity, stretchability and strategy (Zhang, 2015:57), and that these principles do indeed account for the fact that intrinsically vague language items can in practice function as intensifiers within specific contexts.

The intensifying elastic function is typically associated with scalar quantifiers (Zhang, 2015:222), but it appears that in CoWITE19 *nearly* is intensifying elastic in the structures in (14)-(18):

15. When **nearly** done, add a large table-spoonful or more of capers, or pickled nasturtians (Leslie, 1854).

16. […] place it over a hot fire and when boiling add a cup of butter and a paste of corn starch; when **nearly** cold, add one pint of wine and lemon or vanilla flavoring (Wittenmeyer, 1864).

17. […] put in half a pint more jelly, let it stand till cold, and then lay in the four small fishes across one another, that when you turn the bowl upside down the heads and tails may be seen; then **nearly** fill your bowl with jelly, and let it stand till cold (Haslehurst, 1814).

18. […] and at **nearly** midnight came a supper of sweets, ices, and fruits, more coffee, and the accompanying thanks, and then good-night […] (Campbell, 1893).

Nearly co-occurs with a past participle in (15), an adjective in (16), an imperative in (17) a time expression in (18). The approximator is stretched to emphasise that certain qualities such as doneness in (15), coldness in (16) or fullness in (17), or an exact time such as midnight in (18), are not actually desirable to achieve certain effects. By using *nearly*, the writers intensify their certainty in the fact that something cannot be the case, which ostensibly stamps their authority on the subject.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has addressed the uses of the approximators *about*, *at least* and *nearly* in CoWITE19. Findings show that, apart from displaying their default approximative meaning, these approximators perform a wide range of interpersonal functions which seem to be subject to the collocational patterns associated to them.

The most frequently used approximator is *about*, being followed by *nearly* and *at least* in this order. *About* and *at least* collocate more often with numerical expressions while *nearly* does so with other structures, i.e., mostly past participles and adjectives. Within numerical expressions, co-occurrences involving whole numbers outweigh those with fractions. Dominant structures within the set of other structures which typically combine with *about* include (i) determiner + noun + *of* + determiner + noun, and (ii) *as* + adjective + *as* + (determiner) + noun, which have been labelled as *approximation by comparison*.

In terms of functions, *about* serves to provide the right amount of information in the examples analysed when it collocates with (i) two exemplar numbers being coordinated by *or*, (ii) small fractions, (iii) past participles, and (iv) time expressions. *Nearly* also fulfills this function when combining with fractions. They are just-right elastic when imprecision is contextually acceptable or when generalisations are being made. They also contribute to rapport building, specifically when preceding approximations by comparison since these structures mark some shared knowledge between writers and readers.

At least only collocates with whole numbers in CoWITE19. It appears to be mitigating elastic and self-protection elastic because of the scalar implicatures its use generates as they implicitly leave open a set of possibilities for the reader to choose from. Thus, *at least* signals lower writer commitment and, at the same time, enhances rapport. *Nearly*, on its part, is intensifying elastic when combined with past participles, adjectives, imperatives and time expressions as it indicates the writers' certainty in a given state of affairs not being desirable.

This paper contributes to ongoing research on women's specialised writing in the nineteenth century by providing an account of the collocational patterns of the approximators *about*, *at least* and *nearly*, and their interpersonal functions. Considering the size of CoWITE19, the representativeness of the findings seems to be adequate for the purposes of this study but, in order to ascertain the extent to which there are gender differences, a corpus of nineteenth-century specialised texts authored by men is necessary. This is intended to be done in the future.

As commented on in the methodological considerations, both American English and British English are represented in CoWITE19, so future research may also explore whether variation in the interpersonal functions of approximators in these two language varieties (and their corresponding cultural contexts) occur. Similarly, disciplinary-specific conventions may be looked into as they can certainly have an impact on the pragmatic functions fulfilled by approximators and this, in turn, may help illuminate the distinctiveness of the registers present in CoWITE19.

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APPENDIX

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