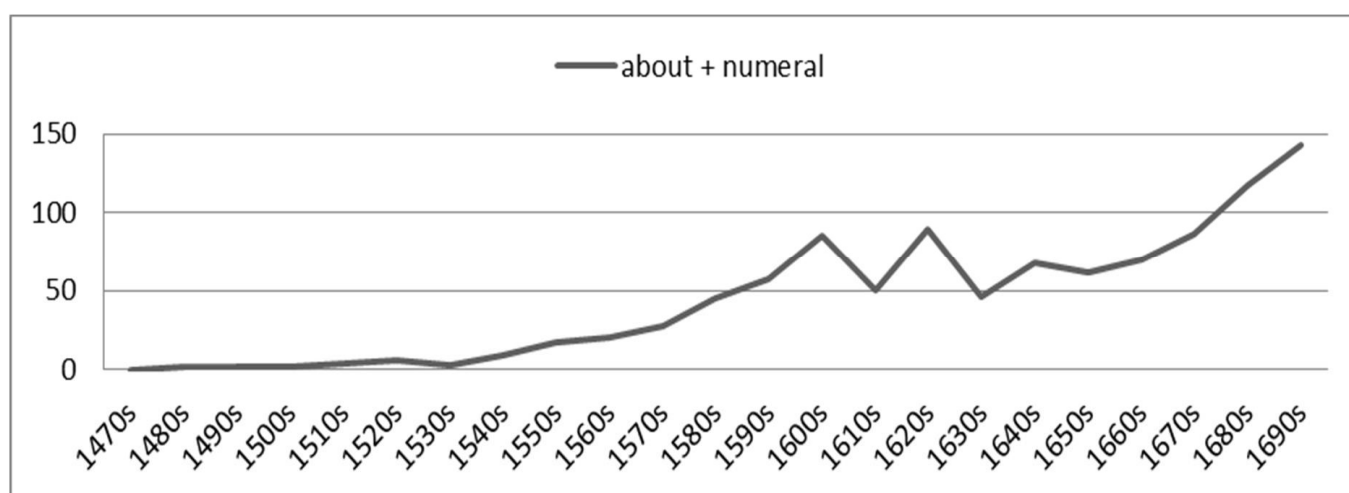


Approximative adverbs in modern and pre-modern languages

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The adverbial category of approximative adverbs (including among others *almost*, *nearly*, *virtually*, *well-nigh*, *pretty much*, *(just) about*) is rich and prominent in modern European languages. Semantically, they modify expressions denoting endpoints of closed scales (Horn 1972, Zwarts 1989, Kennedy & McNally 2005, Hoeksema 2011), such as the universal quantifiers *all*, *nothing* (*they did next to nothing*, *I saw virtually everything*), numerals (*nearly two miles*, *almost 700 casualties*), absolute adjectives such as *impossible*, *dead*, *empty*, and *full* (*this container is pretty much empty*) or verbs (*I almost drowned*, *they nearly choked with laughter*). In earlier stages, e.g. Old English or Middle Dutch, the category is considerably less prominent. Combinations of *about* + numeral, such as the following from 1640: *when they arrived at the port, it was about eight of the clocke in the morning*, are typical for early modern English, as opposed to Middle English. Data from the Early English Books Online show a steep increase in the period 1470-1700, from less than 2 per million words in the last three decades of the 15th century to 140 per million in the 1690s, cf. the graph below:



In this paper, I study the rise of approximators in English and Dutch, looking at the whole range of expressions and at the types of items they combine with. Several trends are worth noticing: (1) large overall increase in frequency of approximators, (2) increase in lexical diversity among approximators, (3) growing specialization among approximators. Some approximators combine with all the elements mentioned above (e.g. *almost*), others do not combine with numerals (*virtually all*/**300 men*) or with quantifiers (*just over 300*/**all men*).

Comparison of English and Dutch shows that the rise of approximators is simultaneous in both languages. I argue that while (2) and (3) are truly linguistic developments, (1) is most likely due to large overall societal changes, such as increased interest in precision of measurements and counts (e.g. percentages are not typical of medieval texts, but common nowadays). Based on their practice, one may assume that medieval writers would be content with *half of the men were dead or wounded* if in fact 46 out of 100 were either dead or wounded. A phrase such as *46% percent of the men* is more precise, but too precise for many purposes. Hence *almost half of the men*. It might seem paradoxical that the precise phrase *half of the men* is to be replaced by the less precise *almost half of the men*, in a quest for more precision. However, as Krifka (2009) explains, nice round numbers (and quasi-numbers such as *half*) are usually interpreted as approximations. Adding an approximative adverb helps if the goal is to be more

explicit about the approximate nature of the number, just like adding precision modifiers such as *exactly* helps to make clear that the number is to be taken literally, not approximately.

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