Proximity vs. distance: Approximative markers in contrast

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Approximation is often regarded as a subclass or function of evaluative morphology (e.g., Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015; Masini et al. 2023). Very basically, approximation can be described as 'approaching a concept', e.g. *near-perfect* 'almost perfect', *smallish* 'rather small', *pseudo-intellectual* 'fake intellectual' (e.g., Cappelle et al. 2023). Prototypical approximative markers thus express, in various ways, a high degree of similarity or proximity to the reference value. This raises the question of what, towards the other end of the scale, constitutes the lower bound of similarity with the reference value. Can markers that express only a weak similarity, such as those with the meaning 'half' (e.g., Italian *semi-libertà* 'partial freedom', *mezzo-pacifiste* 'half-pacifist'; cf. Masini & Micheli 2020; Micheli 2023) or even negation (e.g., Italian *sapone non sapone*, lit. soap NEG soap, 'soap-free cleanser'; Masini & Di Donato 2023), also be considered approximative and under which conditions?

By discussion this question, the aim of the talk is to sharpen the theoretical concept of morphological approximation. To this end, we focus on potential approximative morphological constructions in German with the pre-modifiers *semi-*, *halb-* ('half'), *pseudo-* and *schein-* ('fake'). Based on a set of 1.200 examples (150 examples for each marker with both nominal and adjectival bases) from the German Web 2023 (deTenTen23, Jakubíček et al. 2013), we compare these markers with regard to three dimensions, in order to identify the factors for approximative interpretations:

(1) Proximity vs. distance to the reference value: *pseudo-/schein-* vs. *semi-/halb-*
(2) Loan vs. native markers: *pseudo-/semi-* vs. *schein-/halb-*
(3) Nominal vs. adjectival bases (e.g., *Halbinsel*$_{N}$ 'peninsula' vs. *halblegal*$_{A}$ 'semi-legal')

Regarding the first dimension, it appears that approximative meanings are more frequent for the proximity markers *pseudo-* and *schein-* than for the distance markers *semi-* and *halb-*. Although all four markers form both approximative and non-approximative constructions, *semi-* and *halb-* occur more often in constructions with a literal, non-approximative meaning than *pseudo-* and *schein-*, thus in constructions meaning 'the half of X', e.g. *Halbmarathon* 'half-marathon'. This confirms the assumption that proximity items are generally more suitable as approximative markers than distance items.

However, in addition to the degree of similarity to the reference value there are also other factors determining approximative interpretations. Regarding the second dimension, constructions with loan markers seem to have an expressive or pejorative meaning more often than those with native markers. These expressive meanings may also block an approximative interpretation, e.g., *semigut*, lit. semi-good, 'bad'. This could be due to a lack of transparency of these loan markers, in contrast to the semantically more transparent native markers.

Regarding the third dimension, the word-class of the morphological base, the data show that with all markers approximative meanings are more frequent with adjectival than with nominal bases. This indicates that the semantic properties of the base, such as gradability, also determine approximativeness.

The paper explores how the various factors are connected and how they can be integrated in previous theoretical analyses, such as the approximation cline proposed in Eitelmann & Haumann (2023: 94).

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