

SEMANTICS OF APPROXIMATIVE PARTICLES IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN



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In our paper we classify Italian approximative particles and describe their semantics. We define as «approximatives» all those modifiers that imply a certain degree of discrepancy between the speaker's statement and the state of things it refers to. Approximatives are divided into two classes – limiting and graduating. We display their three main meanings: they imply a veracity assessment concerning the stated name, they imply the possibility of another name, they contain the seme 'a little'. On the basis of its meanings and functions we define the semantic category of approximation as an autonomous category within linguistic system.

Key words: *Italian language; approximation; approximatives; limit; graduation; assessment; standard.*

We define as approximative particles, or approximatives, those linguistic units that allow the speaker to assess a certain degree of discrepancy between his own statement and the state of things it refers to. Italian approximatives can be divided into two classes depending on whether they describe a graduating situation within the framework of a scale, or they describe the closeness of a stated situation to its natural limit or the limit of another close situation. We call these two classes - «**graduating**» and «**limiting**» **approximatives**.

About scales S.A. Grigor'eva says: «Degree- intensity-quantitative scales contain three main points: minor pole, standard and major pole. These points divide each scale into the following main areas: less than standard (*a little, barely, hardly, slightly, poorly* etc.), standard (*enough, quite*), more than standard (*very, extremely, absolutely* etc.)» (Grigor'eva, 2001).

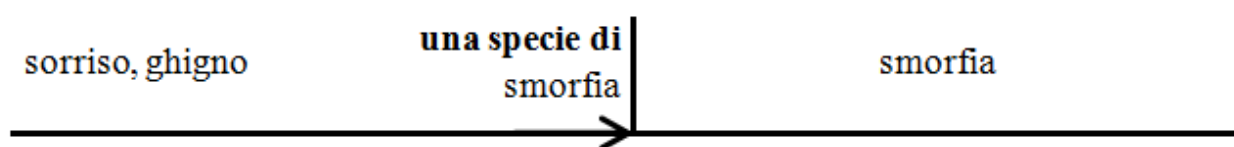
According to this definition, we will note first of all that the approximatives like *quasi* (almost) are used in relation to the limits of a scale, while the approximatives like *abbastanza* (enough) are applied to a certain area of a scale.

You can, for example, say *un'intelligenza piuttosto limitata* (a quite limited mental capacity) but you can't tell **un'intelligenza quasi limitata* (an almost limited mental capacity). On the other hand you can say *un'intelligenza quasi illimitata* (an almost unlimited mental capacity), but not **un'intelligenza abbastanza illimitata* (a quite unlimited mental capacity).

It can be explained by the fact that properties such as *ignoto* (unknown), *inesistente* (nonexistent), *invincibile* (invincible), *illimitato* (unlimited), etc., represent themselves a limit point, a pole: *un progresso illimitato* (an unlimited progress) means that it's enough just one restriction and an unlimited progress turns into a limited progress, and it remains "limited" until the opposite pole *un progresso inesistente* (zero progress). The staging area, i.e. *un progresso limitato* (limited progress), cannot be characterized by a limiting approximative: **un progresso quasi limitato*.

Limiting approximatives characterize the degree and nature of the **distance** of a certain state of things from the extreme pole of a stated situation P. This distance can have two characteristics: it can be within the scale of one situation P (*si è quasi addormentato* – he was almost asleep) or it can be the distance between two different situations, the real one and the situation P the speaker compares it to (*una specie di smorfia* – something like a grimace). In other words, limiting approximatives indicate a comparison between two different stages within a graduating situation (process or state) or a comparison between two non-graduating situations, among which one is considered the not achieved limit.

Figure 1. Representation of limiting approximation

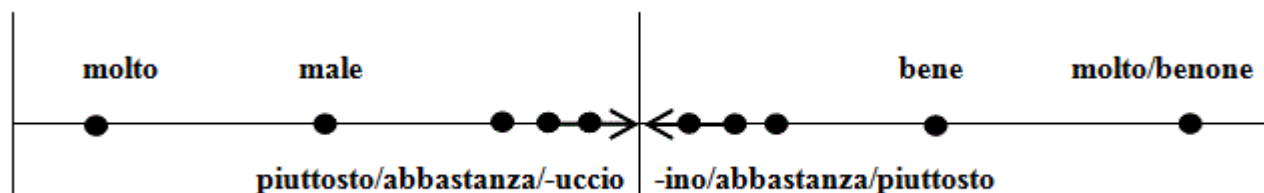


Concerning limiting approximatives can be postulated the following semantic formula:

1. **Limiting approximative P = 'close to P, but not P'.**

Graduating approximatives indicate the degree of **implementation of the standards**. They indicate different degrees of approximation to the minor pole of a graduating situation, towards the minor pole of the opposite situation. Sentences, such as: *va maluccio <benino>*, *abbastanza male <bene>*, *piuttosto male <bene>*, can be represented in the scale good/bad as in the following figure:

Figure 2. Representation of graduating approximation



Concerning graduating approximatives can be postulated the following semantic formula:

2. Graduating approximative P = ‘to such an extent P, that it is not to the full extent P’.

Using graduating approximatives speaker not only describes the distance of a situation from its standard, but also conveys a subjective assessment. Yu. D. Apresjan says that standards «refer to such a state of things which shall be represented (or is represented) by the majority of speakers as the most likely in this particular situation» (Apresjan, 1995: v. 1, 74). According to this definition we can point out another difference between graduating and limiting approximatives: graduating approximatives convey the point of view of the speaker regarding the common representation of a situation, i.e. they focus on the **subjective** assessment of the speaker on describing situation. This fact explains why the pragmatic area of graduating approximatives is to a great extent richer than pragmatic area of limiting approximatives. Let’s consider the following passage: a boy planted trees in his apartment and they became so high that the branches grew through the walls and roof.

(1) *Adesso vengono tutti i vicini di casa a vedere, anzi, direi che vengono un po' da tutto il quartiere. In effetti, la cosa è abbastanza visibile, direi piuttosto appariscente: alberi che fuoriescono dalle pareti e dal tetto, mica da ridere* (Mastrocola, 2003: 303). (All our neighbours come to our home. Moreover, people come from all the quarter. In fact, it is quite visible, I would say, rather flashy: branches of trees grow through the walls and the roof).

Here *abbastanza visibile* (quite visible) means not only that the trees are very visible, but it also expresses the irony of the author. If we replace *abbastanza visibile* with *quasi visibile*, the interpretation would be: ‘it is not visible. A little more and it would be visible’. The next sentence – *piuttosto appariscente* (rather flashy, quite striking) – enhances the effect of irony that would be completely lost if we replaced it with *quasi appariscente*.

The above examples allow us to underline one more aspect that concerns both graduating and limiting approximatives. We assume that approximatives often imply the following assessment of the speaker: the described situation is ‘not positive’. This is due to the function of approximatives in communication, since, as we have noted, using approximatives the speaker expresses his doubt in the validity (i.e. in the veracity) of the stated name or wants to use some other name.

However, a similar assessment of the situation can be expressed by many other linguistic units. Therefore, further we will briefly consider the main distinctive properties of the class of approximatives.

Main Properties of Approximatives

Approximation indicates that there is a mental model (E. Rosh calls it «prototypes», G. Lakoff calls it «Gestalt» – i.e. image, view, Yu. D. Apresjan calls it «standard»), with whom the speaker compares conceptualized objects, properties, and other phenomena of reality. On the basis of this comparison, he evaluates the degree of reliability of the name to be selected to indicate the object.

Using approximatives the speaker **evaluates the name** from the point of view of its **adequacy** for the current situation. In other words, the centre of attention of the speaker are not only the characteristics of the situation or its relationship with other situations, but the **naming process**. The slightest difference between the mental model and the object of reality leads to the fact that situation P in sentences like *approximative P* is perceived as ‘**possibly not P**’, that implies another possible name. Therefore, the use of the approximatives always entails an assessment of validity: in varying degrees situation P is evaluated as not true, i.e. ‘not P’, ‘not fully P’ or ‘for addressee may be not P’.

These two properties (evaluation of the name and the possibility of another name), define the main difference between approximation and other close semantic categories.

It should be noted that the **quantitative seme** is also a common feature of the category of approximation. All approximatives contain the semantic component ‘a little’: they can Express different perceptions of smallness, but they all indicate that the situation the speaker refers to differs from the real situation to a little extent or for few features.

Analysis of many examples leads to the conclusion that the same word can be in one context approximative particle and in another context intensifier, indefinite operator, etc.

As a separate, autonomous linguistic phenomena, the class of approximatives can be distinguished from other close (by value and function) semantic classes, such as: indefinite operators, modal operators, intensifiers, metalinguistic units, figurative nominations, figures of reiteration.

The above short analysis and observations on the distinctive features of approximatives, can be resumed in the following table:

Table 1. Distinctive features of the category of approximation

	Caterygory	Meanings and functions
1.	Approximation	<p><u>indicates the name of another situation, close to P</u></p> <p><i>Per sei settimane, per il fatto che trascurava la scuola, Lee fu poi messo in una specie di casa di correzione</i> (Biagi, 1991: 41). (They sent Li to a sort of correctional institution for six weeks, because he skipped school).</p>
	Indefinite	<p><u>indicates the exact name of an unidentified situation P</u></p> <p><i>Per sei settimane, per il fatto che trascurava la scuola, Lee fu poi messo in una qualche casa di correzione.</i> (They sent Li to a correctional institution for six weeks, because he skipped school)</p>

2.	Approximation	<p><u>indicates the discrepancy between the described object and its prototypical name</u></p> <p><i>Tira la bocca in un modo che fa pensare a un sorriso</i> (Mazzantini, 2008: 418). (He stretches his lips in a semblance of a smile).</p>
	Modality	<p><u>indicates the assumption of the speaker concerning a whole statement</u></p> <p><i>Tira la bocca in un modo che mi fa pensare stia ridendo di me.</i> (He stretches his lips in a mock grimace, and I think he's laughing at me).</p>
3.	Approximation	<p><u>it means 'not fully P'</u></p> <p><i>Continuerà a farsi aiutare dal signor Alchieri che lavora benino... mi pare</i> (Svevo, 1989: 43). (He will continue to look for the assistance of Mr. Algieri, who works not bad ...I think).</p>
	Intensivity	<p><u>it means 'to a greater or lesser degree P'</u></p> <p><i>E se non si fa vivo lui, vuol dire che sta benone, che tutto va benone</i> (Arpino, 1983: 81). (If you don't hear from him, it means he is very fine now, that everything is absolutely fine).</p>
4.	Approximation	<p><u>indicates the speaker's disagreement on adopted names</u></p> <p><i>Ci sono personaggi che si sono imposti con la rissa televisiva, lanciando l'insulto in diretta, altri con l'abbigliamento strampalato, altri ancora (e siamo sempre nel cosiddetto campo della cultura) facendo della diversità una bandiera</i> (Biagi, 1991: 11). (Some people try to draw attention to themselves insulting people on television; others with their weird clothes; others (I'm still talking about the so-called cultural figures) – deliberately showing their orientation.</p>

		<p><u>indicates the speaker's agreement on adopted names</u></p> <p><i>Un tipo di maiolica, molto semplice e in stile cosiddetto severo, in verde e bruno</i> (Altea, 2007: 147). (A very simple majolica in so-called severe style, green and brown).</p>
5.	Approximation	<p><u>it means that P is a real situation</u></p> <p><i>Sono in uno stato pietoso. Completamente disidratata. Quasi morta di fame</i> (Palazzolo, 2005: 24). (I'm in a pitiful state. Completely dehydrated. Almost starving).</p>
	Metaphore	<p><u>it means that P is a unreal situation</u></p> <p><i>Stamattina non ho fatto colazione. Sto quasi morendo di fame!</i> (Today I didn't have Breakfast. I'm almost starving).</p>
6.	Approximation	<p><u>indicates uncertainty regarding the validity of each stated title</u></p> <p><i>Un mezzo ortolano e mezzo contadino, di soprannome Forapaglia, pigionale d'una casetta, o piuttosto capanna comoda, ch'era nel campo, fu assunto come giornaliero</i> (Bacchelli, 1957: 90). (They hired for a one-day-job a half-gardener and a half -peasant, nicknamed Forapaglia, renter of a small cottage, or rather of a comfortable hut, that was in the camp).</p>
	Reiteration	<p><u>indicates the definition of an object from different sides</u></p> <p><i>Tra tutti gli anelli di Casa Damiani, l'anello solitario, anello di fidanzamento per eccellenza, merita un'attenzione particolare</i> (Corpus Coris/Codis). (Among all the rings of the company Damiani, the diamond ring – the traditional engagement ring, deserves special attention).</p>

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