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English possesses various devices for expressing approximation with numerical expressions. The higher numerals often add the word *odd* to indicate that a number is a little higher than that denoted by the numeral (cf. Jespersen 1940:586):

(1) at the age of fifty odd

The contrast with *even*, which would suggest a precise number, shows that the notion of a quantity being left over after all the other members of the set are paired is used here to indicate that ‘fifty’ does not correspond exactly to the real number of years, but that a bit more has to be added in order to reach this figure. Another way of adding a small undetermined quantity to a determinate one to obtain an approximation is to add *or so or or two* (cf. also Jespersen 1940:587):

(2) a mile or so

(3) within the next hour or two

To express approximation one can also simply adjoin a preposition such as *around* or *about*, which situates the number referred to in the vicinity of the value corresponding to the precise cardinal number following the preposition:

(4) He was around/about forty.

If one prefers morphology to syntax, one can affix the adjectival suffix *-ish* to a cardinal number and utilize its signification of ‘not quite *x*, but giving the impression of *x* in some ways’ to produce an approximative sense, as in:

(5) He was fortyish.
As can be seen from the diversity of the linguistic means used to express it, approximation is not a linguistic category but rather a referential one.

The literature on approximatives has been the scene of a debate between a “radically pragmatic” approach such as that proposed by Sadock (1981) and a “radically semantic” approach such as that defended by Wierzbicka (1986). The former offers a truth-functionally defined ‘meaning’ corresponding to approximatives in general and relies heavily on Gricean pragmatic principles to do most of the work of accounting for the overall message expressed by the utterance. The latter attempts to explain as much as possible through the semantics of the words, claiming that even the vaguest hedges and approximatives can be given rigorous semantic explications which correctly account for their use. While I would not fully share Wierzbicka's unconditional optimism that the meaning of all words can be adequately stated by means of paraphrases (1986:596), as one word or combination of words can never be the exact equivalent of another, I do subscribe to the position that one must take a serious shot at defining the conceptual content of a word before having recourse to general pragmatic principles to explain how it can be used to convey certain messages. Indeed the over-reliance on pragmatics is the direct consequence of an impoverished view of semantics, which reduces the latter to only the truth-functional aspects of meaning. This being said, it is not my purpose here to go into the problem of what must be attributed to the semantic component and what to the pragmatic in order to account for the behaviour of approximatives in general. Rather I will be concerned with the much more specific problem of how a word which appears to function as a partitive, namely some (cf. Sahlin 1972:42, Hirtle 1988:462–67), can produce the impression of approximation when used with a cardinal numeral.

Before getting to that question, however, I must first rectify the impression given by the dictionaries and grammars of English that the use of some with a numeral always produces the effect of approximation. In the data which I have been able to examine, there are a number of uses where this does not seem to be the case. Two such contexts are given in (6) and (7):

(6) The present Federal program of vocational education began in 1917 with the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, which provided a continuing annual appropriation of $7 million (...). Since 1917 some thirteen supplementary and related acts have extended this Federal program. The George-Barden Act of 1946 raised the previous increases in annual authorizations to $29 million in addition to the $7 million under the Smith Act. The Health Amendment Act of 1956 added $5 million...

(Brown U. Corpus J38 0100 6)

(7) The phrase is used some twenty-nine times in this book, but not elsewhere ...

(Lancaster-Oslo-B. Corpus D03 12 5)
Here the speaker’s communicative goal does not appear to be merely that of suggesting that the figures given are imprecise, although the use of some does allow the introduction of a slight hedging effect. Some is also used here to exploit other aspects of its meaning-potential. In order to see these more clearly, and also to situate the approximative use with respect to the partitive, the general nature of some’s meaning must now be discussed.

Following Hirtle 1988, I will assume that some can be treated as being basically partitive in meaning: it evokes a specific but non-specified part taken out of a whole. Some can be opposed to any in that it denotes the real extraction of such a part from the whole, while the latter denotes only possible extraction. This distinction can be observed most clearly in affirmative contexts, where one can imagine pairs such as:

(8a) Their dog ate some scraps of food he found in an uncovered garbage can.
(8b) Their dog ate any scraps of food he found in an uncovered garbage can.

Where the sentence with some denotes a quantity really found and eaten, the one with any covers the various possibilities of discovery and ingestion. The distinction just alluded to also accounts for the affinity of any for non-assertive contexts and of some for assertive ones.

In actual fact, it is not some by itself which evokes the part extracted from the whole however, but rather some + the following noun. This can be seen from the fact that the grammatical number of the noun following some evokes the manner in which the part is represented and not the way the whole is conceived. Thus in (9) the plural ending on the noun indicates reference to a plural part:

(9) Some boys were riding down the sidewalk on their skateboards.

In (10), on the other hand, the singular noun denotes the fact that the part extracted from the whole is singular:

(10) Some boy was riding down the sidewalk on his skateboard.

As for the whole of which some + Noun denotes a part, in most cases it is generic, as in (9) and (10) above. It is also possible for it to be specified by the context, as in this example quoted from Sahlin (1979:16):
The same thing is true of non-countable usage, as in
There was still some gas left in the tank.

(11) They had divided the Congo into six provinces – Leopoldville, Kasai, Kivu, Katanga, Equator and Eastern – unfortunately with little regard for ethnic grouping. Thus some provinces contained tribes which detested each other, and to them independence meant an opportunity for war.

The ability to occur with both singular and plural nouns shows that the meaning of some is essentially non-quantitative. The evoking of a specific but non-specified plural part, however, does produce an impression of indefinite quantity, as can be seen in (9). On the other hand, the quantity is definite in (10), where there is only one boy in question. Here some's meaning presents the individual in question as specific but non-specified, which accounts for the slightly demeaning tone of some in this type of use.

A final point concerning the role of accentuation must be brought in to complete the picture. The specific but non-specified quantity which some by itself evokes can be skewed upwards or downwards according to context and stress pattern, besides being evokable in a purely neutral manner. A sentence illustrating the neutral case would be something like (12), with unaccented some:

(12) There was still some time left, so I checked my paper over before I handed it in.

A different intonational pattern, with stress bearing on some, can be used to indicate however that the quantity evoked by some, while really existing, was minimal in extent:

(13) There was still some time left, but hardly enough to go over my whole paper.

The third case involves a similar intonational pattern to that found in (13), except that here the quantity expressed by some is felt to be of considerable size or importance:

(14) It was some time before I saw her again.

With this very summary depiction of some's meaning in mind, we can now attempt

1The same thing is true of non-countable usage, as in There was still some gas left in the tank.
to address the problem at hand – showing the relation between some's use as a partitive and the expression of approximation. No uses of this type have been cited as yet, and so it would be a propos to give some at this point:

(15) The club consists of some 40 members.
    (OED, sub some)

(16) Some fourteen or fifteen years ago, in an essay I called The Leader Follows – Where? I used his polarity to illustrate what I thought had happened to us in that form of liberalism which we call Progressivism.
    (Brown U. Corpus G21 0260 1)

(17) A nuclear pacifier of these dimensions — roughly some six and a half times bigger than anything the United States has triggered experimentally – would certainly produce a bigger bang...
    (Brown U. Corpus B03 1300 5)

The overwhelming majority of this type of use occurs with round numbers, i.e. either simple multiples or simple fractions of the base numbers of the decimal system (cf. Lotz 1955), as in (15) above. In a few cases some is combined with other indicators of approximation modifying more precise numerals, as in (16) and (17).

In order to understand the role of some in signifying approximation, it is necessary to compare some to other determiners which do not produce this impression. The following examples illustrate the contrast between some and both the article and the demonstrative:

(18a) Some 50 villages agreed to the plan.
(18b) The 50 villages agreed to the plan.
(18c) Those 50 villages agreed to the plan.

With the definite article in (18b), reference is made to a specific group of villages set off from other villages which the concept could refer to and this set is characterized quantitatively by the numeral as being 50. Similarly in (18c), the demonstrative evokes a group of villages seen as situated outside the speaker's sphere, and the numeral quantifies this set as being 50 as well. In the case of some on the other hand, what is it that produces the impression of 'approximately 50' perceivable in (18a)?

The answer to this question is to be found in the effect produced by the meaning of some as it has been described above in combination with the quantitative notion expressed by the numeral. Some, for its part, evokes a specific but non-specified quantity of villages, as it does in (19):
There were indeed some villages that agreed to the plan.

The numeral, for its part, characterizes this quantity as being 50. The result of the interaction between these two notions is to represent 50 as an approximate figure by evoking it as a number which corresponds to a non-specific quantity. This explains why the numeral following some must be interpretable as a round number in this type of use.

It was pointed out above, however, that this is not the only type of meaning expressed by the sequence some + cardinal numeral. A second question must be answered then in order to provide a complete view of the interaction between these two types of quantifying determiners: how is it that some + numeral can also be used to express a precise quantity, as in (6) and (7) cited earlier?

It should be noted in this respect that whereas all of the uses found in which some expresses bare approximation are unaccented (cf. (15) – (17) above), the uses illustrated in (6) and (7) receive some degree of stress. This relates them to the type illustrated in (14), where the extensity evoked by stressed some is understood to be of considerable size or importance. The only difference is that in (6) and (7) this extensity is also quantified more precisely by the numeral. The result is the message that the thirteen supplementary and related acts extending the government's spending power referred to in (6) is presented as a considerable number and, in the case of (7), that the twenty-nine occurrences of a phrase not found elsewhere in this author's writings is implied to be a surprisingly high frequency for the one work in which it does occur. Another possible analysis of this use in that some is being used to evoke a certain quantity which may not be exactly thirteen or twenty-nine but is close to these unexpectedly high orders of magnitude, the latter being the main point that the speaker wants to get across. Whatever the case, one cannot simply say that some is expressing mere approximation in such sentences, as the notion of a higher than expected quantity seems to be the dominant impression.

The exploration of this tiny corner of usage in English does not warrant the drawing of any very grandiose conclusions. One observation might be made in closing however: what has been seen here in the case of some provides a case in point of just how complex and unforeseeable the interaction of linguistic meanings can be, in the sense that two notions which may appear at first blush to be logically incompatible – the unspecified quantitative impression evoked by some in use with a plural noun and the precise quantity evoked by a cardinal numeral – are combinable in natural language to express the notion of an approximation. Even more amazingly, moreover, the same two notions can also be combined to evoke a precise quantity, if some is used with an intonational pattern indicating that the quantity it denotes is represented as being of considerable or greater-than-expected size. These phenomena speak strongly in favour of an approach to language which goes and looks at what is really out there, and caution one against an overly logical approach which presumes to know what is grammatical without first going through the indispensable phase of
observing what people actually say when they speak.

REFERENCES