A catalogue of ways and means of expressing numerical approximation

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What follows is a catalogue of ways and means of expressing approximative numerical values as opposed to precise ones. It aims at comprehensiveness as far as the main semantic and structural variations on this theme are concerned which are encountered across languages. Of special interest are such forms and constructions as render a precise numeral imprecise — in the way *approximately* does in English, which, when combined with a numeral as its modifier, means 'not much/many more than nor much less/many fewer than' the quantity denoted by the numeral.

Numerical approximation is often given short shrift in descriptive grammars; and since the present catalogue is to some extent based on the reading of grammars, it is in danger of leaving unrecorded what has been omitted there. However, a complementary source for this catalogue is a rather extensive questionnaire which has meanwhile been filled in for about a dozen languages, and sometimes provides information missing from grammars. For some time now, the headings of the present catalogue have been found sufficient to accommodate whatever expressive means newly were coming to my attention, which I take as confirmation that the major variations are being covered.

There may in fact be a reason for the reticence of grammars other than negligence: the notion of numerical approximation is not always strongly grammaticalized, especially when precise quantification through numerals is not such a cultural priority and the language concerned only has a handful of numerals or fewer in the first place. Therefore, one focus here will be on identifying those lexical means which are in principle available for potential grammaticalization in the domain of numerical approximation. There are certain motives here which are crosslinguistically recurring, which suggests that the resources which grammaticalization can tap are

limited. Arguably, just about any single language, however familiar, can illustrate the full gamut of such resources.

Whether lexical or grammaticalized (to whatever extent), the forms and constructions used for numerical approximation are rarely dedicated to just this one purpose. Again, it emerges that there are certain notional affinities which are crosslinguistically recurring.

The catalogue merely illustrates, and in this respect does not aim at comprehensiveness of crosslinguistic coverage. No conclusions can be drawn from it, therefore, about what is frequent and what rare, about what might run in families or areas, and about how numerical approximation might be interdependent with other structural parameters of variation.