Not *Nearly* Synonymous.

Similarities and differences between *almost* and *nearly* [*]

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Abstract

In this paper we look at the difference in distribution and meaning between *almost* and *nearly*. *Nearly* has to do with expectations and is in general uneasy as a modifier of negative quantifiers, while it is grammatical in the scope of negation. On the other hand, *almost* is at best marginal in the scope of negation (unless an echo context is provided) and in combination with the NPI *any*. We propose that, when *nearly* is in the scope of negation, it loses its scalar component and its literal meaning of physical proximity can be accessed by negation and modified by it. This accounts for the particular interpretation of *nearly* under negation. To account for the contextual expectations raised by *nearly*, we suggest that the operator EVEN is instantiated by the presence of *nearly* and that EVEN does not interfere with the alternatives made salient by scalar operators like *almost* and *nearly* (contra Penka, 2005). We then propose an alternative explanation for the ungrammaticality of the combination between *almost*-NPI *any* and the acceptability of *nearly*-NPI *any*.

1   Introduction

Most literature on *almost* builds on the intuition that two components are part of its meaning: following Nouwen (2006) and Horn (2002), we refer to them as the polar component and the proximal component. In the case of

(1)   John's cat weighs almost 20 lbs.

the polar component signals that John's cat does not weigh 20 lbs., while the proximal component signals that John's cat's weight is close to 20 lbs. We will here summarize some of the most influential analyses that deal with these components and the issues they raise.

1.1   The polar component

With respect to the polar component, the main question is whether "the denial of the complement of *almost* is asserted, presupposed or conventionally or conversationally implicated" (Nouwen 2006).

Sadock (1981) argues for an analysis of the polar component of *almost* as a conversational implicature. According to Grice's Maxim of Quantity, given that a statement of the form *almost p* is weaker than *p*, the hearer assumes that the speaker believes *p* to be false in the actual world. The main support for an analysis of the polar component as a conversational implicature comes from two observations. As it is the case in classic cases of conversational implicature, the implicated material can be reinforced without redundancy. In the case of *almost*, thus, it can be seen from the naturalness of the phrase '*almost* but not quite all' that the polar component can be non-redundantly reinforced. Moreover, as is the case with many conversational implicatures, the implicated material is non-detachable; in the case of '*almost*' we can show that the polar component of *almost* is non-detachable given that it is triggered also by its synonymous *nearly*.

One problem faced by this proposal is, as pointed out by Nouwen (2006), that these two tests are neither necessary nor sufficient to demonstrate the existence of a conversational implicature. The main problem with the proposal is that the polar component cannot be easily cancelled (as is normally the case with conversational implicatures):

(2)   ??John's cat weighs almost, in fact exactly, 20 lbs.

Rapp & von Stechow (1999) assume the polar component to be part of the conventional meaning of *almost*, while Penka (2005) prefers not to commit herself "regarding the status of the two conjuncts as presupposition, implicature or part of the truth conditions" (footnote 1, p.5). The main problem for an analysis that assumes the polar component as part of the semantics of *almost* is the grammaticality of sentences like the following:

(3)   If you want to pass the exam, you have to answer almost all questions correctly.

In this case it is clear that somebody who answers all the questions correctly will pass the exam. It is hard to see how the polar component could be overridden in these cases, if it is indeed part of the semantics of the lexical item.

Nouwen (2006), however, notes that the polar component of *almost* is not very salient:

(4)   Fortunately, almost all my friends attended my wedding

(5)   Fortunately, not all my friends attended my wedding

In (4) it is clear that the adverb cannot modify the negative component, while it obligatorily does so in (5): "whereas we may infer from [(4)] that the speaker is pleased that most of his friends attended the wedding, [(5)] seems to suggest that she is pleased that some of them failed to turn up" (Nouwen, 2006:2). He then shows that the polar component of *almost* shares with presuppositions, conventional implicatures, and conversational implicatures the impossibility of being modified by a sentential adverb:

(6)   Fortunately, John's son is 8 years old.
           (Presupposition: John has a son)

(7)   Fortunately, Jake, who by the way is a movie star, did not come.
           (Conventional implicature: Jake is a movie star)

(8)   Fortunately, some students attended the wedding
           (Conversational implicature: Not all the students attended the wedding)

Given the difficulty in distinguishing between a presuppositional, a conventional, and a conversational implicature for the polar component of *almost*, Nouwen decides not commit

himself and only rejects the hypothesis of the polar component as part of the conventional meaning.

1.2   The proximal component

With respect to the proximal component, the obvious question to ask is what closeness to something means and on what scale this closeness is measured. Two main approaches exist in the literature: the intensional approach (Sadock 1981; Nouwen 2006), according to which closeness is measured in terms of distance between possible words, and the scalar approach (Penka, 2005) according to which closeness is measured in terms of ranking of focus alternatives.

1.2.1   The intension al approach

The original analysis of *almost* as an intensional operator dates back to Sadock (1981):

$[almost] = \lambda w. \lambda p_{<st>}. \exists w' [w'$ is not very different from w & p (w')]

The problem with this formulation is that dissimilarity is not formally defined.

In Nouwen (2006), a world in which the proposition *almost p* is true identifies a world which is minimally distant from a world characterized by the truth of the proposition *p*. Minimal distance between two words is then formally defined as follows: "w_1 is n-removed from w_n if there exists a sequence $w_n, w_{n-1}, \ldots w_1$ such that such that for all n>i> 1, it holds that w_i is 1-removed from w_{i-1}" (Nouwen, 2006:5). The meaning of *almost* can then be captured by saying that "*almost p* is true if and only if *p* is true in some n-removed world, where ***n is small***[1]" (ibid.)

The intensional theory argues that in the case of (9):

(9)   John's cat weighs almost 20 lbs.

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[1]Emphasis added.

a world (w) in which the proposition 'John's cat weighs 20 lbs.' is identified, and some contextually determined words in which 'John's cat weighs 20 lbs.' is false are present (e.g., there is another world 1-removed from w in which John's cat weighs 19.9 lbs., a world 2-removed from w in which she weighs 19.9 lbs. and so on). The *almost* component identifies the actual world as one that is n-removed from w, with n being a small number. This theory accounts for the ungrammaticality of examples like

(10)   *Almost a/some student came.

(11)   *Almost two students came.

The ungrammaticality of (10) stems from the impossibility of ordering between worlds. Given a world (w) in which some students came, it is not possible to order the contextually relevant worlds in which 'some student came' is false, given that they all are 1-removed from w. The ungrammaticality of (11) is explained by the fact that all worlds in which the proposition 'two students came' is false, *n* is small (they are either 1- or 2-removed), "consequently there is no bases for a measure of proximity" (Nouwen 2006:12, footnote 3).

As pointed out by Morzycki (2001), one problem that the intensional approach faces comes from, DP modification: it not clear in what respect the worlds in which p is true are allowed to vary with respect to the actual world. In the case of (12),

(12)   Almost every plant is dry.

our intuition clearly says that such worlds should vary from the actual world with respect to the proportion of dry plants over the non-dry plants, and not with respect to the degree of dryness of each individual plant. But assuming an intensional approach, we need special restrictions to disallow this from happening. To disallow this kind of interpretation for DP modifier *almost*, two main solutions have been proposed. One (Penka 2005, see below) abandons the intensional view and treats *almost* as a scalar focus element (the focus component specifies the dimension along which the alternatives are allowed to differ from *p*), while Morzycki (2001) resorts to a special rule for DP-modifying *almost*, so that the worlds cannot vary with respect to the extension of the VP.
According to the proponents of the intensional approach, the latter framework is better suited to account for VP-modifying *almost*. In the case of

(13)   Travis almost qualified for the long-jump final.

assuming that 6 meters are the minimum for qualification, *almost* picks out a world that is closer to a world in which Travis jumps 6 meters. Such a world (w') is one in which Travis jumps 5.9 meters and not one (w'') in which Travis jumps only 2 meters, given that more degrees would need to be added to Travis's jump in w''. It is important to notice that in all the cases above, *almost* modifies monotonic expressions. When *almost* combines with other types of expressions, it becomes difficult to order between different worlds. Nouwen (2006) offers the following example:

(14)   It is almost 3 o'clock.

In this case, our intuition tells us that it can very well be 2:55, but clearly not 3:05. The problem is that the upper reading cannot be excluded, as we have done in all the other cases, by resorting to the polar component of *almost*, given that 3:05 is not 3 o'clock.[2] Nouwen (2006) suggests that we can say that 3:05 does contain 3 o'clock because time is ordered and hence for it to be 3:05 it needs to have been 3:00. Hence this reading is ruled out again by the polar component. Notice that this approach also takes care of the cases in which both the upwards directed and the downwards directed reading are possible given a suitable context: The sentence

(15)   Today the temperature was very unlikely for the season: it was almost 15°C!

would be probably interpreted as meaning that it was about 12-14°C, if uttered during the winter, while it would be interpreted as meaning that it was about 16-18°C, if uttered during the summer. This is explained by making reference to a scale of ordered values whose direction can be reversed during the winter, given that we are used to lower temperatures, the scale starts from a temperature lower than 15°C, while the opposite is true for the summer. The polar component excludes temperatures that are higher than 15°C during the winter, because they include 15° given that 15°C need to be reached for the temperature to go higher, while the polar component excludes temperatures lower than

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[2] In the case of (1), the upwards directed reading would have been 'John's cat is 21 lbs'. Given that 31 lbs. contain 30 lbs., and hence, in a sense, are 30 lbs., the polar component of *almost* excludes this reading.

15°C during the summer, given that 15°C would need to be reached for the temperature to drop to those values.

1.2.2 The scalar alternative approach

According to Penka (2005), *almost* is a scalar focus element, which presupposes the existence of alternatives ranked on a scale. These alternatives are ranked on a Horn scale (Horn, 2001), that is, elements on the scale are ordered so that an element in the scale entails all elements ranked lower. To avoid the problems pointed out by Morzycki (2001) with respect to DP modification, scalar ordering is projected along with focus alternatives, so that the alternatives taken into consideration are of the right type. In this framework, *almost* p is true if and only if p is false and there is a contextually relevant alternative to p (p'), which is close to p and true.

The ungrammaticality of (10) is easily explained in this approach: the only alternative to *p* (some student came) is p' (no student came). Because of its scalar component, *almost* requires the presence of more than one alternative. To explain the ungrammaticality of (11) Penka would probably have to say that more than n (n= small number) alternatives must be salient in the context. Notice that this is intuitively correct: there is nothing wrong in principle in the combination of almost and a number like 2, provided that a significant number of alternatives are possible in the context:

(16)   John's dog weighed almost 2 lbs when he was born.

Given that measure phrases are associated with dense scales, a significant number of alternatives becomes available (1.7., 1.8, 1.9…) and the use of *almost* is then grammatical. According to Nouwen (2006), this theory is well equipped to deal with DP-modifying *almost* (and maybe better equipped than the intensional approach, as we have seen with the problems raised by Morzycki), but it faces serious problems when it has to account for VP modifying *almost*. Alternatives to a given proposition are based on natural language expressions, so unless the predicate modified by *almost* is a degree predicate, it is hard to see what the alternative can be. In the case of (13), repeated here as (17)

(17)   Travis almost qualified for the long-jump final

the only alternative to p 'qualify for the long-jump final' is 'not to qualify for the long-jump final' (given that the scalar approach crucially relies on scales of natural language expressions), but we have seen that *almost* needs more than one alternative to be successfully applied. Moreover, as argued by Nouwen, modifying the requirement that Horn scales work with natural language expressions so that contextual alternatives could be independent from the natural language expressions used in the proposition being evaluated still wouldn't give the desired results: "The reason is that the meaning of the example in [(13)] cannot be expressed in terms of the set denoted by the VP. The set of qualifiers is irrelevant to the truth of *Travis almost qualified.* The only thing that matters is Travis' efforts." (Nouwen 2006:6-7)

Penka (2005) finally discusses the incompatibility of *almost* with NPIs. In her opinion, this is due to an intervention effect (Linebarger 1980). Following Beck (2006), she proposes that *almost*, an element that evaluates among different alternatives, interferes with the evaluation of focus alternatives introduced by NPIs (Krifka (1995); Lahiri (1998)) and vice versa, so that these elements are mutually incompatible.

2   *Almost* and *Nearly*

As we have seen, *almost* has received considerable attention in the recent literature. However, its synonymous *nearly* has been overlooked and in the few cases in which it has been mentioned, it has been assimilated in meaning to *almost* (see Sadock, 1981). Dictionaries tend to interchange them freely:

Almost: all but; very nearly
Nearly: almost
(*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the English Language,* 1990)

Almost: very nearly but not completely
Nearly: almost, but not quite or not completely
(*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English,* 1995)

Almost: nearly but not quite
Nearly: almost or not completely
(*Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995*)

Almost: not quite; very nearly

Nearly: very close to; almost
(*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 1998)

"You use *almost* to indicate that something is not completely the case but is *nearly* the case. *Nearly* is used to indicate that something is not quite the case, or not completely the case." (*Collins COBUILD English Dictionary for Advanced Learners,* 2001)

2.1   Frequency and distribution

By conducting a simple dictionary search, it would seem that the two items are completely interchangeable, and no dictionary mentions a difference in use or in nuance. If one looks at frequency, it seems that *almost* is much more frequent than its synonymous *nearly*. In the CobuildDirect Corpus *almost* is 2.33 more frequent then *nearly*. A simple-minded Google count gives the same result: *almost* is 2.27 times more frequent than *nearly*. Kjellmer (2003) provides the relative frequencies of these two items in the twelve subcorpora of the CobuildDirect Corpus.

These corpora include different text types: public radio (US and UK), newspapers (UK and Australia), fiction and non-fiction books (US and UK), ephemera (leaflets, adverts, both US and UK), magazines (UK) and transcribed informal speech (UK). From his analysis, it appears that "*almost* prefers literary styles of writing (US books, UK books, UK Times) and avoids more popular text types (*Sun* newspaper, UK and US ephemera, and informal speech), whereas *nearly* tends to be more used in the US news media, while neither of them is used much in spoken British English" (Kjellmer, 2003:21). Kiellmer also looked at the different frequency of *almost* and *nearly* with respect to syntactic category they modify. *Almost* is more frequent with adverbs[3] (the *almost*/*nearly* ratio is 7.39), adjectives[4] (7.49), pronouns (5.29) and prepositions (8.03). *Nearly* is followed by nouns as frequently as *almost* (1.42), while it is followed more frequently by numerals (0.7). He suggests that "*almost* is typically followed by manner adverbs (*obscurely, intentionally)*, time adverbs

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[3]As noted by Wolf (1996) *almost* but not *nearly* can occur before adverbs in –*ly*
  i)   Without proper guidance, you will almost certainly run into difficulties.
Notice that some adverbs (*very, pretty, so*) display the opposite behavior, and can only be modified by *nearly*
  ii)   He very nearly died
  iii)   I came across a paragraph about a girl I'd pretty nearly forgotten.
[4]Wolf (1996) notices that *almost* but not *nearly* can be modified by *like*
  iv)   It made me feel almost like a hostess

(*always, immediately*) and sentence adverbs (*undoubtedly, certainly*), whereas *nearly* typically occurs in the construction *not + nearly + as*" (Kjellmer, 2003:26). In the sample sentences he reports (the first 23 sentences of the corpus containing *almost* and the first 23 containing *nearly*), it is interesting to note that *almost* is never preceded by negation, while in 10 of the 23 sentences with *nearly*, *nearly* is preceded by negation:

(18)   […] distribution rights, though **not** *nearly* as many as they had hoped for
        […] black and white, and – and it's **not** *nearly* as polished as this
        […] immediate reaction would **not** be *nearly* as sympathetic
        […] combined German team **won't** be *nearly* as good as the East German team
        […] fail ridiculously. But I **don't** feel *nearly* as foolish as the time I bought the
        […] as an insider or an outsider is **not** *nearly* as important as proving to voters
        […] moves, which they say do **not** go *nearly* far enough, will be enough for
        […] to the ancient Egyptians, he **wasn't** *nearly* as important as an earlier king,
        […] the parties are **not** *nearly* as powerful as they once were, but
        […] US government is **not** spending *nearly* enough on industrial research and
        […] says the prosecutor did **not** go *nearly* far enough. She says all seven of
        […] to a strict budget which is **not** *nearly* as big as it was last year

This fact is very important and is also mentioned in Wolf (1996) and analyzed by Pozzan and Schweitzer (2007). The opposite behavior is found when these words modify negative expressions like *no*, *none*, *nobody*, *nothing* (Wolf 1996; Lieberman 2007) and free choice *any*.

Lieberman notes that, in Google's general index, *almost* is in general more common than *nearly*; nonetheless, "*with everyone, almost* is 30% commoner than *nearly*, but with *no one* it is 3.840% commoner". (Lieberman, Language Log, June 14th, 2007). Lieberman then compares *almost* and *nearly* when used as modifiers of *always* and *never* and finds that the ratio of *almost* to *nearly* is about 5 when these elements are preceded by *always*, but it becomes about 20 in the case of *never*. Similar ratios are found when comparing *almost* and *nearly* as modifiers of *none of* and *all of*: the ratio is around 38 in the first case and around 3 in the second case. Sure enough, *nearly* is found as a modifier negative quantifiers, but it is not nearly as frequent as *almost*.

2.2   Meaning and implicatures

Up to now we have examined the differences in frequency and distribution between *nearly* and *almost*. The obvious question to raise is whether these distributional differences can be explained by some difference in meaning or in presuppositional content. We have seen that most dictionaries define one word by using the other; in the Webster dictionary, for example, we find the following statement about the differences among about *nearly*, *almost*, approximately: "their differences in meaning are often imperceptible." But what about the cases in which they indeed are perceptible? What are these cases?

One difference that comes to mind when thinking about *nearly* and *almost* has to do with their literal meaning and etymology. *Almost* derives from old English *eallmæst*, which is a compound of *eal* "all" and *mæst* "most", while *nearly* clearly maintains to some extent the idea of physical proximity, and can be used to mean "closely" or "intimately". For this reason, (19) is fine while (20) is ungrammatical:

(19)   The person most *nearly* concerned.

(20)   *The person most *almost* concerned.

Ben van Heuvelen (as reported in Sadock, 2007) suggests that for this reason, even when used as degree modifiers, *nearly* maintains this spatial connotation:

> *Nearly* is a more concrete word than *almost*. Both adverbs are used as degree modifiers, but *nearly* entails a slight metaphor, since the adjective and preposition forms of the word (*near*) suggest physical proximity. It's impossible to use *nearly* without subtly invoking physical space. For example, my understanding of the sentence 'They were *nearly* happy' is informed by my previous understandings of sentences like 'You are near the supermarket.' (True, you can also use *almost* when talking about physical space – 'You are *almost* at the supermarket' – but to do so you have to add a preposition. There isn't a metaphor built into the word.). My theory is that we tend to rely on *almost* when the idea we're conveying is more abstract, something we can't easily picture. '*Nearly* everyone' is easy to picture (a big crowd), as are the '*nearly* worthless' things I encounter every day. '*Almost* no one' is *almost* impossible to picture (an empty space? a space filled with a couple

semi-translucent bodies?), while an '*almost* priceless' object is a logical impossibility. In the latter two cases, we rely on the more abstract adverb, *almost*. (Language Log, June, 16th 2006)

In Wood's *Current English Usage* (1981), we find a similar observation. While *almost* is just a 'minus word' indicating the fact that some 'goal' is not reached, *nearly* "conveys the sense of approximation to the world it modifies." It would seem then that *nearly* focuses on the idea of approximation to a goal, while *almost* focuses on the result, which is the fact that some goal (positive or negative) has not been reached.

According to Evans' *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*, on the other hand, the intuition is more or less the opposite: "A book that is *almost* completed is nearer its completion than one that is *nearly* completed".

An important observation is again found in Wood's *Current English Usage* (1981): "The tendency seems to be to use *nearly* rather than *almost* when some special significance is implied. If someone asks us the time we might reply that it is either *almost* or *nearly* ten o'clock; but we should probably use *nearly* to the exclusion of *almost* if we wished to express **surprise**[5] at the fact, or if someone had asked us to tell him when it was ten. It is *almost* eight kilometers to the next village is a simple statement of distance. If we wish to suggest that it is **too far** to walk, or that it is **further than one would think**, then we are more likely to say that it is *nearly* eight kilometers. Similarly, 'It cost me *almost* twenty pounds' is a mere statement of price but 'It cost me *nearly* twenty pounds' suggests that it was **more than** might have been **supposed**, or more than I wished to pay."

A very similar idea is expressed by Sadock (2007); according to him, there is a difference in conventional implicature between these two items, which has to do with expectations: "*Nearly n* connotes that *n* exceeds (hence is better than) what was expected or hoped for, while *almost n* does not conventionally connote any particular desire, hope or expectation, but easily supports a conversational implicature to the same effect as the conventional implicature associated with *nearly*." Hence the two items are different in terms of what they convey about the speaker's expectations about a certain quantity that was not attained (polar component). According to Sadock, (21) is marginal while (22) is fine

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[5]Emphasis added.

(21)   ?I have *nearly* 10 dollars in my wallet. (uttered by an adult)

(22)   Molly has *nearly* 10 dollars in her piggy bank.

This is so because, while in most contexts it is expected that an adult has 10 dollars in his wallet, this amount is, on the other hand, probably unexpected for a three year old. (21) would thus be an awkward sentence, given that the choice of *nearly* indicates that the quantity it modifies is more than expected, while, on the contrary, $10 is considered a reasonable amount for an adult to have in his wallet. Notice that in his account, crucially, *nearly* conveys the idea of something approximating to an *n* which "exceeds (hence is better than)" some other (expected) *n*. This allows him to account for the deviance of the examples in which *nearly* modifies a negative quantifier. Thus

(23)   ? Nearly no one was there

is deviant because in most context it is unlikely that n=0 is more/better than expected for. But, by scale reversal, it is possible to find situations in which *nearly* modifies negative quantifiers. In the case in which n=0 and n is better than expected for, the combination of *nearly* and a negative quantifier becomes fully acceptable. According to Sadock, in fact, the following sentence is perfectly grammatical, given the assumptions that the speaker has organized a boycott on Humvees and that n= 0 exceeds expectations:

(24)   Nearly no Humvees were sold last month.

With respect to Sadock's proposal, we would like to raise two questions. The first question we would like to ask is whether the conventional implicature brought by *nearly* has to do with *n* being a quantity that is necessarily **more** than what is expected for or rather if this quantity being just different from what was expected. We agree with Sadock on the fact that (24) is fine in the context provided but we would also like to suggest that the sentence is also acceptable in a different context, namely one in which we like Humvees and we know that they are big sellers. In this case *nearly* does not convey the fact that n=0 is a fortunate event, but only that it is an unexpected one.

We would like to argue that the reason *nearly* is in general dispreferred as a modifier of negative quantifiers has to do with the way scales work: in general we assume 0 as a starting point/default quantity and consider bigger numbers as goals/unexpected amounts. In general, then, *nearly* is not used with negative quantifiers because 0 is the default and not an unexpected amount. The direction of the scale can be flipped by managing expectations in the context, so that 0 is not the starting point but rather the end point of the scale. In this case, the combination of *nearly* and negative quantifiers becomes fully acceptable.

We conclude that *nearly n* conventionally implicates that *n* is an unexpected amount; the further implication that *n* is better than expected is due to the fact that by default scales go from smaller numbers to bigger ones and that in general more means better.

The second question we would like to ask is whether the implicature brought about by the presence of *nearly* conveys the unexpectedness of what is denoted by *n* or rather that of what is denoted by *nearly n* .The question seems hard to answer, given the fact that the two quantities need, by definition, to be close to each other. To test for this, we need to create two contexts, one in which *n* is an unexpected amount while close to *n* is an expected one and one in which *n* is an expected amount while close to *n* isn't. The idea would be that if *nearly* can be used in the second context, we can't maintain the conventional implicature proposed up to now, which crucially requires that *n* is unexpected.

Context 1 (n= unexpected, close to n= expected): Sandra is a good student and her tests
and homework are always very good, but never error-free. She normally makes one or two
mistakes. Her teachers know this and they don't expect her to get a perfect score in the
final, but expect she will make few mistakes.
Expected result (for Sandra's final): 2 mistakes. Unexpected result: 0 mistakes.
Actual result: there are 2 mistakes in Sandra's final
Teacher 1: How did Sandra do in the final?
Teacher 2:

(25)   ? She made nearly no mistakes.

Context 2 (n=expected, close to n= unexpected): Sandra is a straight-A student and her
tests and homework are always error-free. The final was particularly easy and everybody

made very few mistakes. It was everybody's expectation that Sandra would get a perfect score. But she made 2 mistakes.
Expected result (for Sandra's final): 0 mistakes. Unexpected result: 2 mistakes.
Actual result: there are 2 mistakes in Sandra's final

(26)   Sandra made nearly no mistakes.

It should be clear from the contexts provided above that Sadock's original claim that it is part of the conventional implicature of *nearly* to indicate only the unexpectedness of what it modifies cannot be maintained: it can also be the whole phrase (*nearly n*) which is regarded as unexpected. Our idea, which will be developed in the next section, is that it is indeed the whole phrase *nearly n* which is valued as unexpected/unlikely by a non overt operator: EVEN.

3   Not *Nearly* and Not *Almost*

One interesting difference between *nearly* and *almost* that has been overlooked in the literature is their interaction with negation. While *nearly* is perfectly acceptable in the presence of negation, *almost* is marginal, at best. By looking at Google's general index, one can easily see that when these words are preceded by negation the ratio *almost*/*nearly* is reversed: *not nearly* is 41 times commoner than *not almost*.

Almost preceded by negation seems acceptable only in echo contexts, that is, when an occurrence of *almost* is present in the preceding context. (27) is acceptable only as an explicit correction of something like (28).

(27)   ? We did not gather almost 100 signatures.

(28)   We should have gathered almost 100 signatures by now.

Moreover, while a sentence like (29) is completely grammatical, (30) is ungrammatical, unless presented, again, in an explicit correction context

(29)   The food here is not nearly as good as it used to be.

(30)   *The food here is not almost as good as it used to be.

One interesting thing to notice is that *almost* and *nearly*, when in the scope of negation, do not have the same interpretation. Compare the sentences:

(31)   ? John does not have almost $100.

(32)   John does not have nearly $100.

(27) and (31) are acceptable only in echo contexts. In such contexts, the intuition is that (27) and (31) are true if and only if the number of signatures/dollars is **different** from the number denoted by '*almost* 100'. We will assume here the semantics for *almost* proposed by Penka (2005), with the further assumption that the polar component is part of the conversational implicature and not part of the conventional meaning of the word.

[*almost* p] = λw. ∃ q [q ≈ p & q (w)]   &   conversational implicature: p = 0 in w

We agree with Penka that *almost* always needs to take wide scope with respect to a proposition, but, contrary to Penka, we assume that *almost* does not always take scope over negation. Rather, it does so only if it c-commands negation prior to LF (as in (33)). This is intuitively clear if one compares (31) with (33).

(33)   John almost doesn't have $100.

If *almost* was to take scope over negation, (31) and (33) would have the same truth conditions, namely the ones for (33). But this is clearly not the case, since (33) means that John has either $100 or a little bit more than $100, while (31) says that he has an amount that is either less than 90 or ≥ 100. These two interpretations need to be kept distinct from each other.

(31) is an echo sentence, whose function is to negate the corresponding affirmative. We propose that in this case *almost* can only scope over p, while it cannot take wide scope with respect to negation. This gives us the correct interpretation for a sentence like (31), which is derived from negating of the affirmative one:

[John has almost $ 100] = = λw. ∃ q [q ≈ (John has $100) & q (w)]
&   c.i.: John has $100 = 0

[John doesn't have *almost* $100] = λw. ¬∃ q [q ≈ p & q (w)]
&   c.i.: John has $100 = 0

The conversational implicature survives negation, but can be cancelled by using prosody, as is the case with classic conversational implicatures:

(34)   John saw some students.   c.i.: John didn't see all the students

(35)   John didn't see some students.   c.i: John didn't see all the students

(36)   John didn't see SOME students, he saw all of them!

(37)   John has almost $100.   c.i.: John doesn't have $100

(38)   John doesn't have almost $100.   c.i.: John doesn't have $100

(39)   John doesn't have ALMOST $100, he has $100!

To sum up, we have seen that *almost* tends not to be felicitous in the scope of negation, unless in echo contexts, where *almost p* gets negated. In these contexts, a scope theory of *almost* (see Penka, 2005) does not give the correct results; *almost* needs to be in the scope of negation to give the correct truth conditions for a sentence like (31). We would like to suggest that a sentence like (31) is semantically and syntactically well formed. The reason why it is marginal seems due principally to pragmatics factors. It is hard to see when it would be appropriate to communicate that some quantity x is different from being close to some quantity y, unless close to y was previously established in the context to be relevant, which is exactly what happens in an echo context.
We now need to give an analysis of *nearly* that accounts not only for the fact that a sentence like (32) (repeated here as (40)) does not require an echo context but that it has a different interpretation from (31):

(40)   John does not have nearly $100.

Notice that the interpretation for (40) (=32) cannot be the same that we have derived for (31). First of all, the conversational implicature doesn't seem detachable:

(41)   ?? John doesn't have NEARLY $100, he has $100!

Secondly, the intuition is that for (40) to be true, John should have considerably less than $100, not just less than $90. We would like to suggest the proximity component that is part of the literal meaning of '*nearly*' can be accessed by negation (probably due to this, *nearly* in negative contexts is almost always prosodically marked). When *nearly* is used in this way, it loses its scalar component and combines with negation:

(42)   John is <u>not *nearly*</u> 60 years old. → John is <u>far</u> (from) 60 years old.

One important fact we would like to come back to is the earlier claim (Sadock, 2006; Wood, 1981) that *nearly p* is different from *almost p* because it carries the implicature that *p* is an unexpected event. We would like to suggest that this is due to the covert presence of a scalar focus operator, EVEN, whose function is exactly that of evaluating the content of its complement as 'unlikely'(hence 'unexpected'). Following Karttunen & Peters (1979), we assume the semantics of EVEN to be that of an operator taking wide scope over the proposition it modifies:

[EVEN p]:   Assertion: $p = 1$;

     Presupposition: $\exists q$ in Context [likelihood q > likelihood of p] $\wedge$ q = 1

The function of the operator EVEN is that of making salient the existence, in the context, of a set of alternatives to *p* (focus component) and evaluating the likelihood of these alternatives as greater than *p* (scalar component). We propose the representation of *nearly p* to be the following:

EVEN [nearly p]: Assertion: nearly p = 1;

     Presupposition: $\exists q$ in C [likelihood q > likelihood of nearly *p*]

An important fact that is captured by this analysis is the possibility of *nearly p* (as opposed to *only p*) to be what is valued as unexpected. Notice that this is exactly what we suggested and could not derive by assuming Sadock's (2006) proposal.

With this analysis in mind, we would like to go back to Penka's discussion of the incompatibility of *almost* with the NPI anybody. Following Lahiri (1998), she assumes that the focus alternatives introduced by NPIs get evaluated by the operator EVEN, which takes wide scope over negation. Penka, following Beck (2006), proposes that the sentence

(43)   *I didn't see almost any student.

is ungrammatical because of the intervention of an alternative-ranking element (*almost*) with an alternative-evaluating element (even) introduced the NPI. Intervention effects arise, according to Beck, when two operators (Op_1 and C) that evaluate alternatives are found in the following configuration:

(44)   *[Op_1 . . . [$\approx$ C [. . .XP_1 . . .]]]

Accordingly, in this configuration the alternatives introduced by XP_1 fail to be evaluated by Op_1 due to the intervening presence of C. The ungrammaticality of (43) is thus easily derived: in the case in which *almost* is found in the position of Op1, EVEN acts as an intervener and there are no alternatives left for *almost* to rank, and vice versa:

*[$even_D$ [$\approx$D [not [*almost$_C$* [$\approx$ C [I saw [a student]$_F$]]]]]

*[*almost$_C$* [$\approx$C [$even_D$ [$\approx$D [not [[I saw [a student]$_F$]]]]]]

Notice that, quite surprisingly for any theory that assigns the same semantics to *almost* and *nearly*, the latter element is compatible with the NPI *any*:

(45)   I didn't see nearly any student.

Penka's way to deal with the ungrammaticality of (43) is not compatible with our analysis of *nearly* so far. Remember that, to account for the difference in expectations raised by the two items, we have proposed that *nearly* crucially involves the presence of a covert EVEN operator. Thus, the representation for *nearly p* that we have proposed instantiates exactly the kind of double evaluation configuration that Penka wants to rule out.

We propose that there is nothing in principle that makes the two operators (*even* and *almost/nearly*) incompatible: *almost* and *nearly* make salient and rank a set of alternatives to *p* and evaluate one of them (q) as true. EVEN, on the other hand, evaluates the proposition *q* as 'less likely' than the other alternatives in the context.

How can we then account for the ungrammaticality of (43) and the grammaticality of (45)? Notice that, on independent grounds, we have already shown *almost* to be incompatible with negation unless an echo context is provided, while *nearly* has been shown to be compatible with it. (43) and (45) are indeed cases in which these elements are c-commanded by negation. Crucially, no echo context can be provided for (43), given that the affirmative counterpart of the NPI *any* is the existential quantifier *a* (Laka, 1990; Pregovac, 1994), which is well known not to be modifiable by *almost*, given that it represents the bottom of the quantifier scale:

(46)   *Almost* a / some student passed the exam. (Penka, 2005)

To sum up, building on the previous observation that *not almost p* is only allowed in a context where a previous mention of *almost p* was made and that *almost* is incompatible with the existential quantifier (which is the incarnation of any in non downward entailing contexts), we were able to independently motivate the ungrammaticality of (43).

Finally, the grammaticality of (45) is explained in the following way: in negative sentences, *not* combines with *nearly* to yield far (from).

[EVEN [I saw not *nearly* a student] → I saw far from a student

The assertion component of EVEN evaluates the proposition (I saw far from a student) as true, while its presupposional component evaluates it as the least likely one of other true proposition in the context (hence, with respect to some other proposition in the context: 'I saw far from 100', 'I saw far from 50…'). In this case, thus, far from 1 can only mean 0.

5   Summary and conclusions

In this paper we have summarized and discussed the main proposals in the literature about the semantics of *almost*. We compared *almost* with its quasi-synonymous *nearly* and showed that these elements are different in terms of expectations and interaction with negative quantifiers, sentential negation and NPI-any. We proposed that *nearly* is always

associated with a focus scalar component like *even*, which evaluates the content of its complement as unlikely/unexpected. This proposal, although it accounts for the intuition that the two elements are associated with different expectations, forced us to abandon Penka's (2005) analysis of the incompatibility between *almost* and the NPI *any*. We then showed that such incompatibility can be motivated on independent grounds and follows straightforwardly from our observation that *almost*, when in the scope of negation, necessitates an echo context, and from the well known incompatibility of *almost* with existential quantifiers. Finally, we showed that *nearly* is felicitous in the scope of negation; we proposed that this is due to the availability of its literal meaning under negation. This in turn enabled us to explain the different interpretation between *not nearly p* and *not almost p* and the compatibility of *nearly* and the NPI-*any*.

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