Running the gauntlet on the approximatives debate:
A response to recent challenges

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Abstract

The debate on the semantic classification of approximative adverbs (approximators, in some accounts) has endured nearly three decades of constant interchange between proponents of an entailment interpretation (e.g., Horn, 2002) and those who suggest a more pragmatic description closer to a conversational implicature (e.g., in the first instance, Sadock, 1981). The research more recently has tended towards an empirical perspective, in which 'inverted' examples of use and the intuitions of native speakers are held to investigation, and historical data are also considered (e.g., Pons Bordería and Schwenter, 2005). The present study reviews some of the recent accounts and responds to recent challenges on the methodology used in earlier studies, as well as providing new insights from historical usage. The status of *almost* is seen from a diachronic perspective as a semi-conventional or conventionalising implicature, while its polar counterpart, *barely*, is considered identifiable as a de-conventionalising entailment. The current, synchronic stage of development of the two proximative opposites is thus perceived to be crucial to a complete understanding of their semantics.

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1. Introduction

It is now 28 years since Sadock (1981) first announced the revolutionary possibility that the negative inferences associated with the use of approximative adverbs such as *almost* (which are associated typologically, with 'proximatives' after the grammaticalisation tradition of Heine (1994) and his followers), were, in fact, contrary to popular opinion at the time, merely conversational implicatures and not entailments. Much restless research ensued after this claim was made, with Atlas (1984, 2005), Anscombre and Ducrot (1983), and Hitzeman (1992) following in Sadock's path of questioning, and more recent studies such as Sevi (1998), Ziegeler (2000a), Horn (2002), and Pons Bordería and Schwenter (2005), the last account bringing new insights from Spanish to the debate containing evidence of the expletive appearance of negation in contexts in which it had been thought to be only an implicit inference suggesting ambiguity between polar and proximal readings of the adverbs.[1] Ziegeler (2006) picked up the argument at

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[1] The polar reading is taken in the present study to refer to the negative inferences surrounding the use of *almost*, whether they be entailments or implicatures; i.e., the inferences that *almost P* suggests *not-P*. The proximal reading is understood to refer to the meanings of proximity to *P* that the use of the adverb invokes. Expletive negation refers to the situation in which the negative inferences associated with the approximative adverb are overtly expressed in the context, yielding a sense of 'double' negation.

that point with data from Chinese, and Amaral (2007) has now provided us with similar examples of expletive negation in Portuguese. The studies conducted by Horn (2002), Pons Bordería and Schwenter (2005) and Amaral (2007) interpret the occurrence of expletive or pleonastic negation as an indication that the negative inferences contained in the meaning of approximatives meaning 'almost' when not expressed pleonastically are 'assertorically inert' entailments, and that the so-called 'flip-flop' between polar and proximal readings means that the polar readings are in focus.[2] Studies such as Pons Bordería and Schwenter (2005) had therefore challenged the implicature analysis by proposing that the use of expletive negation in some languages strengthened the entailment case. Ziegeler (2006) responded by presenting data from native speakers of Chinese, a language in which expletive negation is found, demonstrating that the variations in implicature strength found in Ziegeler (2000a) could also apply in such languages, and raising the question of the extension of the implicature hypothesis to other languages. Because of this, there may still be some new ideas to assess with relation to approximatives crosslinguistically, and the argument for an entailment analysis may yet require a re-evaluation.

Furthermore, it is clear from many of the earlier studies that the semantic relation between the two adverbs, *almost* and *barely*, has not been as clearly articulated as it might be. In the present study, it is maintained, in accord with previous studies (Ziegeler, 2000a, 2006) that the meaning of *almost* is a counterfactual inference, the result of the cancellation of R-based implicatures (see Horn, 1984), so creating Q-based ones. It is hypothesised that the counterfactuality therefore arises through the strengthening of the entailed meanings of proximity to *P* to become reinterpreted as orientation towards *P* (R-based inferences), and henceforth, cancellable with adversative clauses implicating contrary outcomes, e.g., the *but* conjunctive in *I almost fell but I managed to get my balance ...*[3] In the case of *barely*, the inferences of minimal occurrence of *P* appear to be weakening to express orientation towards $\sim P$, cancellable with Q-based implicatures when adversative clauses cancel the orientation senses and re-affirm the minimal occurrence, e.g.: *AFM barely survived but thanks to new members it managed to do so.*[4] The patterns of development in both cases are from meanings of proximity, to orientation, and then to counterfactuality, but the differences are in the direction of the orientation in either case (towards *P* or $\sim P$). It will be shown that the entailments in both cases are not part of the counterfactual meaning, but only of the proximity meaning.

The study will therefore examine in greater detail previous evidence taken from speakers' interpretations of (constructed) *almost* sentences, in which the negative inferences were shown to vary quantitatively according to the aspectual properties of the predicate. It was found in Ziegeler (2000a) that there was quantitative variability where aspectual differences are concerned, with higher degrees of contradiction assessed for sentences with bounded, perfective predicates than those with unbounded, imperfective predicates. At the same time, there was no rejection of any aspectual environment as unacceptable. What was made apparent in the evidence of *almost* used with variable aspectual conditions is that the adverb casts a meronymic shadow over whatever falls within its scope, whether or not that entity can, under other circumstances, be thought of as lexically decomposable in any way.[5] It should also be noted that composability, rather than gradability, is basic to the meaning of *almost*-predicates, since gradability (assuming also orientation), towards a definitive end-goal, is a secondary (R-based) inference primed from the meanings of proximity alone. There is nothing in the meaning of proximity to *P* to entail that whatever is proximative to *P* is also necessarily moving in the direction of *P*. For this reason, it is logical to suggest that not only the negative polar component of meaning, but the positive proximal component of Conjunctive Analyses (Horn, 2002) – those which treat the proximal meaning of proximatives as distinct from the polar meanings—is itself a conversational implicature, an R-based implicature of Quantity in which the expression of mere proximity to *P* stands for orientation towards *P* itself. This means that the Conjunctive Analysis should be revised to account for two polar meanings: positive and negative, with a basic assumption that the only entailed and asserted component of meaning is 'closeness' to *P*. *Not-P* appears thus no more an entailment of *almost P* than is *not-Q*, *not-R*, or *not-S*. There are infinite possible negative entailments derivable from

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[2] By *in focus* here is meant that the polar meanings of the adverb are prominent or more salient to the meaning of the expression, compared with its proximal meanings. The two components of meaning are accounted for in reference to Conjunctive Analyses of approximative adverbs (see below).

[3] Source: www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/06/09/busway-not-so-safe-and-comfortable-passengers-say.html.

[4] Source: http://www.afmorg.net/about/association-profile (2009/02/27).

[5] Lexical decomposability in the context of Ziegeler (2000a) referred to the shared capacity of nouns and verbs to possess internal scalarity when invoked by co-occurrence with *almost*. These included accomplishment verbs and participles, imperfectives, and nouns termed interconnected entities (Langacker, 1987), e.g. *team*, *constellation*, which are all decomposable into partial representations of themselves. Non-decomposable, perfective predicates, on the other hand, are scaled externally by time in co-occurrence with *almost*, so that *John almost fell* is not thought of as decomposable into a partial representation of its own predicate.