

An Account of *Almost*

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is twofold:

- (a) to give a reasonable account for the negative suggestion associated with *almost*
- (b) to determine the semantics/pragmatics of *almost* that would accommodate such a suggestion

Before going into the discussion, I should mention that I shall refer to the expression modified by *almost* as the focus of *almost*. In (1), the focus of *almost* will be *three years*.

- (1) The couple has been dating for almost three years.
↙ ↘
focus

The basic line of argument in this paper is that the focus of *almost* must not contain any pragmatic slack, a notion introduced by Lasnik (1999). I shall try to cast my descriptive explanation into a scheme provided by lexical pragmatics developed by Blutner (1998; 2001?). I shall compare my analysis with other recent accounts of *almost*, such as Hitzeman (1992) and Morzycki (2001).

2. Some facts about *almost*

Section 2 presents some facts about *almost* that we might be interested to know.

Almost P seems to carry the suggestion that 'not P'. This 'suggestion' has presented a puzzle for pragmatists. Consider (2).

- (2) a. Bill almost swam the English Channel. (cf. Sadock 1981)

b. Bill didn't swim the English Channel. (Sadock 1981)

Sadock (1981) maintains that (2b) is the generalized conversational implicature of (2a) derived through the speaker saying *almost swam...* rather than just saying *swam...*

Sadock (1981) also makes an interesting observation that the sentence in (3a) allows a greater deviation from the designated height (here, 6 feet) than (3b) does. If the actual height of the filing cabinet is five feet six inches, (3a) is fine, but if Arthur's actual height is five feet six inches, (3b) is not okay at all.

- (3) a. My filing cabinet is almost 6 feet tall.
 b. Arthur is almost 6 feet tall.

Another interesting bit of data comes from Wierzbicka (1986). She observes that *almost* implies a process of rounding. That is to say, *almost* seems to require a certain "round number" for its focus. Thus (4a) is okay, but (4b) isn't. This seems to be related to the data mentioned in Sadock (1981), in (5). If the actual number of demonstrators was 950, then (5a) seems to Sadock to be truer than (5b). This effect is shared by *approximately X*, as shown in (6).

- (4) a. Almost twenty people came.
 b. ?Almost seven people came. (Wierzbicka 1986)
- (5) a. Almost 1000 demonstrators picketed.
 b. Almost 990 demonstrators picketed. (Sadock 1981)
- (6) a. Odessa has a population of approximately one million.
 b. Odessa has a population of approximately 990,000.

(Sadock 1977)

Also it might be useful to remember that the focus of *almost* can be either end of a scale. In (7a), 60 kilograms is the upper point in the scale of weight, but in (7b), 60 kilograms is the lower point in the scale of weight that could have been reached had John been successful in his dieting. This is rather obvious, given the examples such as (8). This is one of the characteristics

that distinguishes *almost* from *nearly*. That is to say, *nearly* has an upward orientation, while *almost* doesn't. I shall add another set of examples in (9).¹

- (7) a. John weighs {almost/nearly} 60 kg.
 b. John has reduced tremendously. He now weighs {almost/*nearly} 60 kg. (Heinamaki's examples taken from Konishi (1989))
- (8) a. {Almost/Nearly} all of my friends came to the party.
 b. {Almost/*Nearly} no one came to the party. (LAAD)
- (9) a. It's so hot – it's almost {40 degrees Celsius/melting}.
 b. It's so cold – it's almost {-10 degrees Celsius/freezing}.

3. "Negative conversational implicature"?

Now that we have examined the basic facts about *almost*, we shall work towards an analysis that would hopefully explain them. I said in the previous section that *almost* seems to carry a negative suggestion. Sadock's analysis is that this suggestion must be a case of generalized conversational implicature. This comes from the fact that the suggestion can be cancelled; and because the negative suggestion cannot be cancelled in a sentence with *not quite*, it is entailed by *not quite*. This is shown in Sadock's examples in (10). From (10a) he concludes that the negative suggestion in (2b), repeated below, can not be an entailment, but a conversational implicature associated with *almost*, hence, a generalized conversational implicature.

- (2b) Bill didn't swim the English Channel.
- (10)a. Not only did Bill almost swim the English Channel, in fact he did swim it.
 b. *Not only did Bill not quite swim the English Channel, in fact he did swim it.

Thus, Sadock says that the meaning of *almost* must be semantically underdetermined, as in (11), and the negative suggestion is derived pragmatically as a GCI.

- (11) ...the meaning of *almost* is such as to make a statement of the form

almost P true just in case there is a possible world in which *P* is true that is not very different from the real world.

(Sadock 1981: 258-259)

But there are a number of complaints against this analysis of Sadock's. First, the semantics for *almost* in (11) is so vague that, as Wierzbicka (1986) says, it can be applied to other expressions of approximation, such as *nearly*. A more serious defect is that the negative suggestion such as (12b) does not arise in (12a). If it is a GCI, there is no reason for it not to arise in (12a).

(12)a. By the time she finished this, it was almost dark.

(Stephen King, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*.)

b. By the time she finished this, it wasn't dark.

Obviously (12a) doesn't mean (12b). Sadock himself makes a similar observation (1981: 265-266) and considers (14) as another piece of evidence for his claim that *almost P* merely implies 'not P', and doesn't entail it. His words are repeated in (13):

(13) But suppose the Belchee Seed Company offers a prize to the first person "...who breeds an almost black marigold." Let us further suppose that Luther Lompoc shows up with a jet black marigold. ... It seems clear that Lompoc is entitled to the prize. But if *almost black* literally meant 'not black', he should not be. It might be imagined that the reason we feel that the breeder of a truly black marigold should get the award has something to do with our sense of fairness. (Sadock 1981: 265-266)

(14) "...breeds an almost black marigold" → a black marigold is okay

(15) "...breeds a not quite black marigold" → a black marigold is not okay

Thus, according to Sadock, *almost black* does imply 'not black', but our sense of fairness doesn't allow such an implicature to arise if someone bred a perfectly black marigold. This is hardly a very good explanation because it is in some sense true that it wasn't quite dark in (12) and a not quite black

marigold would have won the prize if such were submitted for the contest in (13). Also, if there still was quite a bit of daylight it would be wrong to say it was almost dark, and if the marigold is more gray than black it can't be almost black either. Thus, *almost X* must be very close to *X*, but not quite *X*. This would commit us to the claim that *almost X* would entail *not quite X*.

This is the reason why Anna Wierzbicka's (1986) analysis of *almost* looks like (16). As a radical semanticist, she put a negative suggestion of *not X* and the positive suggestion of closeness to *X* into the semantics of *almost*.

(16) Almost 1:

one can't say truly that *X*
 if something was no more than a little different from what it is
 (was), it would be true to say '*X*'
 one could think that it would be less than that
 I say '*X*' because I want to say something that is easy to think of
 (Wierzbicka 1986)²

This is a very explicit account of the meaning of *almost*, and the negative suggestion is directly explained as part of the meaning of *almost*. A further argument against Sadock's (1981) analysis of the negative suggestion of *almost X* in terms of conversational implicature is given in Hitzeman (1993). She argues that the point of the black marigold contest in (13)-(15) was to breed the blackest marigold possible in spite of the wording of the rules, and that Luther surpassed the expectations of the judges (Hitzeman 1993: 235). She also finds (17a) unacceptable, and it doesn't pattern with a genuine implicature example such as (17b). Also, she points out, (18) is contradictory, which she considers is another piece of evidence that the negative suggestion is not an implicature, but an entailment.

(17) a. ?Not only did Bill almost swim the English Channel, he did swim it.

b. Not only did Bill eat some of the cake, he ate all of it.

(18) # Mary is almost a corporal and she's a corporal. [contradictory]

((17)(18): Hitzeman 1993)

d. Some swans are white.

(Atlas 1984:348; cf. Hitzeman 1992:236) ⁵

Obviously, *almost X* is not downward-entailing, as shown in (22).

(22) a. #He almost {budged/slept a wink/touched a drop/spoke to anyone}.

b. He barely {budged/slept a wink/touched a drop/spoke to anyone}.

(Horn 1996)

However, it is also true that *not* (or for that matter any adverb) cannot normally precede *almost*, and if it does, *almost* is given a sort of metalinguistic status, as shown in (23).

(23) A: He almost crashed his car.

B: He didn't ALMOST crash. He CRASHED.

(Quirk *et al's* example quoted in Konishi (1989)) ⁶

(24) John isn't SOMEWHAT smarter than Bill. He's MUCH smarter.

(Lasnik's example quoted in Ota (1980))

Here, *almost* patterns with positive polarity items such as *somewhat*. Thus one can at least claim that *almost* may be a positive polarity item and thus create an upward entailing context.

Together with the fact that (10a) is far better (in Sadock's judgment) than (10b), one might say that *almost X* doesn't entail *not X*, but it is also true that (18) is contradictory and thus has an entailment-like flavour to it. The evidence so far has been, then, inconclusive, and that's the most that I care to say here.

The consideration so far seems to have made two points clear, as shown in (25). ⁷

(25) 1) *Almost X* somehow suggests a negation of X.

2) *Almost X* suggests that it was very close to X that it wouldn't have been a gross exaggeration (in the speaker's view) to say X.

Point 2) seems to lead us to the question of loose talk, or the question of pragmatic slack allowed for the item coming into the focus of *almost*. In the next section, we shall consider the question of closeness to the truth, in connection with which the notion of pragmatic slack appears most prominently.

4. Pragmatic slack

Pragmatic slack is a term coined by Peter Lasersohn in his 1999 article.⁸ The question of such slack or looseness has been apparent from the beginning of the present discussion. How dark does it have to be for us to be able to say it was almost dark, in (12)? To deal with such cases, I would like to introduce the notion of pragmatic slack as developed by Lasersohn here. Consider (26)-(31):

- (26) a. Mary arrived at three o'clock.
- b. Mary arrived at exactly three o'clock. [Lasersohn's wording]
- (27) a. The townspeople are asleep.
- b. All the townspeople are asleep.
- (28) a. #Although the townspeople are asleep, some of them are awake.
- b. Although more-or-less all the townspeople are asleep, some of them are awake.
- (29) a. This ball is very round.
- b. ? This ball is very spherical.
- (30) a. This ball is round.
- b. This ball is spherical.
- (31) a. This ball is perfectly round.
- b. This ball is perfectly spherical.

((26)~(31): Lasersohn (1999))

If, in (26a), Mary arrived thirty seconds later than three o'clock, you can still say she arrived at three, although she didn't really arrive at three. However, such loose talk might not be allowed for (26b), and this seems to be tied to the presence of the word *exactly* here. Similarly, (27a) and (27b) are truth-conditionally equivalent, which is apparent from (28), but (27a)

allows a greater deviation ("pragmatic slack") from the truth than (27b). Every one of the townspeople has to be asleep for (27b) to be true, but (27a) would be true if there were a certain number of awake townspeople that could be pragmatically ignored. Thus, the word *all* in (27b), as is the case with *exactly* in (26b), cut up the slack (i.e. the pragmatically irrelevant awake townspeople).⁹ A similar observation can be made for (31). The further twist with this example is, as illustrated in (29), that *round* is a scalar adjective whereas *spherical* isn't. Thus, one would expect *round* to allow loose talk, and *perfectly* cut the slack so (31a) allows less deviation from the truth. Now, if *spherical* isn't scalar, then what is the difference in meaning between (30b) and (31b)? The answer is that (30b) allows a greater slack than (31b).

In Lasersohn (1999) pragmatic slack is dealt with in terms of what he calls pragmatic halos. If an expression denotes some object, a pragmatic halo of such an expression is a set of things associated with the object, considered as arrayed around the object in a circular cluster. The elements in the set are ordered in terms of their closeness to the truth. The expressions such as *exactly*, *all*, and *perfectly* are called "slack regulators". The function of slack regulators is to narrow the range of things that can be considered to be in the pragmatic halo. For example, suppose the expression *three o'clock* denotes a point *i* in a time scale, and that its pragmatic halo contains other points, *j* and *k*, which are close to *i*, as represented in (32). Suppose also that the point *j* is closer to *i* than *k* is. Let's say *j* is two seconds later than *i*, and that *k* is one minute later than *i*. Now, if we add the slack regulator *exactly* to *three o'clock*, we get the expression *exactly three o'clock*, and its halo is appropriately tightened, as illustrated in (33). Thus, the expressions *three o'clock* and *exactly three o'clock* are truth-conditionally equivalent, but they are different as regards the pragmatic halos they allow.

(32) *three o'clock* = *i*

the halo of *three o'clock* : {*i*, *j*, *k*} [*j* = 2 secs later; *k* = 1 min later]

(33) *exactly three o'clock* = *i*

the halo of *exactly three o'clock* : {*i*, *j*}

If Mary arrived at three o'clock, but the actual time that she arrived was

one minute later than three, at time k , then (34a) will be true whereas (34b) will be false.

(34) a. Mary arrived at three o'clock. [T; cf. (32)]

b. Mary arrived at exactly three o'clock. [F; cf. (33)]

(Lasersohn 1999)

In addition, Lasersohn contends that (27) and (31) can be analyzed similarly. Note that in (31) the adjective *round* is given a slightly different treatment from expressions *three o'clock*, *the townspeople*, and *spherical*, because *round* is inherently gradable. *Round* is contextually given stricter standards of roundness so that if, say, Context 1 imposes a contextually stricter standard of roundness than Context 2, then the denotation of round objects in Context 1 is much smaller than that in Context 2. Things that qualified as round objects in Context 2 might not count as such in Context 1. But this treatment is not incompatible with the treatments of other expressions, so we ignore this for the sake of simplicity.

I think it is interesting to observe here that, actually, *almost* is often accompanied by such a slack regulator, as illustrated in (35):

(35) a. [...] she had turned exactly the same circle in almost exactly the same place only a few hours ago. (Stephen King, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*.)

b. Almost all the children here speak two languages. (LAAD)

c. They sold almost everything. (LAAD)

d. [...] the lowest spot on the almost perfectly circular, 1.2-mile-diameter crater (Morita Corpus)

e. I found 3rd class 'Nichtraucher' almost always empty, and perfectly comfortable. (Morita Corpus; Nichtraucher is a nonsmoker, so it must be a third-class carriage for nonsmokers)

The slack regulator is underlined, and I argue that such lack of pragmatic slack is necessary for the expression to be modified by *almost*. In fact, I claim that, with an expression of the form *almost X*, it is necessary for us to suppose some kind of narrowing effect for *X*. It seems that *almost* excludes

the pragmatic slack of the denotation of *X*, just as slack regulators do, although *almost X* is different from slack regulators in that it normally allows us to infer that *X* is not reached.

(36) The functions of *almost* in *almost X*:

[a] *Almost* excludes pragmatic slack of *X*, or tightens the pragmatic halo of *X* to the extent that the value denoted by *almost X* is very close to *X*. [meaning]

[b] *Almost* requires that *X* be a complete whole, or a complete eventuality, or have a definite quality [meaning]

[c] *X* is not reached. [implicit inference]

Actually, I propose that (36[c]) is a corollary of (36[a]) and (36[b]). If the actual state of affairs is really *X*, then what is the point to say, through (36[a]) and (36[b]), that it was very close to *X*? Therefore, (36[c]) is inferred rather than meant by *almost X*. Thus, just as we saw in (12) and (14), a negative suggestion may only weakly arise in some contexts. I shall add an attested example.

(37) Part of her know that losing it would make no difference because it was almost certainly going nowhere she wanted to go, it was probably going nowhere at all, in fact, but those things seemed to make no difference. (Stephen King, *The Girl who Loved Tom Gordon*, underline added)

In (37), the preceding (and following) context makes it clear that it was going nowhere, and taking *almost* out of (37) doesn't make much difference in meaning.

Note that I silently inserted the clause (36[b]), which says that the focus of *almost* must be an element that is complete in one way or another. This works fine with examples with slack regulators, but how about those without one? Consider (38):

(38) Yet the truth was that she felt almost all right for the first time since that nasty minnow had started swimming around in her

midsection. (Stephen King, *The Girl who Loved Tom Gordon*, underline added)

I would argue that, in cases with no slack regulators, there is some quality with respect to which the value designated by *almost X* is very close. Thus, in (38), *all right* is not a point on a scale of physical soundness but some quality, and she felt she was quite close to having it, if not quite getting it. The idea of "complete event" is fairly obvious from the Prepositional Phrase *to a standstill* in (39) and the past participle *shut* in (40).

(39) The train had begun to climb steeply. It gradually slowed down until there was time to see nearby objects lamplit, in the world outside: a giant cactus, a flight of steps, part of an olive grove. The engine laboured almost to a standstill. (Ngaio Marsh, *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, underline added.)

(40) Her left eye, close to where the first [wasp] had gotten her, was swelled almost shut. (Stephen King, *The Girl who Loved Tom Gordon*, underline added.)

Also, (36[b]) deals nicely with the rounding effect mentioned in (4)-(6). For example, in (4b), where almost seven people came to the party, *almost 7* is bad because it doesn't represent a complete whole of anything. But of course if it is pragmatically relevant for us to get exactly seven people, then it should be possible for us to say (4b).

I think I would have to add a rather formal formulation of what I've been saying so far. The illustration is given in (41).

(41) almost exactly three o'clock = $\{x \mid \neg \exists y [(y \neq x) \ \& \ (y \text{ is closer to } i \text{ than } x)] \}$

Given the halo of *exactly three o'clock* $\{i, j\}$, if j is closer to i than any other pragmatically relevant points in time, then *almost exactly three o'clock* = j

The beauty of this formulation is that there is no mention at all about the negative suggestion of *almost*, but the exact moment of three o'clock is

excluded so the negative suggestion simply follows. Because there is no mention of negative suggestion, there is no reason for *almost* to create a DE context, and therefore it is no wonder NPI's do not appear at all with *almost*, as we saw in (22).

Another point that I should mention is that because it should be possible for the same expression to have different halos with respect to different sentences, the pragmatic halo account would explain nicely what has been observed in (3). For example, Lasersohn (1999: 546-547) says that if Mary is a very punctual person whereas John is an unpunctual sort, then (42a) allows a greater slack, i.e. a greater halo, than (42b) does. Then we can also say regarding the sentences in (3) that the same expression *6 feet* allows a greater slack, a bigger halo, in (3a) than it would in (3b). Therefore, it is not at all strange that a filing cabinet that is 5 feet 6 inches tall is almost 6 feet in (3a) while an Arthur who is 5 feet 6 inches can never be almost 6 feet tall.

- (42) a. John will arrive at three o'clock.
 b. Mary will arrive at three o'clock.
- (3) a. My filing cabinet is almost 6 feet tall.
 b. Arthur is almost 6 feet tall.

Note that I do not say that *almost* is a slack regulator. The reason for this note is that Morzycki (2001) adduces several arguments against treating *almost* in terms of slack regulation. First, as is shown in (43a), slack regulators are not cross-categorical in the same way that *almost* is. For example, *perfectly* and *all* are very different in terms of the expressions they modify. Second, in (43b), there are certain selection restrictions absent with *almost*. For example, you can say *exactly thirty students* but you can't say **perfectly thirty students*. Third, in (43c), slack regulators do not have any negative suggestions associated with them. If something is perfectly spherical, then it is spherical, with no negative suggestion.

- (43) a. {perfectly/*all} spherical
 b. {exactly/*perfectly} thirty students
 c. The ball is perfectly spherical. ↗ The ball isn't spherical.

(cf. Morzycki 2001)

Thus one must admit that *almost* is not a slack regulator.¹⁰

5. How is the stricter halo selected?

The next question to be addressed is, how is the narrowest possible halo selected? I think some sort of lexical pragmatics along the lines developed by Blutner (1998), shown in (44), might be useful.

- (44) a. Q-principle: $[\alpha, m]$ satisfies the Q-principle iff there is no $[\alpha', m] \in C$ satisfying the I-principle such that $c(\alpha', m) < c(\alpha, m)$
 b. I-principle: $[\alpha, m]$ satisfies the I-principle iff there is no $[\alpha, m'] \in C$ satisfying the Q-principle such that $c(\alpha, m') < c(\alpha, m)$
 (Blutner (1998: 137))
 $\{ \alpha = \text{expression}; m = \text{situation description}; c = \text{cost of processing}; C = \text{set of pairs } [\alpha, m] \}$

This account is similar to Atlas and Levinson (1981) and Horn (1984), but it is different in some ways. For example, with Q-principle, the meaning is held constant, and the form that best fits the meaning is selected, whereas with I-principle the form is held constant, and the meaning that best fits the form is selected. What would be particularly relevant here would be the I-principle. It might be possible for us to think that, in the context of *almost X*, the processing cost involved in calculating a larger halo for the expression *three o'clock* would be greater than the cost involved in calculating a narrower halo for the same expression. This would look like (45):

- (45) I-principle: $[\alpha, m_{\text{narrow}}]$ ($\alpha = \text{three o'clock}$)
 iff $\neg \exists m_y [c(\alpha, m_y) < c(\alpha, m_{\text{narrow}})]$
 given $\neg \exists \alpha_{\text{exactly}} [c(\alpha_{\text{exactly}}, m_{\text{narrow}}) < c(\alpha, m_{\text{narrow}})]$
 (Q-principle)

Obviously (45) is just a tentative formulation of the inference for cutting up the pragmatic slack and getting a narrower pragmatic halo for *three o'clock*. On a new "Bidirectional OT" approach, which is equivalent to his former 1998 theory but is more graphical, things look slightly more

simplified, as in (46). The ordering relation $>$ in (46) is read "is more economical than"; thus, a shorter form, or a less complicated meaning, is more economical. The expressions with slack regulators are longer, more complicated in meaning and thus less economical.

(46) Bidirectional OT (Weak Version)

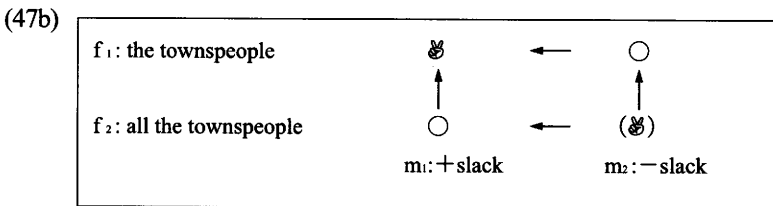
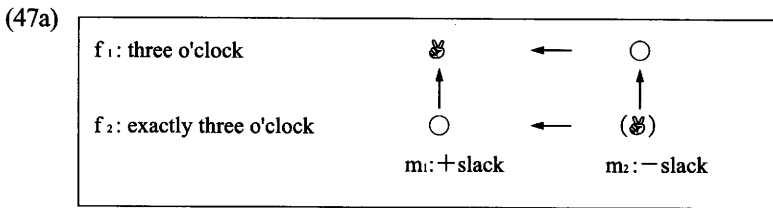
A form-meaning pair $\langle f, m \rangle$ is called super-optimal iff $\langle f, m \rangle \in \text{Gen}_{\delta}$, and

(Q) there is no other super-optimal pair $\langle f, m' \rangle$: $\langle f, m \rangle > \langle f, m' \rangle$

(I) there is no other super-optimal pair $\langle f', m \rangle$: $\langle f', m \rangle > \langle f, m \rangle$

(Blutner 2001?)

And the slack regulation would look like (47) on this approach:

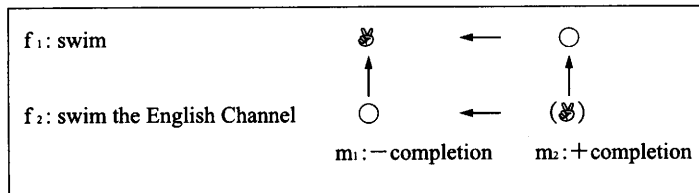


In (47b), for example, *the townspeople* is the shorter form and thus is associated with a more economical, less complicated meaning containing some slack, but *all the townspeople* is the longer form and thus is associated with a less economical, more complicated meaning.

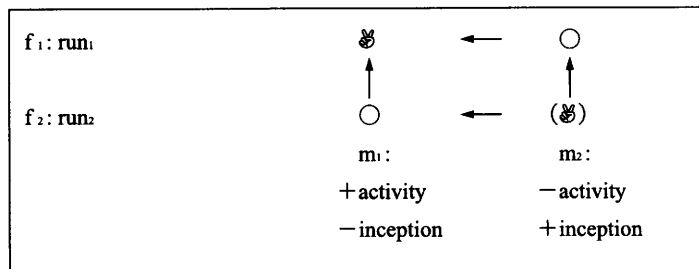
One obvious problem with the present discussion of pragmatic slack and Lexical Pragmatics for the best interpretation is the case of *almost* modifying VP's. For example, swimming the English Channel obviously does not seem to have a pragmatic slack. But there are at least two interpretations that can

be possibly associated with *John swam the English Channel*: the one that entails the completion of the task, and the one that doesn't. Similarly, with *John almost run*, the two interpretations possibly associated with it are: the inception of running, and the activity of running. Now, because *almost* refers to the particular point in some event, the completion of swimming the English Channel and the inception of running are the points in time that *almost* refers to (cf. Nitta 2002). And I argue that the completion and the inception are VP-equivalents of slack regulation. Because time has a direction (Hitzeman 1992), *almost* correctly picks up the time prior to the completion or the inception. ¹¹ These considerations might motivate (48) and (49):

(48)



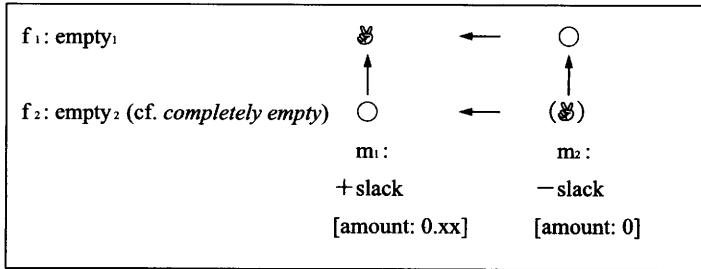
(49)



Again, these are as yet tentative representations, and in particular I'm not committed to the view that *run* is homonymous.

Similarly, adjectives that has some natural endpoint or a point of completion could also be modified by *almost*. For example, *almost empty* has a definite endpoint where the amount is down to zero. Another example will be *almost dead*, which has a definite point of completion in death. Again, just for the sake of argument, I give a Lexical Pragmatic graphical representation in (50). (cf. Kennedy and McNally 1999; Nitta 2002)

(50)



What these charts in (47)-(50) tell us is that the meaning of m_2 , that is the more complicated meaning, is derived either by slack regulation in (47) or by aspectual coercion in (48) and (49). For example, with (47b), *the townspeople* gets the meaning with slack, and it is because *all the townspeople* is longer that it gets the more complicated meaning without slack. In (49), *run* acquires an inception meaning by making a calculation on the original activity meaning.

One question that comes up immediately is: how could these various meanings that can be associated with a single form be derived? Blutner (2001?) is aware of this question as well, and he simply sets up a Generator that would derive those meanings as possible enrichments of the meanings of the expressions in context. This is in fact almost identical to what Wilson and Sperber (2000) says about the "slack" (they actually use the word *slack* in their paper) between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning. They say that in interpreting an utterance, the hearer invariably has to go beyond the linguistically-encoded sentence meaning. The by now familiar optimal relevance of an utterance looks like (51):

(51) a. *Optimal relevance of an utterance*

An utterance is optimally relevant to the hearer iff:

- (a) It is relevant enough to be worth the hearer's processing effort;
- (b) It is the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences.

b. *The Second, or Communicative, Principle of Relevance*

Every utterance conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(Wilson and Sperber 2000)

For our purposes, the second principle of relevance in (51b) is most relevant, because it allows the interpretation procedure in (52).

(52) The HEARER would:

- a. consider interpretive hypotheses (disambiguation, reference assignments, implicatures) in order of accessibility (=I-Principle).
- b. stop when he arrives at an interpretation that satisfies the expectation of relevance raised by the utterance itself.

(cf. Wilson and Sperber 2000: 233)

What I would claim here, then, is that the "order of accessibility" in (52a) must be equated with the various meanings of an expression generated by a Generator in Blutner (2001?).

Another question about this sort of treatment of word meanings may be: do we really need two tiers in (49) and (50)? I think the answer to that question will involve a discussion of the structure of lexicon, a topic that I'm not at all capable of discussing now.

6. Rival analyses: Hitzeman (1992) and Morzycki (2001)

This section takes a look at other people's analyses of *almost*. Hitzeman (1992) proposed an account of *almost* as stated in (53).

(53) Given a statement S_0 containing the phrase *almost P* and a scale Sc such that P is semantically interpreted as the category P'' , and $Sc \supset P''$, the following must be true:

- i. There exists a region R in Sc such that $R < P''$, and $\neg \exists x: (x \in Sc \ \& \ R < x < P'')$
- ii. $R \supset almost(P'')$ and for $x \in almost(P'')$ and $y \in R$, $\neg \exists y: \forall x (y > x)$
- iii. For all categories C'' such that $almost(P'') < C''$, replacing

almost P in S_0 by *not C* will form a new statement S_i such that S_0 entails S_i .

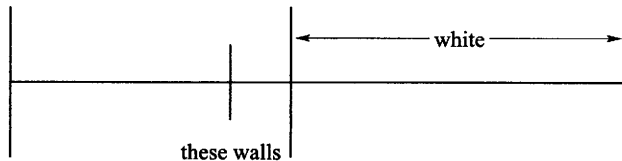
(Hitzeman 1992)

The point of this analysis is "scale". This is illustrated in (54) and (55).

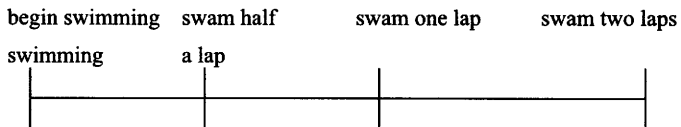
(54) These walls are almost white. (Hitzeman 1992)

(55) Mary almost swam two laps. (Hitzeman 1992)

(54')



(55')



((39')(40'): Hitzeman 1992)

But this is unacceptable. There is no scale involved with *almost*. The simple illustration of this fact is (56).

(56) ?John is almost tall.

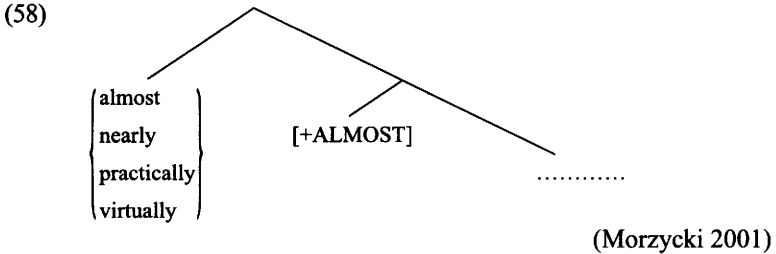
A scalar adjective such as *tall* is simply no good in the focus of *almost*. Of course, if you say *John is almost as tall as Bill*, for example, that would be acceptable, but it is simply because the scalar quality associated with *tall* is somehow taken away by the equative construction. Also, in (57), it is not very clear what the scale of the adverb *immediately* would be: ¹²

(57) In the pteridophytes the sporophyte generation dwarfs and overtakes the gametophyte almost immediately and is totally independent of it for support and nutrition...

("Reproduction and Life Cycle of Ferns and their Allies."
anbg.gov.au/projects/fern/life_cycle.htm: Underline added)

Hence, the item in the focus of *almost* can't be licensed simply because it is scalar. However, there is a grain of truth in Hitzeman's idea of "point on a scale". *Mary almost swam two laps* is true only when Mary swam slightly less than two laps, not when she swam slightly more than that, and this is precisely what the pragmatic halo does not specify.

We shall move on to the next recent analysis of *almost*, Morzycki (2001). For him, *almost* is an adverb that cross-categorially modifies DP, VP, and AP, and must be underspecified in meaning and the items in the focus of *almost* have the licensing feature [+ALMOST] associated with it, as shown in (58). Thus, for Morzycki (2001), the meaning of *almost* is characterized as a closeness relation between possible worlds, as in (60). As an example, I cite the licensing feature of AP and VP in (59).



(59) a. $[[[+almost]_{AP}] = \lambda P \lambda R \lambda x \lambda y . \neg P(x)(w) \wedge \exists w' [P(x)(w') \wedge R(w)(w') \wedge \forall w'' [w'' \leq w' \wedge P(x)(w'') \rightarrow w'' = w']]]$

b. $[[[+almost]_{VP}] = \lambda P \lambda R \lambda e \lambda w . \neg P(e)(w) \wedge \exists w' [P(e)(w') \wedge R(w)(w') \wedge \forall w'' [w'' \leq w' \wedge P(x)(w'') \rightarrow w'' = w']]]$

(60) $[[almost]] = \lambda w \lambda w' . CLOSE(w)(w')$

Thus in (59a) for the sentence of the form *x is A*, *x* doesn't have the property *P* in a world *w*, which is related to another world *w'* in which *x* does have the property *P*; and if *x* has the property *P* in all the worlds contained by the

world w' , then such worlds must be equal to the world w' . An adjective having such a feature can be modified by *almost*, which basically means that the world in which one situation obtains is close to the world in which it doesn't.¹³

The beauty of this analysis is that the cross-categoriality of *almost* is properly treated by relegating the relevant parts to the [+ALMOST] feature assigned to DP, AP, and VP. This is very nice, but, as we saw, *almost* could also modify PP's and adverbs too.

(61) The engine laboured almost to a standstill. (= (39))

(62) almost immediately, almost certainly, etc. (= (37)(57))

Another problem is that unless we can specify more closely the closeness relation in (60), we don't really have a very clear picture of *almost*. The third problem is that just saying "the worlds are close" is not enough. The worlds must be somehow ordered, in view of the comment we made in connection to Hitzeman's analysis: *almost* restricts the value of the item in its focus to the point slightly lower than that literally expressed by it. Thus *almost one hundred* would be slightly less than *one hundred*. The fourth problem is that different sentences might allow different closeness relations even for the same AP as we saw in (3) with both Arthur and the filing cabinet being almost six feet tall.¹⁴ Some of these problems do not arise with my rather informal treatment of *almost*: the closeness relation is resolved into pragmatic slack, and different objects, say Arthur or the filing cabinet, do not have to give rise to the same amount of pragmatic slack in the first place. Also, the cross-categoriality is reduced to the complexities of expressions and their possible enrichments in meaning, so it simply isn't relevant in my account.

7. Conclusion

My contentions are summarized in the following:

(63) a. *almost X* selects a narrower halo of X and means "coming close to X ", excluding X .

b. Narrowing down of the halo for X might involve a calculation

mechanism analogous to Blutner's (1998; 2001?) lexical pragmatics.

Notes

- 1 Incidentally, this might appear to mitigate against Horn's (1996) assertion that *almost* is upward oriented while *barely* is downward oriented, but it's not. What is relevant here is that *almost* goes along a particular direction that's either contextually specified or lexically determined. See (36[b]) below.
- 2 Wierzbicka (1986) has two types of *almost*. The other type of *almost* than the one mentioned in the text is the following:

(i) Almost 2

If something happened that wouldn't have been more than a little different from what happened, it would be true to say 'X'. (Wierzbicka 1986)

(i) represents the "narrow escape" reading with an event predicate. Thus (i) is supposed to apply to verbs only, and this kind of treatment is what Morzycki (2001) tried to overcome in his treatment of English *almost*. However, it is interesting to note that (i) is supported by the Polish data in (ii). The italicized words are the expressions corresponding to *almost*.

(ii) a. On jest *prawie* лысы.

"He is almost bald."

b. On *o malo* jej *nie* zabil.

"He almost killed her." (literally: By not much he didn't kill her.)

(Wierzbicka 1986: 607)

Obviously it is possible to ask whether it is wise to consider *o malo...nie* to be equivalent to *almost*. At least in Japanese, there is only one expression that best corresponds to *almost* and it is used cross-categorially: *hotondo* (ほとんど)

(iii) a. 彼はほとんど禿頭だ。

Kare ha hotondo hage-atama da.

He TOP almost bald head is

(=He is almost bald.)

b. 彼は彼女をほとんど殺しそうになった。

Kare ha kanojo wo hotondo koroshi -sou ninatta.

He TOP her ACC almost kill come-close-to

(=He almost killed her.)

- 3 Obviously, it is possible to infer from *He didn't ALMOST swim the English Channel* (with stress on *almost*, as in (23)) to *He SWAM it* (again with stress on *swam*), which renders the inference in (20b) possible, which in turn shows that the negative suggestion is an entailment after all. But this is a marked (and possibly contrastive) use of negation

and is quite different from the negation in *Mary didn't kill John* in (19b).

- 4 Obviously the reverse of (20b') is okay; thus one can conclude that *not quite* entail *not*, but not the other way around. For a similar conclusion at least for accomplishment and achievement predicates, see Atlas (1984).
- 5 I think Hitzeman (1992) misquotes Atlas's example. She put *all* in front of *white* in (a), but this is simply not present in the original.
- 6 Hitzeman's (1992) case is further undermined by the fact that the counterexample against upward-entailment of *almost* is no good. She says that the example in (i) is an upward entailment, but the same inference doesn't go through with (ii).

(i) Almost all dogs run. → Almost all dogs move. (Hitzeman (1992))

(ii) Almost all men are fathers. ↗ Almost all men are male. (Hitzeman (1992))

(iii) Almost all men are fathers. → Almost all men are parents.

However, (ii) is simply a category mistake. As shown in (iii), the proper superordinate of the term *father* must be *parent*, and the inference goes nicely with it.

- 7 *Almost* is distinguished from *practically* in the point 2), because the focus of *practically* doesn't have to be close to the truth at all. I am indebted to Professor Masahiko Ohnuma for this observation. See also Araki *et al.* (1985).
- 8 In fact, Lasersohn's account is in fact very similar to Sperber and Wilson's account (1986), just as Lasersohn himself notes in his article.
- 9 Brisson (1997) also constructs a similar theory to Lasersohn's pragmatic halos. She adopts Schwarzschild's idea of covert distributivity and notes that (i) makes a somewhat weaker claim than (ii). She analyses *the boys* in (i) as denoting a possible 'cover' for the universe of discourse. The function of *all* in (ii) is then to demand that the cover be a 'good fit', which means that every element of the set that the NP denotation denotes is contained in a cell of the cover that is the subset of that set. That is to say, (i) allows ill-fitting covers, but (ii) doesn't.

(i) The boys are hungry.

(ii) The boys are all hungry.

This 'good fit' is a concept quite close to slack regulation.

- 10 Morzycki himself notes that "Despite all these empirical differences, though, the conceptual machinery Lasersohn suggests for these expressions – 'pragmatic halos' – bears a certain intuitive resemblance to what may be required for *almost* modifiers." (Morzycki 2001: 323) Despite his intuitions, he didn't take this line in his paper.
- 11 Note also that if you put "completely" or some such words that express completion, all sorts of adjectives and past participles can be modified.

(i) Mycoplasm is another organism that is almost fully sequenced;...

(swiss.ai.mit.edu/projects/amorphous/white-paper/amorph-new/footnode.htm)

(ii) Another organism whose workings are almost completely understood is E. coli.

(ibid.)

(iii) In flight, the wings are uniformly dark, lacking stripes, the rump and tail are almost completely white, and the legs extend well beyond tail.

(state.ak.us/local/akpages/FISH.GAME/notebook/bird/yelolegs.htm)

12 And I can point out some counterexamples in Japanese: ほとんど(almost)

ほとんど(hotondo)=almost

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| (i)a. とても暗い | b. # とても真っ暗だ |
| totemo kurai | #totemo makkurada |
| "very dark" | "very completely-dark" |
| (ii)a. # ほとんど暗い | b. ほとんど真っ暗だ |
| # hotondo kurai | hotondo makkurada |
| "almost dark" | "almost completely-dark" |

Here, the scalar adjective 暗い(kurai) *dark* is incompatible with ほとんど(hotondo), which means *almost* in Japanese. See also note 2.

- 13 This account is similar to the analysis in Sadock (1981). The difference is that Sadock is not concerned about cross-categoriality at all.
- 14 A further complaint is that the differences in meaning between, for example, *almost* and *nearly* is explained in terms of the metalanguage used. *Almost* is a closeness relation, and *nearly* is a near-ness relation. Then, why is it that *almost* cannot be modified either by *very* or *not*, while *nearly* can? *Not nearly* has a decidedly clear meaning of partial negation as in *not all*. *Very nearly* shows the presence of gradability in *nearly*, so a nearness relation that can't explain such a distribution seems to me to be of little value.

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