

Pragmatics and Autolexical Grammar

In honor of Jerry Sadock

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(2011)

John Benjamins Publishing Company

Amsterdam / Philadelphia

Almost forever

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The division of labor between semantic and pragmatic contributions of *almost* and other proximatives has long been controversial. A watershed in this dispute is Sadock's (1981) proposal that *I almost won* only conversationally implicates, rather than entailing, *I didn't win*. Neither this "radical pragmatic" line nor a pure entailment account covers the full range of data, including the non-cancelability of the polar component and the distribution of polarity items. This gap prompts the construct of assertoric inertia (Horn 2002a), exploiting the distinction between what is entailed and what is asserted. I buttress that approach here with additional arguments, address the role of other semantic and pragmatic factors, and revisit the viability of assertoric inertia in the light of other recent work.

1. The proximal and the polar¹

Thirty years ago, the young leader of a fanatical cadre of radical pragmaticists circulated an underground manifesto calling for the overthrow of the bourgeois analysis of *almost*. In the published version of his manifesto, Sadock (1981: 257) posed the central question this way:

A sentence of the form *almost P*, in which *almost* is a verb phrase modifier, is used as if it meant, among other things, "not P." For example, someone who says

1. Different subsets of this material were presented in Tel Aviv (June 1999), Chicago (Jan. 2000), Berlin (March 2001), Tokyo (May 2001), Reading (Sept. 2001), UMass (October 2001), Yale (April 2002), Chicago (April 2002), Pomona (April 2005), Potsdam (Dec. 2005), Swarthmore (April 2006), Anaheim (Jan. 2007), Leysin (March 2007), and Seoul (July 2007). I am grateful to commentators at those occasions as well as that of the Jerryfest in Chicago, and I am indebted to Barbara Abbott, Patricia Amaral, Jay Atlas, Kent Bach, Ariel Cohen, Bart Geurts, Anastasia Giannakidou, Janet Hitzeman, Michael Israel, Chungmin Lee, Jason Merchant, Scott Schwenter, and Debra Ziegeler and in particular to Jerry Sadock for his inspiration and to the two semi-anonymous readers for their very helpful comments. Of course, only I am responsible for any errors (if anyone is). For insightful recent treatments of the semantics, scalar directedness, and cross-categorical nature of *almost*, *barely*, and their relatives, see Penka 2006; Ziegeler 2006, 2010; Nouwen 2007; and Amaral 2007.

Sam almost died would be taken as indicating that *Sam didn't die*...But what is the nature of the connection between the English word *almost* and the negative proposition?

The starting point for any analysis of *almost* is the recognition that my uttering (1) commits me in some sense to the truth of both (1a) and (1b).

- (1) Sam almost died.
- Sam came close to dying. [PROXIMAL COMPONENT]
 - Sam didn't die. [POLAR COMPONENT]

Following the practice of Sevi (1998) and Horn (2002a), I shall refer to these aspects of the meaning of *almost* sentences as the proximal and polar components respectively. But are these implications created equal? Sadock offers three, or 3½, answers to his question – the traditional symmetricalist view in (2A), the moderate asymmetricalist view in (2B) (available in two flavors), and the radical asymmetricalist view in (2C):

- (2) a. (1b) is entailed by (1); (1) is a conjunction of (1a) and (1b) and is false if (1b) is false.
- b. [B₁] (1b) is (semantically) presupposed by (1); (1) is neither true nor false if (1b) is false; or [B₂] (1b) is conventionally implicated or pragmatically presupposed by (1); (1) is “strictly speaking true” but inappropriate if (1a) is true and (1b) known to be false.
- c. (1b) is conversationally implicated by (the utterance of) (1); (1) is true but misleading if (1a) is true and (1b) false. The inference from (1) to (1b) is a scalar implicature.

It is the radical pragmatic view in (2C) that Sadock endorses: if you know (1b) is false, it's misleading to assert (1), given the maxim of quantity. Hence, it is (*mirabile dictu*) true that 2 plus 2 almost equals 4. I will argue here that in some respects Sadock's approach is overly radical and in others not quite radical enough.

2. Proximatives: What has been (almost) learned

I now turn to a review of some of what has been learned in the thirty years since Sadock's manifesto – and what has been unlearned. We begin with the problems of how to characterize the proximal component. Typically it is viewed by allusion to possible worlds: *almost P* entails that P is ‘not far from being true’ (Ducrot 1973), ‘true in a possible world not very different from the real world’ (Sadock 1981), or true in ‘a world which is almost not different from the actual world’ (Rapp & von Stechow 1999). But note the problem with circularity – how distinct is (1a) from (1)? – and consider the problems posed for any possible worlds account by sentences like *Planets travel in*

almost circular orbits (Atlas 1984: 357) or *0.3333 almost equals 1/3* (Sevi 1998: 18), or most eloquently by Sadock's observation (1981: 259) that the sentence *961 is almost a prime number*

might be adjudged true because the only blot on 961's record as a prime number is the sad fact that it is the square of 31. If this one little fact were not true, then 961 would be a prime number. The imaginary world in which 961 is a prime number is not very different from the real world in the nontechnical sense that only one proposition has to be changed to gain access to it, but of course it is *very* different from our world in the technical sense than it is an inconsistent world and lacks mathematics.

Two more bits of standard wisdom on *almost* that appear periodically in the literature are its role in arguments for lexical decomposition and intervention in polarity licensing. The varying scope possibilities for *almost* have been used to argue for deconstructing causatives like *I almost killed John* based on the availability of distinct readings like ‘I almost did something that caused John to die’, ‘I did something that caused John to become almost dead’, etc. (Morgan 1969; McCawley 1973), but Dowty (1979: §5.4) finds the evidence unconvincing and Rapp & von Stechow (1999) reject the corresponding scope argument for German *fast*.

The common wisdom is that *almost* co-occurs with universals but not indefinites or existentials and thus serves as a reliable diagnostic for free choice as opposed to NPI *any*. Such claims date back to Carlson (1981) and have since become received wisdom: “As pointed out by Horn (1972), free choice *any*, like other universal determiners, may be modified by adverbs like *almost* or *nearly*” (Hoeksema 1983: 409); “We know that in general, FC-*any* can be modified by *almost* (just as other universal quantifiers can). Crucially, such modification...is rejected in downward entailing contexts like negation” (Zepter 2003: 234). More recently, Penka cites the purported impossibility of **I didn't see almost any student* (2006: (2b), (31), (35)) as evidence for an intervention constraint blocking NPI licensing across *almost* (à la Horn 2000: §III). Along the same lines, *almost* is periodically claimed to be a positive polarity item (e.g. by Klein 1997: 87; Rapp & von Stechow 1999: 197; Horn 2000: 87). In fact, as stressed in Horn (2005a: 198–99), clauses with *doesn't* {*know/have*} *almost any*, *don't like almost any*, *NEG almost a single CN*, and so on are readily googlable:

- (3) a. In a story that didn't see almost any coverage here,...
- b. Global warming: we didn't see almost any snow in the winter
- c. I'm in the 5th week and i didn't see almost any results.
- d. I don't pay almost a single cent for any of my art work.

Crucially, however, *almost* does scope over negation in such cases, i.e. *not almost any* = *almost no*, so the constraint can be retained as long as it applies at a more abstract level.

Almost is often assumed, at least tacitly, to share its semantics (whatever they are) and its distributional properties with that of its adverbial kin *nearly*, *just about*, *damn near*, *virtually*, and *pretty much* (Sadock 1981; Morzycki 2001; Horn 2002a). In particular, *almost* and *nearly* are apparent glossmates; for example, both tend to incorporate the same aspectual asymmetries in space and time: if you're "almost/nearly here", your arrival is deemed imminent rather than your departure recent; the fetus approaching due date but not the neonate is "almost/nearly born".²

But unlike *almost*, *nearly* is largely excluded from negative focused expressions (cf. van Dongen 1921 on {*Almost/#Nearly*} *nobody was there*), a constraint that Sadock (2007) attributes to a subtle difference between these two proximatives involving speaker 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*.

Another standard assumption – e.g. in Morzycki (2001) and Atlas (2007), following (2A)-type symmetricalists, lexicographers, and butchers – is to equate *almost* with *not quite*. The *American Heritage Dictionary*, as endorsed by Atlas, glosses *almost* as 'slightly short of, not quite, nearly'. The 'nearly' gloss doesn't quite work, but 'not quite' isn't even nearly successful. True, as the marketing slogan for a line of deli meats puts it, "Almost Boar's Head Isn't Boar's Head." But as Sadock (1981: 263) points out, *almost but not quite* is less redundant than it would be if the two adverbials were synonymous; further, the adversative *but* indicates that *almost* and *not quite*, so far from mutual paraphrases, are at odds. *Almost* may be repeated to highlight the contrast with a juxtaposed *not quite*.³

(4) I almost felt sorry for Sonterra. Almost but not quite.
(Linda Lael Miller (2003), *Don't Look Now*, p. (223)

(5) "You almost make it sound all right."
"Almost. Not quite."
(exchange on *Law & Order*, NBC-TV, about shading the truth)

2. This can be overridden by context, however: the truth of *Dale is almost a virgin* doesn't require the operation of a time machine.

3. In other contexts, both the proximative and polar components are fully asserted in separate clauses, to indicate the equal importance of the two:

Perhaps we should have thrown the mattresses out the window as a possible way of breaking our fall... **As it was, we both nearly died, and as it was, we both lived.**
(Dick Francis (1997), *The 10-lb. Penalty*, emphasis added)

And then there's Herr Doktor Professor Moritz-Maria von Igelfeld, who reflects after a day of adventures, including an encounter with the Pope, that "the life of a diplomat, or even a schismatic if it came to it, could be almost as fulfilling as life as a professor of Romance philology. Almost, but not quite." (Alexander McCall Smith, *The Finer Points of Sausage-Dogs*, 2004).

Now we come to the interdefinability of *barely* with *almost not*, assumed in some treatises on proximatives (Ducrot 1973; Sadock 1981; Horn 2002a) but challenged in others (Atlas 1997; Amaral 2007; Ziegeler 2010) on cross-linguistic grounds and on the basis of the role played by expectation and speaker assessment for the two proximatives. (While *They barely survived* and *They almost died* are both natural, *They barely died* is peculiar in a way that *They almost survived* is not.) In any case, both adverbs have received similar conjunctive (2A)-style expansions in the literature, as seen in (6), either or both of which are endorsed, *mutatis mutandis*, by Hitzeman (1992), Atlas (1997), Sevi (1998), and Rapp & von Stechow (1999).

- (6) a. *Lee almost passed*: \neg [Lee passed] \wedge CLOSE-TO [Lee passed]
b. *Lee barely passed*: [Lee passed] \wedge CLOSE-TO \neg [Lee passed]

3. Issues of (a)symmetry

The primary argument for a conjunctive analysis of the polar implication has always been its apparent non-cancelability. The contrast in (7)

- (7) 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.

(= Sadock 1981: (23), (25)) does render an implicature-based analysis problematic.⁴ On the other hand, the conjunctivist must cope with the troublesome fact that *barely VP* (despite its positive polar component) licenses negative polarity items, while *almost VP* (despite its negative polar component) does not:

- (8) a. She barely {budged/slept a wink/touched a drop/spoke to anyone}.
b. #She almost {budged/slept a wink/touched a drop/spoke to anyone}.

But notwithstanding its NPI-licensing ability, *barely* cannot be a non-veridical or downward entailing (DE) operator, given its polar entailment and non-DEness.

4. On the (2[B₂])-style analysis of Jayez & Tovena (2008), the polar component of *almost/presque* is *conventionally* implicated; this correctly predicts the non-cancelability of the relevant meaning component, but incorrectly projects *Lee almost survived the operation* as (infelicitous but) *true* if Lee did (just barely) survive the operation.

It doesn't follow from *Moishe barely eats meat* that he barely eats pork; he may be a kosher flexitarian. Note that cancellation is difficult (and for some, impossible) even with an epistemic rider:

- (9) a. #It barely rained and in fact (it's possible) it didn't.
b. #It almost rained and in fact (it's possible) it did.

The resolution of this conflict I have urged (Horn 2002a) is to accept that while the polar component of the meaning of *barely VP* and *almost VP* is indeed entailed, this entailment is assertorically inert, falling outside the scope of the potentially controversial information put forward by the speaker (Stalnaker 1978). Such inert material is transparent to polarity effects. Thus, the conjunctive analysis (2A) is correct...almost.

A particularly dramatic illustration of the contrast between asserted and non-asserted entailments comes from Sadock's contrast between *almost* and *not quite*, two proximatives that on the current view are equivalent at the level of what they entail while differing as to what they assert. This is displayed in the table in (10), adapted from Schwenter (2002), who also extends the distinction and analysis to Spanish.

- (10) *almost vs. not quite:*

	Entailed	Asserted
Proximal Component (<i>almost</i>)	+	+
Polar Component (<i>almost</i>)	+	-
Proximal Component (<i>not quite</i>)	+	-
Polar Component (<i>not quite</i>)	+	+

Thus consider the difference between *It's too bad you almost died* (- now you'll need a long difficult recovery) and *It's too bad you didn't quite die* (- now I'll have to finish you off...). Given that what is relevant for negative polarity licensing is not downward entailment as such but downward *assertion* (with inert entailments disregarded), we predict the contrast between (11) and (12):

- (11) I {didn't quite/never quite} read any of your papers.
(12) *I almost read any of your papers.

Beyond polarity licensing (as in (8)) and inversion (*{Barely/*Almost} had I arrived when...*), further evidence for the negativity of *barely* and positivity of *almost* is provided by the role of these approximatives in argumentation (cf. Ducrot 1973; Sadock 1981; Jayez 1987; Horn 1996). I'm delighted if my laptop is almost working and

concerned if it's barely working, even though it's in the latter case that it's actually functional. If our gasoline tank is barely half full, we'd better stop to fill it, while if it's almost half full, we blithely drive on, although it contains less gas in the latter case. The rhetorical negativity of *barely* and positivity of *almost* is left unexplained by a pure (2A)-type symmetricalist analysis.

Another asymmetry between polar and proximal components, as Ziegeler (2000) observes, is that only the latter supports causal explanation. Thus in (13),

- (13) I almost moved to Chicago because of the deep-dish pizza.

Medici's specialty could only have been an insufficient lure for me (...but I didn't relish the long winters), not the ultimate deterrent (#...so I stayed in New Haven, where the thin-crust style blessedly rules).

As for *barely*, its behavior as an NPI licenser in (8) derives from its downward assertive character: the polar entailment is transparent to polarity licensing. In fact, as the usenet posting in (14) shows, NPI licensing correlates with the invocation of a negative scale.

- (14) The typical airline bathroom barely accommodates one person, much less two.

The rhetorical negativity of *barely* thus vies with its veridicality, whence the force of adversative *but* to mark this opposition while reversing the rhetorical direction of the utterance, as seen in (15a) (from the 2006 Luanne Rice novel *Sandcastles*) and (15b) (from "Grey's Anatomy", ABC TV, 5/08).

- (15) a. Sissela meowed from the bed above and Agnes barely heard.
But *Brendan* did and after another kiss he pulled slightly away...
b. He's alive. Barely, but...he's alive.

4. Inverted readings and the permeable polar membrane

The polar component of *almost* and *barely* clauses is more peripheral to the primary force of the proximative, learned later than the proximal component (Amaral 2007) and more evanescent. In particular, the polar (negative) component is subject to flip-flopping in some contexts to yield "inverted" readings (Horn 2002a: 65; Schwenter 2002; Amaral 2007: 25; cf. Ziegeler 2006: §4.7.1 and especially Amaral 2007 on the role of context).

Inverted readings were first recognized in the case of the Mandarin Chinese particle transliterated as *cha-yidiar* or *chadianr* and literally glossed as 'miss-a-little' (Li 1976; Biq 1989). While its ordinary interpretation is 'almost', when it scopes over

a negative predicate it can be rendered as either ‘almost not’ (= ‘barely’) or as ‘almost’, as in (16(ii)):

- (16) *Wo chadianr mei chi.* (i) ‘I almost didn’t eat, ‘I barely ate’
 I miss-a-little not eat (ii) ‘I almost ate’ [= *Wo chadianr chi le*]

In some contexts, the non-compositional pleonastic reading is the only one that emerges, for pragmatic reasons; *Wo chadianr mei zhuangdao qiang* can only be read as admitting that I almost bumped into the wall, not as boasting (compositionally) that I almost didn’t bump into it.

Similarly, in Spanish (Schwenter 2002; Pons Bordería & Schwenter 2005), negation under *por poco* ‘almost’ can – and in certain contexts must – be interpreted pleonastically, as in (18b(ii)), rather than compositionally, as in (18b(i)):

- (17) a. *Por poco sale.* ‘She almost left’
 b. *Por poco no sale.* ‘She almost didn’t leave’
 (18) a. *Por poco se mata.* ‘She was almost killed’
 b. *Por poco no se mata.* ‘She almost {(i) #wasn’t/(ii) was} killed’

Thus too, Swiss German *fasch* is normally equivalent to the standard *fast* ‘almost’, but also has an inverted ‘barely’ sense emerging in relevant contexts. And in English, a *near miss* can be either a goal barely missed or a disaster barely averted, i.e. nearly a non-miss, as in the case of air traffic collisions, to the consternation of prescriptivists like William Safire, who lambastes the use of *near miss* as “a nonsensical version of *near thing*” in his Jan. 2005 *New York Times Magazine* “On Language” column. But elsewhere, when the context allows, a near miss *is* nearly a miss:

[Headline:] Martin’s near miss

Great Britain curling skip Rhona Martin almost missed the [Salt Lake City] Winter Olympics because of a stomach problem...

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/winterolympics2002/hi/english/curling>)

Finally we come to the permeable polar membrane represented by the distribution of the un-noun (Horn 2002b, 2005b), available in two flavors. The Class A *unX* is a non-member of the category *X* which, while lacking one or more criterial properties of category members, nevertheless shares salient functional attributes with them and effectively coerces a superset category of which both *X* and *unX* are members. The “sponsor” for this class is the *un-cola*, introduced in a 1967 advertising campaign for the soft drink 7-Up; its intended interpretation posits a set (that of soft drinks) encompassing both colas and 7-Up, which is why *un-cola* wouldn’t have been as catchy for promoting chocolate milk or beef jerky, which are by any definition not colas. Similarly, Woodbury (this volume) describes a class of Aleut pronouns that show clitic-like attraction to the verb; they are almost but not quite clitics in that they fail to

fuse phonologically with their verbal host. He dubs them *unclitics*. Class A un-nouns are especially pervasive in the culinary realm, including the *un-martini* (for various aperitifs lacking gin or vermouth but served in a martini glass), the *un-potato* (for Jerusalem artichokes roasted with thyme), and the *un-turkey* (a concoction of “delicate seitan” dressed in “delectable beancurd skin” intended for the vegan’s holiday table; cf. <http://unturkey.org/>).

If a Class A *un-X* is *Almost* (but not quite) an *X*, a Class B *un-X* is *Barely* an *X* – technically a category member but a marginal or peripheral one. Thus we have the *un-sheet* (natural, unbleached, untreated), the *uncollege* (e.g. the U.S. Naval Academy, lacking fraternities and binge drinking), and the *unjob* (one with low status or poor pay).

In some cases, though, it’s hard to tell: is an *unbreakfast* – e.g. a bean burrito consumed at 8:00 a.m. – a breakfast (because of its timing) if just barely, or almost a breakfast but not quite (given its structure)? Are the *unwomen* of Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* – political dissidents; those unable or unwilling to reproduce – nevertheless still women? Or, within their dystopian universe, are they not really women at all? And what of those infamous disputed Floridian ballots? Americans of both blue and red stripes may have acknowledged that these were not ideal exemplars of their class, but the 2000 (un)election hinged on whether those dimpled, chad-hung *unvotes* were in fact votes or (as it turns out) not.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that while proximatives entail and assert their proximal component, the polar component is more of a semi-permeable membrane. An early account of this variable permeability is given by P. Harder & C. Kock (1976), who insightfully invoke Ducrot’s notion of argumentation theory for dealing with the negative orientation of *barely*, but then – like the *almost = not quite* brigade – succumb to the temptation of dictionary-hugging. Of sentences like (19a) they write,

- (19) a. Roderick barely kissed Honoria.
 b. Roderick kissed Honoria.

In terms of truth conditions, *barely* is strangely ambiguous. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* lists as one of extant meanings “Only just; hence, not quite...”. According to this description, *barely* entails, in [19a], either that Roderick kissed Honoria, or that he did not kiss her – we do not know which. The serious consequences of this confusion would be even more obvious, e.g. in a criminal case where Roderick was charged with rape, and where a witness made the statement *Roderick barely raped Honoria*. (Harder & Kock 1976: 28)

But any such ambiguity is far more plausible for *hardly* (cf. Atlas 1997), as in *Roderick hardly kissed Honoria*, than for *barely*. In particular, as shown by Amaral & Schwenter (2009), *hardly* differs from *barely* in allowing for inversion of the proximal component as opposed to the polar, through patterns of ironic use. Harder & Kock find that it is “in any case clear that [19a] is always argumentatively stronger than [19b]”, but this is

untenable without a specification of what conclusion these statements are presented as arguments *for*. It appears that despite its promise, the Harder-Kock theory can hardly penetrate the polar membrane.

5. The implicature line and the set-partition Griceogloss

We turn now to other perspectives on the slippery status of the polar component of proximative adverbs, beginning with a review of one non-argument *for*, and proceeding with a new argument against, the (2C)-type Sadockian conversational line on the polar component.

A second fact that lends support to the idea that “not *P*” is a conversational implicature [of *almost P*] is that it can be reinforced – it can be made explicit without producing redundancy. Consider [20] as an answer to the question *Did Bill swim the English Channel?* (Sadock 1981: 263; cf. also Sadock 1978: 293)

- (20) Almost, but not quite.

As argued in Horn 1991 contra Sadock 1978, informationally redundant propositions can in fact be asserted as long as they introduce a rhetorical opposition (Anscombe & Ducrot 1983), typically signaled by *but*. Thus, we have (21a–c), where the *but* clause is semantically entailed/presupposed yet felicitously assertable:

- (21) a. I don't know why I love you, but I do.
b. Bush barely won the election, but he did win.
c. It's odd that dogs eat cheese, but (eat cheese) they do.

This doesn't prove that *almost P-ing* is semantically distinct from *not quite P-ing*, but it does neutralize Sadock's non-redundancy argument for the implicature analysis.

A new Griceogloss to distinguish between entailment- and implicature-based characterizations of the relation between *almost P* and *not P* is provided by mixed-outcome situations as illustrated by the statements in (22) and (23). When dealing with clear instances of conversational implicature, we get inclusive readings for the subset described:

- (22) a. 20 students tried to solve the problem.
b. 20 students solved most of the problems.
c. 20 students don't drink much.

Thus, the relevant set in (22a) includes those students who succeeded in solving the problem; if 5 of them did solve it, they constitute 5 of the 20 who tried to solve it. Similarly, those in (22b) include whoever solved all the problems, and those in (22c) include any who don't drink at all; if 5 students are teetotalers in (22c), again we have just 20 in all. But by contrast, (23a,b) respectively exclude those who succeeded and those who failed:

- (23) a. 20 students almost solved the problem.
b. 20 students barely passed the test.

If (23a) is true and 5 students solved the problem, we have a total of (at least) 25 students – the 5 who succeeded and the 20 who almost did. (23b) similarly takes the set of students who actually failed to be disjoint from the set of the 20 who barely passed (and thus did pass). This supports the view that conversational implicature, pace Sadock (1981) and Ziegeler (2000, 2006, in press), does not suffice for the polar component of proximatives.

6. On being almost dead vs. almost ready for dinner

“You thought something would change?”

“She almost died.”

“Almost dying changes nothing. Dying changes everything.”

– exchange on “House”, 17 Dec. 2008

As we have seen, the paraphrase relation between *almost* with *not quite* assumed by some lexicographers, linguists, and philosophers fails to predict the rhetorical difference between the two proximatives (see §2 above). On the account supported here, this difference is attributable to the fact that *almost* and *not quite* share their entailments but differ at the level of what they assert. Now consider the contrast between them in the context of (24):

- (24) A: So dinner is {(?)almost/#not quite} ready, right?
B: Yes, in fact it *is* ready.

The impossibility of *not quite* here is no problem: to assert that dinner is not quite ready is to assert that it's not ready, whence the contradiction. But if the statement that dinner is almost ready *entails* (even though it does not *assert*) that it's not ready, why is the positive response at least possible in this case, if not impeccable? Along the same lines, many speakers have no problem with the exchange in (25), while the apparently parallel cases in (26) and (27) seem far less acceptable.

- (25) A: Is your dissertation almost ready to file?
B: (?)Yes, (in fact) {it *is* ready/it's *completely* ready}.

- (26) A: Is Fredo almost dead?
B: #Yes, (in fact) he's *totally* dead.

- (27) A: Did you almost kill Sollozzo at the restaurant?
B: #Yes, (in fact) I *did* kill him.

And, as we might expect, the cancellation facts yield a similar contrast:

- (28) A: (?)Dinner is almost ready, and in fact it *is* ready. (cf. (7a))
 B: #Fredo is almost dead, and in fact he *is* dead.

While there are multiple factors affecting the robustness of the polar implication and its cancelability, including the aspect of the predicate and the desirability of the outcome (cf. Ziegeler 2006, 2010; Amaral 2007), one consideration is that if dinner is almost ready in the actual world, it will be ready soon in all the inertia worlds determined in the context (cf. Dowty 1979: 148), while death is not similarly projectible from near-death as a default future. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that at least in our culture, whether a dinner or a dissertation is ready or not is of considerably less import than the metabolic difference between being dead vs. not dead. Thus *almost P* is sometimes (virtually) compatible with *P* and sometimes incompatible with *P*, depending in part on the significance of the distinction (as the waggish Paul Grice might have put it) between *P*-ing and not *P*-ing.

7. A not so distant cousin: The assertoric asymmetry of *only*

Disputes on the relative status of the two components of proximative adverbs were predated by the parallel questions arising in the case of *only* clauses by a millennium or so. Since the 13th century, symmetricalists from Peter of Spain to Jay (Atlas) of Pomona, for whom (29a) essentially unpacks into the conjunction of (29b+c), have squared off against asymmetricalists (Geach, McCawley, Ippolito, van Rooij & Schulz et al.), for whom (29a) entails the negative (exclusive) component (29c) but at most presupposes or implicates the positive (prejacent) component (29b); cf. Horn (1996, to appear); Atlas (1996); and Beaver & Clark (2008) for extensive history and references.

- (29) a. Only love counts.
 b. Love counts.
 c. Nothing distinct from love counts.

Like the polar component of *barely/almost VP*, the prejacent of *only NP* is entailed, pace Ippolito (2006) and van Rooij & Schulz (2007):

- (30) a. #Only Sue passed the test, and in fact even she didn't.
 b. #Only Obama can reform health care – indeed, nobody can.

If *in fact/indeed* is replaced by *and possibly (even)* in (30a,b), many find the result improved; cf. Horn (1970), Ippolito (2006), Atlas (2007), and Beaver & Clark (2008) on suspension or epistemic cancellation.

While semantically conjunctive and non-downward-entailing, however, *only* phrases license NPIs (pace Atlas 1993 et seq.; Giannakidou 2006), trigger subject-aux inversion, and produce scale reversal, very much like their proximative cousin *barely*:

- (31) a. *(Only) Dana {would ever eat any/drank a drop} of that.
 b. *(Only) in stories does a dropped glass betray agitation.
 c. *(Only) a fool would even eat a bite of that jellyfish risotto.

The semantic and pragmatic parallel between cross-categorical *only* and VP-modifying *barely* is especially striking here. The scale reversal attested in (31c) is a diagnostic of the rhetorically negative character of semantically non-monotonic particles, as illustrated by *only's* cousin *barely* in (32).

- (32) Patient's boyfriend: "You can't do this. We lived together.
 We were going to have kids. You barely even know her."
 Patient's mother: "Apparently neither did you." ["House" episode, 9/07]

The polar component of proximatives and the prejacent of *only* also share a predilection for taking wide scope with respect to complement-embedding emotive factives. Thus, *It's too bad only Democrats supported the President's bill* laments the fact that no Republicans crossed the aisle, not that Democrats voted as they did; cf. Horn 2002a (but see also Atlas 2002, 2007 for another view on the "Karttunen & Peters diagnostics"). Even the *barely but* sandwich of (15b) above has an *only* analogue with *only*, thanks to Galway Kinnell's 1985 poem "Prayer" (formatting in original):

Whatever happens. Whatever
what is is what
 I want. Only that. But that.

For Giannakidou (2006), following Atlas, *only* is a "renegade" NPI licenser in languages like English. This conclusion is based partly on the fact that in languages like Greek, NPIs are not licensed by *monon* 'only' (Giannakidou 1998, 2006):

- (33) *Monon i Theodora idhe {ti Roxani/*kanenan}.*
 only the Theodora saw-3sg the Roxanne/anybody
 'Only Theodora saw {Roxanne/anybody}' (Giannakidou 1998: 154)

Giannakidou stresses the fact that (i) *only* clauses are veridical and (ii) fail to license all NPIs. But first, as we have seen with *barely*, veridicality is not a deal-breaker when the relevant entailment is assertorically inert, and second, licensing isn't a binary thing, as has been recognized at least since Horn (1970). Indeed, even those restrictive polarity

items that Giannakidou sees as requiring overt negative licensers (the examples in (34) are reproduced from her (43)) do not always require them, as seen in (35):

- (34) a. *Only Bill came either.
 b. *Only Bill is all that intelligent.
 c. *Only Bill arrived until Friday.
- (35) a. Few of *my* friends could make it here either.
 b. If he's all that smart, why isn't he rich?
 c. I'll be damned if I'll quit until I absolutely have to.

Can we thus conclude that languages like Greek require full downward entailment as opposed to mere downward assertion to rule out (34) and similar sentences? No – for two reasons. First, DENess isn't actually necessary for licensing NPIs in Greek. As Giannakidou (1998) has pointed out, disjunctive and *want* contexts permit unstressed *kanenas* 'any'. This is seen e.g. in (36), courtesy of Jason Merchant (p.c.):

- (36) I bike *kanenas mesa i afisame ta fota anamena*.
 lit. 'Either n-one came in or we left the lights on'

(Note the impossibility of licensing in the corresponding English disjunction: **Either anyone came in or we left the lights on*).

Second, DENess isn't always sufficient. *At most n*, unlike *only n*, establishes a true downward entailing environment: if at most 5 students passed, then at most 5 students got A's. (Notice that this is actual DENess, not the Strawson DENess proposed for *only* in von Stechow 1999.) The contrast between the semantic negativity (and DENess) of *at most* as opposed to the semantic non-monotonicity of *only* emerges through our set-partition Griceogloss of §5. Thus, while (37a), patterning with the *barely* case in (23b) above, excludes any students who failed to solve any problems, (37b) includes any such students.

- (37) a. 20 students solved only the last problem.
 b. 20 students solved at most the last problem.

If (37a) is true and 5 students flubbed every problem, we can infer a total of (at least) 25 students, but for (37b) the original set of 20 will suffice. This supports the view that conversational implicature, pace Sadock (1981) and Ziegeler (2000, 2006, 2010), does not suffice to model for the polar component of proximatives.

But despite its DE-ness, the direct equivalent of *at most* fails to license even weak NPIs in Greek (Anastasia Giannakidou, p.c.), as in (38):

- (38) **To poli pende fitites ipan tipota*
 'At most 5 students said anything'

Thus, in Greek, *at most n* and *only n* are equivalently *non*-licensors, while in English they're equivalently (medium-strength) licensers (cf. De Decker et al. 2005), so it can't

be DENess as such that's relevant in either case. However, this raises a problem for the facts in English.

On their plausible conjunctive epistemic analysis of *at most n*, Geurts & Nouwen (2007) would unpack (39a) into a conjunction of (39b) and (39c).

- (39) a. At most 5 linguists have ever worked on that language.
 b. It is (epistemically) possible that 5 linguists have ever worked on that language.
 c. for $n > 5$, ¬[It is epistemically possible that n linguists have worked on that language].

This raises the following question for such an analysis: Why is *at most n* an NPI licenser, given the conjunctive and hence apparently non-monotonic expansion in Geurts & Nouwen 2007? Notice that as seen in (40), the quasi-negative (NPI-licensing) behavior of *at most n* nominals is shared by that of the upper-bounding proposition in (40b) but not by that of the positive epistemic proposition in (40a).

- (40) a. It is possible that 5 linguists have (*ever) worked on that language.
 b. It is not possible that more than 5 linguists have ever worked on that language.

As with the cases of *almost*, *barely*, and *only*, the key is to recognize that symmetry in the semantics may conceal a crucial asymmetry at the level of what is asserted. Given the assertoric inertia of the positive entailment in (40a), *at most n* asserts only the negative proposition in (40b) and thus counts as effectively downward monotonic.

8. Some (literally (almost (virtually))) last words

I have argued that the apparent tension between the semantic symmetry of *almost* and *barely* and the rhetorical asymmetry of these adverbs can be resolved by distinguishing what is (simply) entailed from what is (not just entailed but) asserted. Material in the former category counts as inert, and hence as transparent with respect to a wide range of linguistic diagnostics, including the "partition" diagnostic introduced in §5 above.

On Sevi's (1998) formally symmetric (2A)-style conjunctive analysis for the proximal and polar components, *almost p* entails (and asserts) *not p* and *barely* entails (and asserts) *p*. Sevi concedes that the polar assertion is "somehow 'backgrounded' or less 'prominent'" than the proximal assertion (1998: 32). That is, "*almost* is 'positive' and *barely* is 'negative' in some sense" (1998: 34). But how, and in what sense? It is this question that we have sought to address here.

Like *barely*, *only NP* is neither downward entailing nor non-veridical. This predicts it shouldn't license NPIs, and indeed it doesn't in Greek, but in English its veridicality

and non-monotonicity are overridden by downward assertion (where assertorically inert components are disregarded), a property evidently irrelevant for Greek. Disjunctions, on the other hand, are not NPI triggers in English, where non-veridicality is insufficient for licensing NPIs. We thus obtain a parameterized account of polarity licensing to allow for cross-linguistic variation: (non-)veridicality for the distribution of polarity items in some languages (Greek, Bengali), downward assertion for others (English, Swedish).

Sentences based on *almost VP*, *barely VP*, *only NP*, *at most n CN*, and other quasi-conjunctive expressions entail both conjuncts of the relevant expansion but assert only one of those conjuncts. Recognizing this asymmetry in the pragmatics enables us to capture the facts of NPI licensing, scalar orientation, and rhetorical negativity while avoiding the contradictions incurred by a semantically asymmetric account. Like Atlas (2002: 12), I “remain as unconvinced as ever that downward entailment can explain the distributional data of NPI licensing”, but the fault, I have argued, lies not in the *downward* but in the *entailment*.⁵

A poster on GameSpot forums complains of a banner on the FableUnion website, “its been up *almost forever*. and i mean *literally almost forever*” [emphasis added]. There are several other hits for “literally almost forever”, whatever that means: how do you know when it’s almost forever, let alone *literally* almost forever?

At the airport en route to Chicago for the Jerryfest, I learned in a discarded USA Today sports section of an historic decision on the part of the organizers of the World Series of Poker. Referring to the plan to institute a four-month hiatus between the early summer rounds of the WSOP and the final table action at the 2008 tournament with the championship set for the wee hours of November 11 so it could be edited and aired on ESPN later that evening, commissioner Jeffrey Pollack boasted that the new format will allow for “an almost virtually real-time telecast.” In the light of this comment, we can see that if the years since Sadock (1981) have taught us anything, it is that the debate on the status of the polar component of proximatives will continue literally almost virtually forever.

Three decades after Sadock (1981), the radical pragmatics vanguard on *almost* rides on, although I would bridle it in some respects and loosen the reins elsewhere, given (i) the central role of context in determining both when *almost P-ing* counts as *P-ing* and when inverted readings are possible, and (ii) the central role of speech act theory – a longtime dossier in Jerry’s portfolio (cf. Sadock 1974) – in explaining why

5. It must be acknowledged that despite my compelling arguments for assertoric inertia, not all have been entirely convinced. Some remarkably stubborn perspectives are to be found in Atlas (2002, 2007) and Beaver & Clark (2008: §9.9); I offer some counterarguments in Horn (to appear).

there are entailments and there are entailments, and why the polar contribution of *almost* and *barely* is an instance of the latter. Linguists from A (Amaral 2007; Amaral & Schwenter 2009) to Z (Ziegeler 2000, 2006, 2010) would endorse the moral that Jerrold Sadock has taught us: *almost* counts not only in horseshoes and hand grenades but also in the border wars of semantics and pragmatics.

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