

# ON THE OPTIMAL USE OF *ALMOST* AND *BARELY* IN ARGUMENTATION

Richard van Gerrevink & Helen de Hoop

Department of Linguistics  
Radboud University Nijmegen  
richardvangerrevink@student.ru.nl

## 1. Introduction

Consider the following sentence:

- (1) Richard almost passed his UG exam, so he will probably get his bachelor's degree by the end of the year.

In sentence (1) the subject technically did not pass his exam. The word *almost* implies that he came close, but failed. Despite this negative result, a positive prediction for the rest of his studies is a logical follow-up to this statement (cf. Verhagen 2005). This observation forms the basis for this paper. We are especially interested in the reasons why people formulate sentences with the quantifier *almost*. In the example sentence it seems as if the first part is a statement that is used as an indirect argument for the second part, which in turn can be seen as the conclusion. So the fact that Richard almost passed his exam supports the conclusion that he will receive his bachelor's degree by the end of the year. In normal everyday language use, however, the argumentation does not necessarily have to be as clear and complete as in this example. The following sentence was taken randomly from the internet:

- (2) Ronaldo *almost* scored a goal in the remaining ten minutes for AC Milan [...] Ronaldo clearly got talent, and if he gets himself shaped-up, he is going to be an important player in AC Milan... [italics added]

In (2) it is stated that Ronaldo has got talent. The fact that he *almost* scored a goal seems to support this statement.

In this paper we will start out with a brief sketch of the semantics of *almost*. We will discuss the meaning of *almost*, as given by Penka (2006) and Nouwen (2006). After the semantics has been discussed, the focus of this paper will shift towards Argumentation Theory (van Eemeren *et al.* 1996). We will discuss the role that *almost* can play in argumentation and we will explain how this actually works from the perspective of a speaker with the help of Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 2004). As far as we know, this is the first time that Optimality Theory is applied to Argumentation Theory.

## 2. The semantics of *almost*

In this section we will try to determine the exact meaning of *almost*, following Penka (2006) and Nouwen (2006). We will conclude the section with a discussion of how this can help us in determining why a language user would want to use *almost*. To begin, take a look at the following sentence pairs:

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| (3) a. It is six o'clock.         | b. It is <i>almost</i> six o'clock.         |
| (4) a. The victim was dead.       | b. The victim was <i>almost</i> dead.       |
| (5) a. John scored a goal.        | b. John <i>almost</i> scored a goal.        |
| (6) a. Hugh never drives his car. | b. Hugh <i>almost</i> never drives his car. |

The a-sentences all contain simple statements in which something happens or occurs. If we now turn to the b-sentences, one might say that by inserting *almost* the statements of the a-sentences have been negated on a logical level in the b-sentences. In (3), 'almost six o'clock' means that it is *not* six o'clock (yet); in (4) 'almost dead' means that the victim was *not* dead (yet); in (5) 'almost scored a goal' in effect comes down to the fact that John did not score a goal and in (6) 'almost never' means that Hugh does drive his car occasionally. Everything that comes to pass in the a-sentences technically does not come to pass in the b-sentences. However, *almost* does entail that the event which it seems to negate is never far away from occurring. In formal semantics it is said that the b-sentences constitute worlds that are minimally different from the worlds of the a-sentences.

Penka (2006) argues that the semantics for *almost* is similar to that of other operators like *only*, *at least*, *at most* and *more than*. That is, *almost* operates on a certain scale:

A sentence in which *almost* modifies an expression P entails the truth of a corresponding sentence without *almost* in which P is replaced by a value close by, but lower on the scale associated with P. (Penka 2006: 278)

Penka composes the following formula for the semantics of *almost* (Penka 2006: 279):

- (7)  $[[\text{almost}_x]] = \lambda w. \lambda p_{\langle s, t \rangle}. \neg p(w) \ \& \ \exists q [q \approx p \ \& \ q(w)]$   
 (The symbol  $\approx$  is used to signify the 'close-by' relation.)

The formula in (8) ensures that the proposition *almost p* is true if and only if *p* itself is false in the actual world, but there is an alternative proposition that is close by to *p* and that is true. Nouwen (2006) proposes an intensional approach to the meaning of *almost*, which is defined as follows:

*Almost p* is true if and only if there is a world which is not very different from the actual world in which *p* is true (Nouwen 2006: 165)

To illustrate this meaning, consider for example the next sentence, taken from random Google-searches on instances of *almost*:

(8) This blog has become *almost* a diary [italics added]

In the intensional approach we can analyze (8) in terms of a world that has a diary and the actual world which has a blog that has a lot of the characteristics that we would normally ascribe to diaries, yet not all of them. Thus, sentence (8) is true if there is a world in which the blog has one more diary-property than it has in the actual world, and therefore in this alternative world the blog *is* in fact a diary. Clearly then, the use of *almost p* draws the attention to this minimally different world which is not the actual world, but in which *p* holds.

Now that we have determined the formal meaning of *almost*, we gain some insight in the reasons why people would want to use it. If a speaker wishes to evoke a world in which *p* holds (for example because *p* would lead to the conclusion *q*, and the speaker would like the hearer to conclude *q*), then using *almost p* would be a good strategy, even though literally *almost p* entails *not p* and not *p*. The reason is that *almost p* involves the existence of a minimally different world in which *p* does hold, and this world gets ‘activated’ in the mental state of the hearer when the speaker uses *almost p*. The next section will focus on this use of *almost* in argumentation.

### 3. The use of *almost* in Argumentation Theory

The basic idea of Argumentation Theory is that the speaker or writer makes a certain statement which the hearer or reader will not automatically believe. An argumentation in its most basic form consists of two parts: a statement (also known as claim or conclusion) and an argument that supports the statement. The purpose of the speaker is to convince the hearer of the truth of the statement (conclusion). One condition is that the argumentation should be valid, meaning that the conclusion has to follow from the arguments (van Eemeren 1996). An example of a valid argumentation is of course *modus ponens*. The validity of an argumentation does not guarantee that the argumentation is convincing or that the conclusion is true, however. This also depends on other factors, such as the truth or plausibility of the premises.

Let us now return to the use of *almost* in argumentation and the reasons for people to use *almost*. It can sometimes be better for a speaker to say *almost p*, or to say *almost p, therefore q* than just plainly state *q* even when *q* is what the speaker actually would like to tell the hearer. To illustrate this point, take a look at the

following example, which is a pretty transparent yet popular advertising strategy (the example is taken from the internet):

- (9)    Premise 1:    (If you can drive a new car for free, then you should buy it.)  
     Premise 2:    Drive a (Nearly) New Car for (Almost) Free!  
     Conclusion:   (You should buy this car.)

If an advertiser uses only premise 2 (and leaves the first premise and the conclusion implicit) as a slogan, a hearer will be easily led to draw her own conclusions. She is provided with a tempting argument for buying the car. Note that *p* (i.e., the antecedent of the first, implicit premise) is not completely true in the actual world, because of the adverbs *nearly* and *almost* between parentheses. However, as we argued above, the actual world is only minimally different from the ideal world (in which the car *is* new and for free) and this is sufficient to lead the hearer to draw the implicit conclusion (at least, that is the speaker's intention). In fact, leaving the conclusion implicit can be an effective tool in argumentation: when a hearer draws the intended conclusion by herself, this is often more convincing than when the speaker explicitly states the conclusion.

#### 4. An Optimality Theoretic analysis

In an Optimality Theoretic account of argumentation, the input is made up of the intention of the speaker to convince the hearer of a certain conclusion, given a certain situation in the real world. For instance, if a speaker wants to convince a hearer of the fact that John is a good striker, then the fact that John scored a goal would be a good argument in favour of this conclusion. However, if John did not score a goal in the actual world, then the speaker must come up with another argument in favour of the claim that John is a good striker. The candidates in an Optimality Theoretic account of argumentation are made up of possible arguments that should lead the hearer to come to the speaker's intended conclusion. The options for the speaker are the possible output candidates, which are evaluated against the following set of constraints:

- (10)            \*LIE: Speak the truth.  
(11)            GIVE-ARG: Provide an argument for the conclusion.  
(12)            EFCY: Be as efficient as possible in your argumentation; do not use more argumentative elements (premises or conclusion) than needed.  
(13)            EXPL: Be explicit in your argumentation; do not beat around the bush.

Tableau 1

Input: Convince hearer that John is a good striker; given that John did not score a goal, but he almost did (he just had bad luck), and given that if a striker does score a goal, he is a good striker.	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFFCY	EXPL
John scored a goal	*!			*
John did not score a goal		*!		*
☞ John almost scored a goal				*
John is a good striker		*!		*
☞ John almost scored a goal, so he is a good striker			*	

Under this ranking of the constraints and given the input, stating “John almost scored a goal” is more efficient but less explicit than “John almost scored a goal, so he is a good striker”. Because the constraints EFCY and EXPL are not ranked with respect to each other, both candidates can be the winners of the competition, which means that the conclusion (that the speaker wants to convey to the hearer) sometimes remains implicit, but is made explicit at other times. Just uttering “John scored a goal”, which would lead to the right conclusion, is rejected, because this violates the highest ranked constraint \*LIE. Saying “John did not score a goal” and stating “John is a good striker” are both rejected, because they do not provide the hearer with a proper argument in favour of the conclusion that John is a good striker, and hence they both violate GIVE-ARG. The two outputs using *almost*, come forward as the best options: these utterances are not only true, but they also evoke a world which is so close to a world in which John did score a goal, that this is sufficient support for his being a good striker in the actual world.

### 5. Extension to *barely*

Our analysis can be extended to the use of *barely* in argumentation. Although the semantics of *barely* has been studied less than *almost*, it has a similar argumentative effect as *almost*. Suppose that a speaker wishes to convince the hearer of the fact that John is a bad striker. However, John did score a goal. The problem that the speaker is confronted with is similar to the problem with *almost*. For example, if the speaker would state that John did not score a goal, she would be lying. Were she to state that John did score a goal, the hearer will not conclude that John is a bad striker, so the best solution to the speaker’s problem is to state that John *barely* scored a goal. The speaker does tell the truth, yet because the actual world is only

minimally different from a world in which John did not score a goal, the hearer can still conclude that John is a bad striker in the actual world.

So, like *almost*, *barely* helps in directing the hearer towards a certain conclusion that is not completely supported by reality, but only indirectly by the existence of a minimally different world. Two ‘real’ illustrations of this type of argumentation are the following, taken from the internet:

- (14) The US have never won in Mexico, and *barely* scored a goal for the first time on Mexican soil in many years. You're seriously underrating Mexico [italics added]  
(15) Terrible game! You *barely* scored a goal! [italics added]

In (14) the speaker wishes to convince the hearer that she is seriously underestimating Mexico and one of the arguments provided to support this statement is that the US barely scored a goal (the other argument is that the US never won in Mexico). In (15) the statement (conclusion) is that it was a terrible game, and the argument in favor of that conclusion is that “you *barely* scored a goal”. Both argumentations are in accordance with our analysis.

### Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. We are grateful to our colleagues Geertje van Bergen, Ad Foolen, Lotte Hogeweg, Luuc van der Horst, Monique Lamers, Sander Lestrade, Peter de Swart, Joost Zwarts and to the audience at the TIN-dag 2007 for useful comments.

### References

- Eemeren, Frans H. van, Rob Grootendorst & Francisca Snoeck Henkemans (1996) *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory: a Handbook of Historical Backgrounds and Contemporary Developments*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Nouwen, Rick (2006) “Remarks on the Polar Orientation of *Almost*”. *Linguistics in the Netherlands 2006*, ed. by Jeroen van de Weijer and Bettelou Los, 162-173. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Penka, Doris (2006) “Almost there: The meaning of *almost*”. *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung 10*, ed. by Christain Ebert and Cornelia Endriss, 275-286. Berlin: ZAS.
- Prince, Alan & Paul Smolensky (2004) *Optimality Theory: Constraint Interaction in Generative Grammar*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Verhagen, A. (2005) *Constructions of Intersubjectivity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.