

Almost AS A VP MODIFIER
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In this paper I focus on the interaction between *almost* and de-adjectival verbs derived from ‘total’ and ‘partial’ adjectives. It has been observed that the grammaticality of expressions like *almost dirty*, where ‘dirty’ is a partial adjective, is directly correlated with the availability of a scalar reading for a sentence where *almost* modifies the corresponding de-adjectival verb ‘to dirty’. The purpose of this paper is to provide a unified compositional analysis of *almost* which can simultaneously account for the (un)grammaticality of expressions where it modifies adjectives, and the (un)availability of multiple interpretations when it modifies verbs. Consider the sentences below and their corresponding possible readings.

- (1) Mary *almost* cleaned the room.
 - a. Mary was about to start cleaning the room (when she received an urgent call). C
 - b. Mary started the cleaning process but only got close to finishing it. S
- (2) Jon *almost* dirtied the table.
 - a. Jon was about to start dirtying the table (when he received an urgent call). C
 - b. ?Jon started dirtying the table but but only got close to finishing. ?S

The modified predicates in (1) and (2) are accomplishments, following Dowty (1979). As it’s generally known about accomplishment verbs, modification by *almost* leads to an ambiguity between a C(ounterfactual) and a S(calar) reading. Since accomplishment verbs are claimed to be decomposable into a covert BECOME and a result state, this ambiguity can be attributed to the multiple potential landing sites for the modifier, below or above BECOME. The S reading is obtained by having *almost* scope under BECOME, and the C reading when it scopes above it. Since in the case of de-adjectival verbs the result state is the root adjective itself, I claim that understanding the semantics of *almost adj.* can shed light on the varying availability of the S reading.

DERIVING THE S READING: When looking at total–partial pairs of adjectives such as ‘clean-dirty’, ‘dry-wet’, it has been noted that the construction *almost adj.* will always be acceptable for the total, but not necessarily for the partial adjective. Following Rotstein and Winter (2004), I claim that the acceptability of such constructions rests on whether or not the standard value for the partial adjective is made salient by the context, which, in their system, is equivalent to creating a closed interval on the corresponding scale. Since total adjectives represent closed degree intervals, their acceptability when modified by *almost* follows if we assume that the modifier can only combine with adjectives whose underlying scale is closed. This is consistent with the intuition that when the partial adjective is provided a contextual standard of comparison, it suddenly becomes acceptable with *almost*, as does the S reading for the corresponding accomplishment verb. I offer a preliminary entry for *almost* in (3).

$$(3) \llbracket almost^S \rrbracket = \lambda P_{dt}. \lambda Q_{dt}. \neg [\max(Q) \geq \min(P)] \wedge \text{CLOSE}(\max(Q), \min(P)) = 1.$$

The modifier behaves like a generalized quantifier over degrees; it takes in two sets of degrees, the set of degrees for which an object is considered clean/dirty (P), and the degrees to which the table is clean/dirty (Q). Notice that (3) correctly predicts there to be no S reading for partial adjectives whose standard of comparison is not made contextually salient. When the standard is not made salient, the interval of degrees corresponding to the adjective’s denotation is open from below and thus the function ‘min(P)’ is undefined, assuming dense scales (the standard does not belong to the set P).

This entry can be generalized so as to account for accomplishment predicates which refer to result states that are derived adjectives. By appealing to Krifka’s notion of “Mapping

to Objects”, I adopt the Kennedy & McNally (2002) style of associating derived adjectives with a scale structure based on the event structure associated with the source verb and the boundedness of its argument – boundedness which plays the same crucial role as the existence of a contextually supplied standard in determining whether an S reading exists.

DERIVING THE C READING: The next step in the analysis is to show that the C reading we obtain by having *almost* scope above BECOME can be derived by appealing to a lexical entry for *almost* structurally similar to that in (3), with the difference being in what types of arguments it takes. Unlike the S reading, the C reading cannot be paraphrased in terms of closeness along a scale of a physical measure corresponding to the result state of the object. Rather, when *almost* scopes over BECOME the reading obtained seems to be interpreted as making reference to temporal closeness. Observe the entailment to the progressive in (4):

- (4) a. Mary almost cleaned the table. \models Mary was (finishing) cleaning the table. S
b. Mary almost cleaned the table. \models Mary was starting to clean the table. C

The entailment in (4b) is consistent with our intuitions about what the C interpretation of this sentence is. It says that Mary was in the process of an event which, given our expectations about the world, would shortly culminate in her beginning to clean the table. Recall that we assume BECOME to be in the underlying structure of the predicate, and that the C reading is obtained by having *almost* scope above it. I assume the semantics of BECOME offer the transition from the adjectival domain (the result state), into the verbal domain; it imposes a corresponding event structure that makes reference not only to the running event of ‘cleaning’, but also the event immediately preceding it which culminates in the event of ‘cleaning’. Given the entailments in (4), I offer a semantics for *almost* inspired by Landman’s (’92) PROGRESSIVE. His PROG appeals to the notion of ‘reasonable options’ for an event e in w . This is a set of worlds $R(e, w)$ such that if there is a reasonable chance on the basis of what is internal to e in w that e continues in w as far as it does in w_i , $w_i \in R(e, w)$. I also adopt the idea of a ‘continuation branch’ of e in w , a set $C(e, w)$ of pairs of events and worlds; the events are continuation stretches of the event e (e is a stage of these larger events) in the closest worlds to w that are also part of $R(e, w)$. The last component we need is the notion of ‘culmination’ of an event. I claim that $\text{Cul}(f) \in h$ is true if the events overlap and for any non-final stage e of f , e and h do not overlap. Lastly, *almost* takes as one of its arguments a set P , which denotes an event type (the ‘table cleaning’ event.) The entry is in (5). In (6) I offer the revised entry for *almost* when it scopes under BECOME. Unlike in (3), the second argument is the maximum degree to which the result state is true of the theme.

- (5) $\llbracket \text{almost}^C \rrbracket(P, e) = 1$ iff $\exists f \exists w_i : \langle f, w_i \rangle \in \text{CON}(g(e), w)$, $[\exists h : \text{Cul}(f) \in h \ \& \ \llbracket P \rrbracket^{w_i, g}(h) = 1]$
 $\wedge [\neg \exists e' : \text{Cul}(e) \in e' \ \& \ \llbracket P \rrbracket^{w, g}(e') = 1] \wedge \text{CLOSE}(w, w_i) = 1$
(6) $\llbracket \text{almost}^S \rrbracket(P, d) = 1$ iff $\exists d' = \text{strd}_{\text{adj}}$, $P(d') = 1 \wedge \neg P(d) = 1 \wedge \text{CLOSE}(d, d') = 1$

Notice that these entries are structurally identical, with a negation component and a notion of closeness evaluated along either a scale of degrees, or a scale of reasonable and similar worlds. Lastly, I will also show how the present analysis predicts the different types of readings we obtain when *almost* modifies activity and achievement verbs. In particular, I will account for the difference in entailments to the progressive for activities (7a) and achievements (7b):

- (7) a. Mary almost pushed a cart. $\not\models$ Mary was pushing the cart.
b. Mary almost won the race. \models Mary was winning the race.

REFERENCES: Kennedy & McNally (1999). ‘From Event Structure to Scale Structure’ *SALT 9, CLC Publications, Ithaca*, 163-180. Landman (1992). ‘The Progressive’ *NLS1*: 1-32. Rotstein & Winter (2004). ‘Total Adjectives vs. Partial Adjectives’ *NLS12*: 258-288.