

Not nearly almost: evidence from English and Italian

In this paper we examine the English word *nearly*, extending recent work on *almost*, and compare the two to their Italian counterpart *quasi*. We survey current approaches and present a few counter examples, explore the overlapping but distinct extensions and distribution of *nearly* and *almost*, looking at their behaviors under negation and with respect to directionality, and then conclude with an explanation of similar phenomena in Italian involving *quasi* and *lontanamente*.

At first glance, the English words 'almost' and 'nearly' appear to have a very similar extension and distribution. They both have been used as a test for universal quantification when combined with a DP (e.g. Carlson, 1981), as in:

- (1) Nearly/almost all the senators voted for the bill.
- (2) *Nearly/*almost some of the senators voted for the bill.

When combined with a number, they both seem to have a default reading that picks out some amount less than, but not equal to, that number, but this reading can be inverted given a differing expectation, as in:

- (3) Let's take a walk -- it's almost 35 degrees! (actual temperature < 35)
- (4) We've cooled it down to almost/nearly ten degrees. (actual temp > 10)

In all these cases, almost/nearly can indicate a number that approximates to a goal: depending on the context, *almost/nearly* can mean either more or less than the goal, but never more and less at the same time. This seems due to the inherent directionality of the scales used. If the scale is non directional, almost/nearly can indicate both values:

- (5) It's almost green (for both a bluish and a yellowish green).¹

As already noticed in the literature, it seems that the use of almost/nearly strongly implies that goal has not been reached. Nonetheless, for some speakers, nearly (contrary to almost) can mean "about" (more, less or equal to a goal number), especially if the number in question is small with respect to some ultimate goal:

- (6) We have to come up with 1 million dollars. At this point we have nearly 1000.

Nearly (probably because of its spatial connotation) seems also dispreferred as a modifier of spatial adverbs

- (7) ?? nearly/almost here/there

Furthermore, there are instances where *nearly* and *almost* are not synonymous, and *almost* is acceptable only if it is used in an echo context:

- (8) There were not nearly/*almost enough signatures on the petition.
- (9) I'm not nearly/*almost done.

The similarity between *almost* and *nearly* disappears in a negative context:

- (10) Remove all those petitions that do not have almost 100 signatures.
- (11) Remove all those petitions that do not have nearly 100 signatures.

In (10), all petitions which have fewer than X signatures, where X is the smallest number that can be considered to be 'almost 100', will be removed. That is, the negation of 'almost 100' is the complement, i.e. any number smaller than X. In contrast, (11) requires that only those petitions which have a number of signatures that is far from 100 be removed. Interestingly, speaker judgments seem to indicate that 'not nearly 100' picks out in fact those numbers which are $0 + X$, that is, numbers which are as close to zero on the number line as 'nearly 100' numbers are to 100.

To account for these cases, we propose that *almost* forms a unit with the number it modifies, and that the negation has scope on this new number, while *almost* cannot by itself be modified by negation:

- (10) NOT (almost 100) → NOT (90) → 0-89

In the case of *nearly*, however, negation can combine directly with nearly. To account for why in (11) the complement of nearly 100 (i.e., 0-89) is not the correct interpretation of *not nearly*, we propose that a silent *even* is present, but optionally spelled out.

Summing up, in English, *almost* and *nearly* seem to have an overlapping distribution in non negative contexts. On the other hand, *almost* and *nearly* behave differently in negative context, because *almost* cannot be in the scope of negation. In a sentence like (12), *almost* is allowed because in logical form it scopes over negation.

- (12) There was almost nobody at the party (for almost everybody, they were not at the party).

Italian only has one word that corresponds to nearly/almost: *quasi*. *Quasi* seems to behave like almost and differently from nearly in negative contexts; the Italian translations of (8) and (9) are ungrammatical (unless they are used in echo contexts):

- (8a) *Non c'erano quasi abbastanza firme sulla petizione
- (9a) *Non ho quasi finito

If anything, the Italian counterpart of (8) and (9) can, as it is the case of the English "not almost" cases, pick up all the cases that are not "almost X". As a matter of fact, the Italian translation of (10) could only mean that all petitions that have not 100-X signatures should be removed:

¹ It is worth noticing that in this context some people have a strong preference for using *almost*.

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(10a) ?Rimuovi tutte le petizioni che non hanno quasi 100 firme

Analogously, in the Italian counterpart of the English example in (12), *quasi* can be used: this is not surprising, giving the proposal that *quasi* and *almost* can have scope over negation, but cannot be in the scope of it. Hence, in Italian, negative environments with universal quantifiers allow the presence of *quasi*.

(13) Non è venuto quasi nessuno alla festa

Not came almost nobody to the party

(14) Quasi nessuno è venuto alla festa

Almost nobody came to the party

In both cases, the logical form is: for almost everybody, they did not come. (The double negation in (13) is only required by the fact that the subject is postverbal)

Interestingly, in Italian, the most natural and synthetic way to express (11) would be to use the adverb “lontanamente” (by far)

(11a) Rimuovi tutte le petizioni che non hanno lontanamente 100 firme.

Remove all the petitions that don't have by far 100 signatures

The adverb “lontanamente” behaves differently from other intensifying expressions (“by far” in English, “lange” in Dutch), as it is marginally used in non negative context², while it is widely used in negative contexts:

(15) Non ci penso neanche lontanamente

I don't think about it not even by far

(16)*Ci penso lontanamente

I think about it by far

(17) Non ci sono lontanamente abbastanza parlamentari in aula per votare la legge

There aren't by far enough senators in the room to vote the law

(18)*Ci sono lontanamente abbastanza parlamentari in aula per votare la legge

There are by far enough senators in the room to vote the law

A puzzle seems to emerge here: in Italian, to express the idea that a goal is very far from being achieved we use the negation and the adverb “lontanamente” (literally, “by far”). One possibility to account for this behavior would be to say that “lontanamente” has wide scope, but this analysis doesn't seem correct, given that it doesn't account for the fact that “lontanamente” cannot scope over in positive environments.

We would like to propose that, as in the case for the English *nearly*, an optionally expressed even (neanche/neppure/nemmeno) is always present: the use of *nearly* in a negative context indicates that the goal is not even near to being achieved, while Italian expresses the same by saying that a given goal is not even far from being reached.

In conclusion, we have shown that the English *almost* and *nearly* have overlapping but not identical extensions. By assuming an optionally spelled out ‘even’ (a negative polarity item) as part of *nearly*, we are able to explain the differing behavior of *almost* and *nearly* under negation. The spatial proximity indicator *nearly* does not assume a linear scale, as does *almost*, and therefore does not always have a default reading that indicates “less than” some goal amount. Further evidence for our claim can be found in the Italian counterparts to *almost* and *nearly*, which are *quasi* and *lontanamente*, respectively. These behave similarly under negation to their English counterparts, and display additional behavior due to the fact that Italian both allows post-verbal subjects and is a negative concord language. Further research into the behavior of similar words in additional negative concord languages is underway,

References:

Carlson, G.N. (1981). The distribution of free-choice any. Papers from the Seventeenth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society, CLS.

Penka, D. (2006). Almost there: The Meaning of 'almost'. In: Christian Ebert and Cornelia Endriss (Eds.). Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung 10. ZAS Papers in Linguistics, Nr. 44, Berlin.

² It can only be used in non negative context only in a restricted set of cases, in general the ones where it modifying a verb that indicated physical similarity:

Gianni assomiglia lontanamente a suo nonno Questa zona ricorda lontanamente alcuni quartieri di Parigi
Gianni resembles by far his grandfather This area reminds by far of some quarter in Paris