

Almost as a ‘Variable-Force’ Modal

Andrew McKenzie and Lydia Newkirk

1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore the nature of *almost* as a modal. We observe that closeness to completion of the event is not a requirement for *almost*, and that, like some modals in Pacific North West languages, *almost* seems to vary between necessity and possibility. Applying insight from the study of those modals, we propose that *almost* denotes a necessity counterfactual whose force is weakened by an expectation-based ordering source. This ordering source also saves the felicity of *almost* when circumstances aren’t close to culmination. Further aspects of the analysis account for differences between *almost* and ordinary counterfactuals, and demonstrate compatibility with some of the broader issues in the *almost* literature.

2. Observations and puzzle pieces

We start with an ordinary example of the English word *almost*.

(1) *I almost climbed Mount Everest.*

Horn (2002) finds that *almost* provides two basic elements of meaning. First, a polar condition: I did not climb M.E. Also, a proximal condition: I came close to climbing M.E. Analysis of the proximal condition typically involves either scalar alternatives, where some proposition q close to p holds in w (Horn, 2002; Penka, 2006; Amaral & Del Prete, 2010); or modal closeness, where p holds in some world w' close to w (Sadock, 1981; Rapp & von Stechow, 1999; Morzycki, 2001).¹

In this paper, we adopt a modal account, but not one of closeness, because closeness is not required for *almost* to be felicitous. As has long been observed, you can do practically nothing and still almost do it:

(2) *John almost killed Harry. . . . even if he didn’t do anything.* (McCawley, 1972)

(3) *Émile almost kissed Adèle. . . . even if he never made a move.* (Martin, 2005)

This observation applies to climbing Mount Everest: impediments at any stage can stop you (4), but *almost* remains felicitous.

(4) *I almost climbed Mount Everest, but. . .*

- *I ran out of oxygen near the summit*
- *The weather got bad*
- *I broke my leg halfway up*
- *I got sick at base camp*
- *The Sherpas went on strike*
- *Nepal wouldn’t grant me a visa*
- *I couldn’t raise the money*
- *I decided to stay home and eat Cheetos*

* Andrew McKenzie: University of Kansas, Lydia Newkirk: University of Kansas/Rutgers University. For questions, contact Andrew McKenzie at andrew.mckenzie@ku.edu, or Lydia Newkirk at lydia.newkirk@rutgers.edu. Many thanks we offer to Aynat Rubinstein, any audience at KU, Marianne McKenzie, Eric Wenski, Samuel and Carol Newkirk, the KU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the KU Undergraduate Research Center, the audience at WCCFL, and almost all our anonymous reviewers.

¹ Modal accounts tend to leave the polar condition to implicature.

Note that the impediments in (4) are rather specific. We can conclude that the polar condition is not simply $\neg p$, but actually refers to an impediment. The impediment causes the failure of some of the necessary conditions for p . We must therefore refine the polar condition. Let $\text{NEC}(p)(w)$ be the set of necessary conditions for $w \in p$. The polar condition states that w doesn't hold for any member of some subset of $\text{NEC}(p)(w)$.

(5) $[\textit{almost}] \approx \exists Z [Z \subseteq \text{NEC}(p)(w) \ \& \ w \notin \bigcup Z \dots]$

Besides refining the polar condition, (5) provides an anaphor for the proximal condition. Also, the existential quantifier explains other ancillary facts about *almost*: It is upward entailing, the polar condition can be negated, and evaluative adverbs ignore the polar condition (Nouwen, 2006)— they ignore any restrictor.

The proximal condition needs refinement as well. On the modal accounts, the modal force is one of possibility, since removing the impediment does not guarantee success.

(6) *I almost climbed Mt Everest, but the weather turned bad halfway up.*

i.e., in some close world(s) where the weather stays good, I climb Mt Everest

However, our intuition is clear that (6) is more confident: *I would have* succeeded if the weather hadn't turned bad. Is *almost* a necessity modal after all?

A different context reinforces the necessity reading. If you lost a basketball game 72-71 after missing a last-second shot, *We almost won the game* has a very strong 'would' reading— you would have definitely won if you'd made the shot. However, if you lost a basketball game 72-67, after your star player was hurt with five minutes left to play and the score tied, then *We almost won the game* has an obvious 'could' reading, since there are no guarantees you would have won. *Almost* thus seems to have a variable modal force.

To explain this observation, we can apply insight from other modals that also seem to vary in force. Notable among these are modals from indigenous languages of the Pacific North West. For instance, in St'at'imcets (Salish group, British Columbia), the circumstantial modal *ka* can be used with either a 'would' or a 'could' reading (Rullmann et al., 2008).

(7) zúqwsas **ka** ta sk'úkwmi7ta ti7 ku swúw'a, lh-cw7áoz-as kw s-quscitítas
it kill IRR DET child DEIC DET cougar, COMP-NEG-3 DET NOM-they shoot it

'That cougar would/could have killed a child if they hadn't shot it'²

Context 1 : The cougar had been on a rampage and had a child cornered. (\rightarrow would)

Context 2 : Cougars sometimes kill children when they venture into built-up areas (\rightarrow could)

Modals have been found to appear to vary in force in Gitksan evidentials (Peterson, 2010) and Nez Perce *oq'a* (Deal, 2011). What these accounts all agree on is that the modals do not actually vary in force. Each employs a different mechanism to derive the 'variable force': St'at'imcets modals are necessity modals weakened by domain restriction,³ Gitksan evidentials are possibility modals strengthened by domain restriction, and Nez Perce *oq'a* is a possibility modal lacking a dual, and varying in strength depending on the entailment environment it's in. We find that *almost* behaves most like the St'at'imcets kind, as will become clear, so we will propose it as a necessity modal weakened by domain restriction.

Rullmann et al. employ a choice function for domain restriction, but as Peterson points out (along with (Portner, 2009)), an ordering source already restricts the domain to the most ideal accessible worlds. We adopt Portner's function Best, which takes the worlds compatible with the modal base and returns the worlds best satisfying the ordering source (8d).

(8) Given conversational backgrounds f, g , and world w :

a. modal base : $f(w)$

b. worlds compatible with the modal base : $\bigcap f(w)$

² The gloss has been simplified for presentation.

³ Kratzer (2012) suggests we can replace this mechanism with upper-end degree modals.

- c. ordering source : $g(w)$
- d. $\text{Best}_{g(w)}(\cap f(w)) = \{ w' \in \cap f(w) \mid \neg \exists w'' [w'' \in \cap f(w) \wedge w'' \leq_{g(w)} w'] \}$

However, von Fintel & Iatridou (2008) point out that a single ordering source does not really weaken necessity modals; a second ordering source does. They sequence the two ordering sources (OS), so that the second ranks the best worlds from the first.⁴ For instance, if you want to travel to Boston from Amherst, MA in under three hours, but also take the scenic route, your friend might tell you *You ought to take Route 2*. The first OS gets you the worlds where you arrive on time, then the second gets you the worlds among them where you take the scenic route. The ratio of scenic Boston worlds to all the Boston worlds will give the strength of necessity (9c). The closer the ratio is to 1, the stronger the necessity.

(9)

- a. $g(w) = \{ \text{You get to Boston in 3 hours or less} \}$
- b. $g'(w) = \{ \text{You take the scenic route} \}$
- c. necessity strength = $\frac{|\text{Best}_{g'(w)}(\text{Best}_{g(w)}(\cap f(w)))|}{|\text{Best}_{g(w)}(\cap f(w))|}$

$$= \frac{\text{no. of worlds where you get to Boston in 3 hrs and take the scenic route}}{\text{no. of worlds where you get to Boston in 3 hrs}} = \begin{cases} 1 \cdot \text{strong} \\ \downarrow \text{weak} \\ 0 \cdot \text{infelicitous (empty domain)} \end{cases}$$

So, we have a necessity modal weakened by two ordering sources. Since ordering sources are contextual, context should affect modal strength. For *almost*, it does. Take (1) again: *I almost climbed M.E.* We have a turning point, where the impediment took place. We have circumstances: What had happened leading up to the turning point. And we have expectations of what would ensue thereafter. As circumstances and expectations lower, modal strength weakens.

For instance, Figure 1 sketches out the various strengths of modal we get at different (relative) levels of circumstantial proximity to success. The further to the right along the row of circumstances, the closer to success we get, and the stronger the modal (along the bottom). Meanwhile, the expectations remain constant and high— if the impediment at the turning point is removed success will ensue. Thus, *almost* remains felicitous.

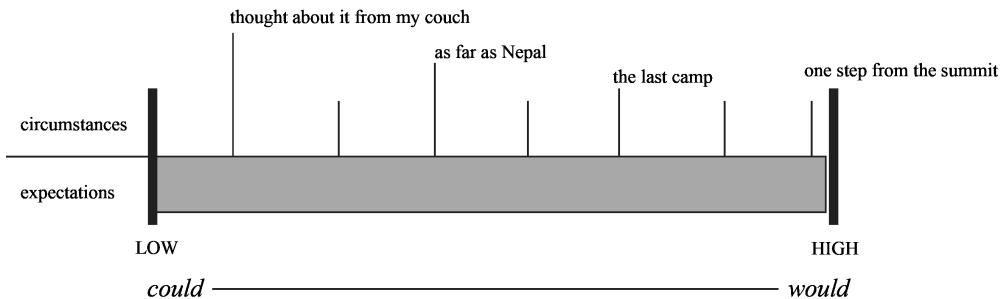


Figure 1: variable strength from circumstance

If we hold circumstances constant rather than expectation, the strength can vary based on the level of expectation. Figure 2 sketches out this process. In it, circumstance gets us halfway up the mountain but no further. As we progress from left to right in the expectations row, the increasing strength of our expectations shapes the increasing strength of *almost* (Figure 2).

In Figures 1 and 2, we held one of the pieces constant. In ordinary use, though, both circumstance and expectation will shape the strength of *almost*. Thus, we can hold *almost* to be a modal whose force appears to vary, while in fact being a necessity modal affected by context. This context-dependency allows us to use *almost* even though the circumstances don't bring us close to completion.

Indeed, the interpretation of *almost* depends on the context in reliable ways. This is to be expected as a modal: Modal interpretation is contextually determined by conversational backgrounds (Kratzer,

⁴ Katz et al. (2012) offer an ordered merging of premise sets to get the same result without a sequence.

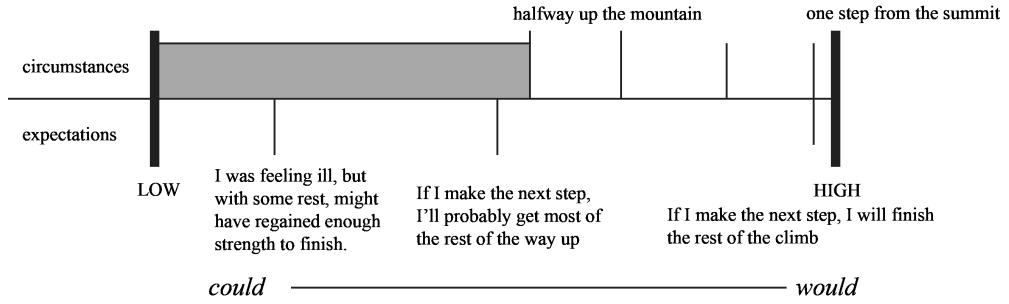


Figure 2: variable strength from expectation

2012). We can link the circumstances described above to a modal base, and the expectations to an ordering source.

3. Analysis

Using these pieces, we can build a denotation for (verbal) *almost* where there is a set missing necessary conditions that, when assumed, and when compatible with the circumstances, entails p in the most ideal accessible worlds.⁵

$$(10) \llbracket almost \rrbracket = \lambda g_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda g'_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda f_{\langle s, \langle st, t \rangle \rangle} \lambda p_{st} \lambda w_s \cdot \\ \exists Z [Z \subseteq NEC(p)(w) \ \& \ w \notin \bigcup Z \ \& \quad \text{(polar condition)} \\ \forall w' [w' \in Best_{g'(w)}(Best_{g(w)}(R(f(w))(Z))) \rightarrow w' \in p]] \quad \text{(proximal condition)}$$

READ: *Given conversational backgrounds f, g, g' ; proposition p , and world w :*

There is a set of propositions Z such that Z is a subset of conditions necessary for $w \in p$, such that no member of Z holds of w , and such that in all worlds w' that are most ideal with respect to g' out of those most ideal with respect to g , such that Z holds of w' and is accessible from w , $w' \in p$.

For example, in a situation where I climb halfway up Mount Everest before the weather turns bad and I have to quit, *I almost climbed Mount Everest* might have the following following necessary conditions in the actual world (w_0):

(11) $NEC(p)(w_0)$:

- I decide to climb Mount Everest
- I raise the funds
- I fly to Nepal
- I arrive at base camp
- I climb up halfway
- I climb to the last camp
- I take the last step

The circumstantial modal base $f_c(w_0)$ is the circumstances that lead up to the turning point (when the weather turns bad), including presupposed facts like the location of Mount Everest, but also all of the fulfilled necessary conditions for climbing it, up to and including climbing halfway.

Almost states that at least one of the necessary conditions is missing from what's true in w_0 ; in our context the weather prevented me from getting past halfway, so the set Z will contain the proposition that I climb to the last camp. The counterfactual meaning of *almost* adopts the propositions in Z as true premises, and combines this set with the modal base: $f_c(w_0) \cup Z$. The modal then takes the worlds true in the largest consistent subset of the union where the circumstances still hold:

$$(12) R(f_c(w))(Z) := \bigcap H, \text{ where } H \text{ is the maximal consistent subset in } f_c(w) \cup Z \text{ such that } f_c(w) \subseteq H$$

⁵ The denotation in (10) mixes sets and characteristic functions, but it is straightforward to shift from one to the other.

Suppose for our example that $R(f_c(w))(Z) = \{ w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, w_5, w_6 \}$.

These modal worlds are then plugged into the realistic ordering source, $g_R(w_0)$. Since it involves reality, it includes the circumstances, which already removes most oddball worlds, getting rid of weather-dispersal devices, teleportation, etc. As it also contains the negation of the supposition (since Z is not true in the actual world), it might not order the worlds in $R(f_c(w))(Z)$, if they are all equally good or bad with respect to reality. But for this case, suppose that one world is removed to select the most realistic ones:

$$(13) \text{Best}_{g_R(w_0)}(R(f_c(w))(Z)) = \{ w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, w_5 \}$$

The best of these worlds are then ranked by the second ordering source $g_E(w_0)$, which is expectational. This narrows down the set of realistic worlds to those that also best satisfy some set of expectations: What we expect would have happened next if the supposition held. Imagine the expectations in Table 1, which returns the following set of most expected of the most realistic worlds $\{ w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4 \}$.

expectations	Best _{g_R(w₀)} (R(f _c (w))(Z))				
	w ₁	w ₂	w ₃	w ₄	w ₅
If I decide to CME, I will raise the funds	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
If I raise the funds, I will fly to Nepal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
If I fly to Nepal, I will climb to base camp	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
If I climb to base camp, I will reach halfway	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
If I reach halfway, I will reach the last camp	✓	✓	✓	✓	
If I reach the last camp, I will reach the summit	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Best_{g_E(w₀)}(Best_{g_R(w₀)}(R(f_c(w))(Z)))

Table 1: expectational ordering of realistic worlds

The ratio of the number of expected worlds to the number of realistic worlds gives us the modal strength; the higher the ratio, the stronger *almost* becomes.

$$(14) \frac{|\text{Best}_{g_E(w_0)}(\text{Best}_{g_R(w_0)}(R(f_c(w))(Z)))|}{|\text{Best}_{g_R(w_0)}(R(f_c(w))(Z))|} = \text{strength}$$

$$(15) \frac{|\{w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4\}|}{|\{w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, w_5\}|} = \frac{4}{5} = \begin{matrix} \text{relatively} \\ \text{strong} \end{matrix}$$

Both circumstances and expectations affect the strength of *almost*. As the circumstances get closer to actual success, the set of realistic circumstance worlds becomes more restricted, and the same set of circumstances picks out a greater proportion of those worlds. Table 2 exemplifies this; progress downwards in the table reflects progress toward success. The second column gives the cardinality of realistic worlds where the proposition in that row holds, while the third column gives the cardinality of realistic worlds best meeting expectations.

	most realistic worlds	most expected worlds	Strength
	Best _{g_R(w)}	Best _{g_E(w)}	
I decide to climb ME	12	3	0.25
I raise the funds	9	3	0.33
I fly to Nepal	8	3	0.38
I arrive at base camp	7	3	0.43
I climb up halfway	6	3	0.50
I make the last camp	5	3	0.60
I take the last step	3	3	1.00

Table 2: Variable strength from circumstance

As expectations dwindle, the cardinality of Best_{g_E(w₀)} diminishes. The smaller cardinality weakens *almost* by lowering the numerator of the ratio. This is exemplified in Table 3. The second column gives

the cardinality of realistic worlds. The other columns have varying cardinalities of expected realistic worlds and corresponding modal strengths. Comparing the two strength columns (in boldface), we can see the effect of having fewer worlds where our expectations of success hold.

	most realistic worlds	high expectation		low expectation	
	Best_{g_R(w)}	Best_{g_E(w)}	Str.	Best_{g_E(w)}	Str.
I decide to climb ME	12	3	0.250	1	0.083
I raise the funds	9	3	0.333	1	0.111
I fly to Nepal	8	3	0.375	1	0.125
I arrive at base camp	7	3	0.425	1	0.143
I climb up halfway	6	3	0.500	1	0.167
I make the last camp	5	3	0.600	1	0.200
I take the last step	3	3	1.000	1	0.333

Table 3: Variable strength from expectation

This analysis illustrates the mechanism by which circumstance and expectation shape the modal strength of *almost*, but does not develop an account of calculating the circumstantial or expectational closeness. This will be developed in future research.

4. Failure of *almost*

One important distinction between *almost* and the modals of the Pacific North West is that *almost* can scope below negation:

Context: *We won the game.*

- (16) a. # *We almost won.*
 b. *We didn't almost win.*

Between this fact and the fact that *almost* statements can be infelicitous or false, we need to understand what it means for *almost* to fail. As we've defined $\llbracket \textit{almost } p \rrbracket$ to mean that there is a set of necessary conditions Z missing that, when assumed and compatible with the circumstances, entails p, $\llbracket \textit{not almost } p \rrbracket$ must mean that either there is no Z missing, or that there is no Z missing that can be assumed while being compatible with the circumstances and entailing p.

The first option amounts to negation of the polar condition: There is no Z missing, so p holds and *almost p* is false.

- (17) *We didn't almost win, we did win.*

On the other hand, if the negation (or the failure) is in the proximal condition, we get the sense that p isn't close to holding. This meaning can emerge in one of two ways. Either what is assumed does not entail p, or the circumstances do not allow the missing necessary condition to be assumed at all. Either way, we get a sense of distance from p holding.

- (18) *We didn't almost win, we got blown out.*

Entailment can fail when $g_E(w)$ reduces the modal strength to zero. If the set of most ideal worlds is empty, *almost* fails the constraint on vacuous quantification. For instance, if we lost the basketball game 125-57, and it was 70-9 at halftime, the difference in skill is so apparent that we can have no expectation of winning, and *we almost won the game* is infelicitous.⁶

The other way *almost* will fail is if the supposition is inconsistent with the circumstances.

Context:

I was in Vancouver yesterday, arriving for the conference.

⁶ An open question remains as to whether this failure occurs only at zero modal strength, or if there is a limit slightly above that.

(19) #*I almost climbed Mount Everest yesterday* (in w_0)

The set of necessary conditions for climbing Mount Everest includes the proposition n , that I was in Nepal at the time. However, the circumstances include the proposition v , that I was in Vancouver. Supposition adds n to the modal base, but as n and v are incompatible, $R(f_c(w))(Z)$ preserves the modal base at the expense of n . This means that all of the modal worlds are worlds where I am in Vancouver, yet none of those are worlds where I climb Mount Everest, so the use of *almost* fails. In this respect, *almost* begins to diverge from ordinary counterfactuals.

5. *Almost* is no ordinary counterfactual

When the supposition is eliminated from the modified modal base $R(f_c(w))(Z)$, that modal base is no longer counterfactual. In ordinary counterfactuals this would be pragmatically odd for being uninformative, but in the case of *almost* we end up with a contradiction, because of *almost*'s polar condition. This explains why some suppositions possible with ordinary counterfactuals cannot be made with *almost*.

First, presuppositions cannot be the focus of *almost*. In (20), which presupposes a king of France, the fact that there is no King of France is part of $f_c(w)$, so if Z is the proposition that there is a King of France (which would resolve the presupposition failure), the supposition in Z will be thrown out by $R(f_c(w))(Z)$, resulting in a contradiction.

(20) #*I almost kissed the King of France yesterday, but there is no King of France.*

Second, non-transient properties cannot be the focus of *almost*. If Bill is blind, but went to Paris and walked right past the Eiffel Tower, *Bill almost saw the Eiffel Tower* is infelicitous. The circumstances do not allow us to suppose that Bill isn't blind. On the other hand, if he were sighted, but temporarily blinded by a strobe light as he went past the Eiffel Tower, it's felicitous to say *Bill almost saw the Eiffel Tower*: Circumstance provides the turning point where there is a real possibility that Bill could have seen it.

Third, *almost* cannot be used for physically impossible hypotheticals. While (21a) can be true, (21b) cannot be.

- (21) a. *The Aztecs would've beaten the Romans.*
 b. # *The Aztecs almost beat the Romans.*

The difference between the two is that ordinary counterfactuals allow basically any supposition, overt or not.⁷ *Almost* doesn't support any idle supposition, because whatever we suppose must be compatible with the circumstances in the real world. Since the Aztecs and (ancient) Romans never encountered each other, and never could have, due to their distinct time periods, no encounter between them could be compatible with the actual circumstances.

These distinctions, and the observations before it, all demonstrate that as a counterfactual, *almost* is rather restricted—its modal force, base, and ordering sources are all fixed, and the suppositions allowed to be used with it are restricted. However, our account of *almost* derives and predicts these restrictions, and demonstrates a new element of variation within the 'family' of counterfactuals.

6. Further explanations

We close with two issues from the literature concerning *almost* that our account handles in a straightforward fashion.

The first issue involves the various readings of *almost*. McCawley (1972) derived these readings by scope relations between *almost* and a decomposed verbal predicate. (22) has the readings in (23) (the names for these are Rapp & von Stechow's).

⁷ *Almost* also differs syntactically from ordinary counterfactuals, in that *almost* does not allow modification by *if*-clauses, even when the clause expresses the relevant missing condition: *I would've/almost climbed Mt Everest if I had the money*. However, the reason for this restriction doesn't seem purely semantic, since you can refer to these clauses later using a *but*-clause: *I would've/almost climbed Mt Everest, but I didn't have the money*.

- (22) *Josie almost killed Marie* (à la McCawley (1972))
- (23) a. almost [ACT(Josie) CAUSE BECOME (dead(Marie))] (counterfactual)
 b. ACT(Josie) almost [CAUSE BECOME (dead(Marie))] (scalar)
 c. ACT(Josie) CAUSE BECOME almost [(dead(Marie))] (resultative)

However, Dowty (1979) points out crucial problems with decomposing English verbs in this way. Rapp & von Stechow (1999) reduce these readings to two, and derive them from a single meaning of German *fast* ('almost') that relies on scope within the extended verbal projection to differentiate the readings.

But with an ordering account we can derive all these readings for English *almost* without relying on scope at all.⁸ Different contexts provide different turning points, each with different sets of circumstances that lead to a myriad of different readings. Linguists could group these together into apparent 'families' of readings (Table 4), but essentially, there are at least as many 'readings' of *almost* as there are necessary conditions.

a	Josie considered	
b	Josie decided yes	<i>counterfactual</i>
c	Josie aimed	
d	Josie fired	<i>scalar</i>
f	The shot hit Marie	
g	It hit a vital organ	
h	Marie bled out	<i>resultative</i>
i	Marie died	[<i>does not hold</i>]

Table 4: Apparent readings for *Josie almost killed Marie*

The second issue concerns the classical observation that *almost* usually requires closeness. This requirement is especially strong when quantifiers are involved, as in (24).

(24) *Sarah almost met 10 heads of state*. . . infelicitous if she actually met 3

(24) is obviously true if Sarah met a number of heads of state close to 10, but it's easy to find a context where closeness doesn't matter. If Sarah was invited to a party where everyone would meet 10 heads of state, but at the last minute she opted not to go, (24) is still true. While the circumstances are not particularly close to meeting 10 heads of state (in reality, Sarah met none), we strongly expect that if she had gone, she would have met 10, so *almost* is felicitous. We can also save *almost* when she meets three. If she met three heads of state, but the other seven who were expected had to cancel at the last moment, then (24) is felicitous, because minus the impediment, the expectations save the reading.

Circumstances and expectations can also explain cases where proximity does seem to matter:

Context:

Sarah ate 27 chili peppers.

(25) *Sarah almost ate 30 chili peppers.*

(26) # *Sarah almost ate 50 chili peppers.*

The circumstances are the same in both cases: the eaten peppers, and Sarah's state (her stomach, spice tolerance, etc.); these get us very close to 30, and very little expectation is required to make (25) felicitous. For the 50-pepper target, on the other hand, the circumstances don't get us very close, and there's even less expectation of success. While it's reasonable to expect that Sarah could eat a few more peppers, getting her to 30, it's not reasonable to expect her to get to 50.

As our account predicts, though, we can find a context where the expectations can save *almost*:

⁸ The placement of *almost* does affect its complement. A change in complement affects NEC(p)(w), which can affect the available readings, perhaps ruling some out.

Context:

I was in a pepper-eating contest, to 50. I was on a good pace to eat 50, and had eaten 27 when some idiot pulled the fire alarm and we all had to flee.

(27) *I almost ate 50 peppers.*

In (27), the circumstances don't get us any closer to 50 than in (26), but we have a strong expectation to finish, and *almost* is licensed.

Our account therefore not only handles the new observations made about *almost*, but also straightforwardly handles the classic observations from the *almost* literature.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, we propose a definition for (verbal) *almost* under which there is a set *Z* of missing necessary conditions for *p* in *w*, such that when *Z* is compatible with the circumstances of *w* and holds of the most expected realistic worlds accessible to *w*, *Z* entails *p*. *Almost* behaves like variable-force modals of the Pacific North West, which is to say that its force doesn't vary at all, but is shaped by conversational backgrounds that provide domain restriction of its quantifier.

Although *almost* is a counterfactual, it differs in key ways from other counterfactuals, requiring that the supposition meet a certain degree of plausibility in order to be compatible with its circumstantial modal base. Despite this requirement for plausibility, *almost* does not actually require closeness, since you can almost do something even when in reality you do practically nothing. Our definition delivers a myriad of readings, depending on circumstance, including contexts where closeness is required.

With the components that contribute toward our denotation of *almost* we expect several possible areas of variation across different languages: different ordering sources than reality and expectations might come into play, or different modal bases than the circumstances, which might even explain some of the 'kin' of *almost* discussed in Morzycki (2001). Our definition for English *almost* defines it as a necessity modal, but a Gitksan-like *almost* using existential quantification and domain strengthening is a plausible cross-linguistic alternative.

References

- Amaral, Patrícia & Fabio Del Prete (2010). Approximating the limit: the interaction between *quasi* 'almost' and some temporal connectives in Italian. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 33:2, 51–115.
- Deal, Amy Rose (2011). Modals without scales. *Language* 87:3, 559–585.
- Dowty, David (1979). *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar*. Kluwer, Amsterdam. 1991 reprint.
- von Stechow, Kai & Sabine Iatridou (2008). How to say *Ought* in foreign: The composition of weak necessity modals. Guéron, J. & J. Lecarme (eds.), *Time and Modality*, 115–141.
- Horn, Laurence (2002). Assertoric inertia and NPI licensing. Andronis, Mary, Erin Debenport, Anne Pycha & Keiko Yoshimura (eds.), *CLS 38 Part 2*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 55–82.
- Katz, Graham, Paul Portner & Aynat Rubinstein (2012). Ordering combination for modal comparison. Chereches, Anca (ed.), *Proceedings of SALT 22*, 488–507.
- Kratzer, Angelika (2012). *Modals and Conditionals*. Oxford U. Press, Oxford.
- Martin, Fabienne (2005). Les deux lectures de *faillir* + inf. et les verbes présupposant l'existence d'un événement. Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot, Hava & Nicole Le Querler (eds.), *Les Périphrases Verbales*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 455–473.
- McCawley, James D. (1972). Kac and Shibatani on the Grammar of Killing. Kimball, J. (ed.), *Syntax and Semantics 1*, Academic Press, New York, 139–149.
- Morzycki, Marcin (2001). *Almost* and its kin, across categories. Hastings, R., B. Jackson & Z. Zvolenszky (eds.), *Proceedings of SALT 11*, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 306–325.
- Nouwen, Rick (2006). Remarks on the polar orientation of *Almost*. van de Weijer, J. & B. Los (eds.), *Linguistics in the Netherlands*, John Benjamins.
- Penka, Doris (2006). Almost there: The Meaning of *almost*. Ebert, Christian & Cornelia Endriss (eds.), *Proceedings from Sinn und Bedeutung 10*, vol. 2, 275–286.
- Peterson, Tyler (2010). *Epistemic modality and evidentiality in Gitksan at the semantics-pragmatics interface*. Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia.
- Portner, Paul (2009). *Modality*. Oxford U. Press, Oxford.

- Rapp, Irene & Arnim von Stechow (1999). *Fast* 'almost' and the visibility parameter for functional adverbs. Journal of Semantics 16, 149–204.
- Rullmann, Hotze, Lisa Matthewson & Henry Davis (2008). Modals as distributive indefinites. Natural Language Semantics 16, 317–357.
- Sadock, Jerrold M. (1981). *Almost*. Cole, Peter (ed.), Radical Pragmatics, Academic Press, New York, 257–271.

Proceedings of the 33rd West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics

edited by

Kyeong-min Kim, Pocholo Umbal,
Trevor Block, Queenie Chan,
Tanie Cheng, Kelli Finney, Mara Katz,
Sophie Nickel-Thompson, and Lisa Shorten

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2016

Copyright information

Proceedings of the 33rd West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics
© 2016 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-57473-469-0 library binding

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Ordering information

Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

McKenzie, Andrew and Lydia Newkirk. 2016. *Almost as a 'Variable-Force' Modal*. In *Proceedings of the 33rd West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, ed. Kyeong-min Kim et al., 299-308. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #3249.