On the rhetorical use of *almost* *

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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 a 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 accounts that have been given by Penka (2006) and Nouwen

(2006) for the exact meaning of *almost*. We will see that even though these accounts show how one can derive the meaning of *almost*, the semantics alone does not provide a satisfying answer to the question why people would want to use this word. After the semantics has been discussed, the focus of this paper will shift towards Argumentation Theory. 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. As far as we know, this is the first time that Optimality Theory is applied to Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric.

2.   The semantics of *almost*

In this section we will try to determine the exact meaning of *almost*, basically 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 *almost* six o'clock.
(4) a. The victim was dead.   b. The victim was *almost* dead.
(5) a. John scored a goal.   b. John *almost* scored a goal.
(6) a. Hugh never drives his car.   b. Hugh *almost* 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, as the instances of *yet* in parentheses already indicated, *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. If the worlds of the b-sentences were to be changed just the tiniest bit, they would be exactly the same as the worlds of the a-sentences.

Penka 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)

With an example:

(7)   John picked almost 1000 apples yesterday.

Sentence (7) entails that a certain number of apples was picked by John, that certain number being close to but lower than 1000. Penka stipulates furthermore that the semantics of *almost* involves alternatives that are ordered on a so-called Horn scale. This scale is ordered by the entailment relation in such a way that a certain element on the scale entails all the elements that are ranked lower on that scale. In Horn (1972) these scales are related to quantifiers as well as scalar predicates. An example of such a scale is the following list of quantificational elements: *one – some/a few – several – many – half – most/the majority – all/every*. Every item on this list logically entails the items to the left of it. So if it is the case that 'many girls are clever and seductive', then it is also the case that 'some girls are clever and seductive' (Horn 1972, pp 57-61). Taking all of this into consideration, Penka composes the following formula for the semantics of *almost* (Penka 2006: 279):

(8) $[[almost_{\approx}]] = \lambda w.\lambda p_{<s,t>}. \neg p(w) \ \& \ \exists q \ [\ q \approx p \ \& \ q(w)]$
      (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. The requirement in (8) that p is false ensures that only alternatives that are lower on the scale can be true.

   A somewhat less strict definition of the semantics of *almost* can be found in Nouwen (2006). Nouwen makes a distinction between two different approaches to the semantic definition of *almost*: (I) the intensional approach and (II) the scalar alternative approach. The latter is the same as Penka's. The intensional approach, however, 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)

At first glance, the intensional approach seems far more difficult to use, because it is harder to determine how closely two possible worlds resemble each other, than it is to compare two values on a certain scale to each other. Consider for example the next sentence, found in an online version of the film script of the movie *Almost Famous*:

(9) She's *almost* to her bedroom down the hall when mom catches her [italics added]

In (9) there is a certain end point, the bedroom, and the proximity to it can be easily placed on an imaginary scale. Say that the distance from the front door to the bed room door is 15 metres, then according to the scalar alternative approach 'almost to her bed room' would be true once the girl is within a few metres from her bed room door. A problem is posed, however, once *almost* modifies a proposition that is not so easily placed on a certain scale. Consider for example the next sentence, taken from random Google-searches on instances of *almost*:

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

It is very difficult to imagine a scale of prototypicality for diaries. For such an analysis one would like an ordered set of properties of diaries that can define measurable exemplars to be placed on a scale. For these cases the intensional approach seems better suited. In the intensional approach we can analyze 'almost a diary' in terms of worlds that have a diary and worlds that have a blog that has a lot of the characteristics that we would normally ascribe to diaries, yet not all of them. Thus, the set of properties does not have to be ordered because they do not have to make up a scale. Even though this approach still requires some imaginative power for analyzing *almost* p, it is still more workable than to try and think up a scale for a set of properties that cannot be scalarized easily.

In this section we have determined the formal meaning of *almost*. In formally defining the meaning of this word, however, we still do not gain any insight in the reasons why people would want to use it. The semantics alone does not provide any clues. As pointed out in the introduction, propositions containing *almost* can be used as arguments for a certain statement. For instance, a sentence such as (5b) above (*John almost scored a goal*) could be uttered by a speaker to convince the hearer of the fact that John is a good striker. The next chapter will focus on this use of *almost* in argumentation.

3.   The rhetoric of *almost*

In this section we will investigate the rhetorical effect of *almost* and explain why people would want to use it.

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 his 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*:

(11) Premise 1:   If p is the case then q is the case.
    Premise 2:   p is the case.
    Conclusion: q is the case.

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. In everyday argumentation the first premise is often left implicit. Making every premise explicit for each argumentation would make everyday language a very tedious and lengthy business. This does however cause a problem: what should a hearer make of all these incomplete and therefore invalid argumentations? The solution is simple: each hearer validates argumentations that lack the first premise themselves, making the argumentation sound, without the speaker having to make premise 1 explicit each and every time he wants to make his point.

The possibility to leave this first premise implicit entails that speakers assume this premise to be part of the common ground, one that is valid in general and that is shared at least by both speaker and hearer. And something that is already known by your conversational partner does not necessarily need to be spoken out loud. Another argumentative element that can be left implicit is the conclusion. In fact, leaving the conclusion implicit can be an effective tool in Rhetoric: when a hearer draws the intended conclusion by himself, this is often more convincing than when the speaker explicitly states the conclusion. So, a speaker might leave the general premise 1 ($p \rightarrow q$) implicit as well as the conclusion q. Yet, on the basis of the given argument p the hearer might still come to the conclusion q, which is exactly the purpose of the speaker, who wants to convince the hearer of q.

We will now determine what kind of effect an instance of *almost* has on a sentence and how this can be interpreted in the context of an argumentation. If

we now take a look at sentences that contain *almost* in the context of an argumentation we get an argumentative scheme that can be interpreted as a modified version of a modus ponens. The second premise is not *p*, but *almost p*, yet it still leads to the conclusion *q*, given $p \rightarrow q$.

(12) Premise 1:   (If somebody scores a goal, he is a good striker.)
     Premise 2:   John almost scored a goal.
     Conclusion: (John is a good striker.)

The parentheses indicate that these parts of the argumentation are left implicit. The formulation of the argumentation is now less strict and a bit more suggestive than a formulation without *almost*. When *almost* is used in an argumentative context the rhetorical effect of *almost* is the following. The speaker wants to convince the hearer of a certain conclusion *q*. As long as the speaker can make use of premises that are true in the real world, there is no problem whatsoever. A problem arises once *p* is not true in the real world, while at the same time the speaker wants the hearer to come to conclusion *q* on the basis of $p \rightarrow q$. Were the speaker still to present *p as* a valid argument, he would be lying. This is of course not a preferable situation, since a lie is usually easy to detect and will not only result in the hearer not coming to the desired conclusion, it will even cause distrust in the hearer towards the speaker. The speaker also wants to keep his argumentation as valid as possible. If the argumentation is invalid, it is not logical for a hearer to come to the desired conclusion. So in the context of our problem, stating the truth (namely that *p* is not the case), will definitely not lead the hearer to conclusion q. The best solution to the problem of the speaker is to bend the truth in his advantage by stating *almost p*. Even though *p* is not the case, the speaker creates the illusion that it ís the case, therefore leading the hearer to conclude that *q* is the case.

So in effect, *almost* helps in directing the interpretation of the hearer towards a certain conclusion that is not supported by reality. This conclusion can be left implicit.

Of course, the reason for a speaker to say *almost* can also be of a mere economic nature, since *almost* has vague reference, which makes it, for instance, far more efficient to say "This blog has become almost a diary" than "This blog has taken on a lot of properties that diaries have as well, yet it is still a blog". As we have seen in Section 2, as hearers we are able to think up two comparable worlds, one in which an object has all the specific characteristics of a diary, and one in which an object which has all but some of the specific characteristics of a diary (cf. Nouwen 2006). This last world is the world of 'almost a diary'.

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*,

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):

(13) Premise 1:   (If you can drive a 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 his own conclusions. He is provided with a tempting argument for buying the car

4.   An Optimality Theoretic account

In the previous section we have seen that in an argumentative context, a formulation with *almost* can help to convince a hearer of a statement *q*, which is not supported by a real fact *p*, but only by *almost p*. We will now look more closely at this rhetorical use of *almost*. We will discuss the different options that a speaker has in argumentation and we will see how he comes to an output containing *almost*. The speaker's perspective will be analysed within an Optimality Theoretic framework.

Optimality Theory (OT) explains language phenomena in terms of violable constraints. These constraints express general statements with respect to language and they can be in conflict with each other. The constraints are ordered in a constraint hierarchy on the basis of their strength. Constraints that are higher in the hierarchy should be satisfied more than constraints that are lower in the hierarchy. OT specifies the relation between the input and output. For each input, several possible output candidates are evaluated against the constraints. The output that satisfies the ranked constraints best emerges as the optimal output for the given input (Prince and Smolensky 2004). OT has been used first in the field of phonology and has later been applied to syntax and pragmatics/semantics as well. To the best of our knowledge, OT has not been applied to the field of Argumentation Theory or Rhetoric before.

In an Optimality Theoretic account of Rhetoric, 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, then the conclusion that John is a good striker is not supported by reality. The candidates in an Optimality Theoretic account of Rhetoric are made

up of possible arguments that should lead the hearer to come to the speaker's intended conclusion. In our example of John being a good striker, (relevant) possible candidates that the speaker may utter would be "John scored a goal", "John did not score a goal", or "John almost scored a goal". Let us now see how an OT analysis of Rhetoric works in practice.

In Section 3 we have already pointed out the problem that arises in argumentation once there is a premise 2 that is not true in the real world, while at the same time the speaker still wants his hearer to come to conclusion q. The speaker does not want to lie, yet he still wants to keep as close to a valid argumentation as possible. In this situation there are several possible arguments that the speaker can put forward in order to try and convince the hearer of a certain conclusion. These statements and their consequences are summed up below:

(14) Stating p: You are lying, but the hearer will conclude q.
(15) Stating *not p*: You are telling the truth, but the hearer will not conclude q.
(16) Stating *almost p*: You are not lying, and the hearer will conclude q.
(17) Stating q: You are not lying, but the hearer will not be convinced of q, because you have not provided him with a proper argument.

These options for the speaker are the possible output candidates, which are evaluated against the following set of constraints:

(18) *LIE: Speak the truth.
(19) GIVE-ARG: Provide an argument for the conclusion.
(20) EFCY: Be as efficient as possible in your argumentation; do not use more argumentative elements than needed.
(21) EXPL: Be explicit in your argumentation; do not beat around the bush.

If we now put the possible outputs that a speaker has for his argumentation in an OT tableau against the constraints, we get the following result for *almost*:

Tableau 1

Input: intention to convince hearer of q; given that p is not true, that p is almost true and that $p \rightarrow q$ all hold in the real world	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
p	*!			*
not p		*!		*
☞ almost p				*
q		*!		*
almost p, so q			*!	

Under this ranking of the constraints, given the input, stating "almost p" is the optimal output for a speaker to convince the hearer of q. Just uttering "p" is rejected, because this violates the highest ranked constraint *LIE. Saying "not p" and stating "q" are rejected, because both outputs violate GIVE-ARG as they do not provide the hearer with a proper argument in favour of the conclusion q. Our optimal output, saying "almost p", comes forward as the best option. In this tableau a fifth option stating "almost p, so q" is considered as well, yet this one is less optimal than "almost p", because it is a less efficient argumentation: more argumentative elements are being used than should be needed to convince a hearer. Even though this last candidate output is more explicit than "almost p", it is still rejected because it violates a higher ranked constraint (EFCY) more often than the optimal output.

     If we now try to apply this to the next sentence, found in a random Google search on instances of *almost*:

(22) Good performance and almost no downtime. [Said in an advertisement for a certain web-server.]

The part *almost no downtime* can be analysed in an argumentative context as follows:

(23) Premise 1:   (If the server has no downtime, it is a good server.)
Premise 2:   The server has almost no downtime.
Conclusion: (It is a good server.)

Tableau 2

Input: Convince hearer that the server is good; given that the server does have downtime, but not a lot and given that if a server has no downtime, it is good	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
The server has no downtime	*!			*
The server has downtime		*!		*
☞ The server has almost no downtime				*
The server is good		*!		*
The server has almost no downtime, so it must be a good one			*!	

Clearly, given that the input is in accordance with reality, the first candidate does not reflect the reality, so it is a lie. The second candidate will not convince the hearer to buy or use the server: it gives the feeling that the server is down more often than not. Candidate 4 makes you think "what makes this server that good then?" and simply does not provide enough information. Candidate 5 is a bit of a lengthy formulation, compared to candidate 3, the optimal one. This optimal output allows the hearer to draw his conclusions on his own, which is always better than being force-fed a certain conclusion.

We have seen how speakers arrive at a formulation with *almost* in order to support a particular line of argument. With the help of Optimality Theory we have explained how a formulation with *almost* surfaces as the optimal form for convincing a hearer of a certain conclusion. Even though the focus initially lies on the production of utterances containing *almost*, our solution can be placed in a broader perspective. The speaker does not only optimize the production of a sentence, in effect he optimizes his entire argumentation strategy. Given a situation where reality does not support a certain point he wants to make, the speaker can use a formulation with *almost* to make a statement that twists reality in such a way that it does support the conclusion. Out of several possible formulations to convince the hearer of a certain conclusion, a formulation with *almost* comes out as the optimal candidate.

5.   An extension to the rhetorical use of *barely*

Our analysis can be extended to the use of *barely* in Rhetoric. Although the semantics of *barely* has been studied less than *almost*, it has a similar argumentative effect as *almost*. In the case of argumentations that contain an instance of *barely* the first part of premise 1 is again not true in the real world,

therefore there is no solid argument for the hearer to come to the conclusion *not q*. The problem for the speaker however, is that he does want to convince the hearer of *not q* for whatever reason. 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, he would be lying. Were he 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 in a way, yet the hearer can still conclude that John is a bad striker.

So, like *almost*, *barely* helps in directing the hearer towards a certain conclusion that is not supported by reality. Again, this conclusion can be left implicit. For the sake of completeness an example of the OT analysis of an argumentation with *barely*:

Tableau 3

Input: Convince hearer that John is a bad striker; given that John scored a goal, but some people called it luck, and given that if a striker does not score a goal, he is a bad striker.	*LIE	GIVE-ARG	EFCY	EXPL
John scored a goal		*!		*
John did not score a goal	*!			*
☞ John barely scored a goal				*
John is a bad striker		*!		*
John barely scored a goal, so he is a bad striker			*!	

Two 'real' illustrations of this type of argumentation are the following, taken from the internet:

(24) 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]

(25) Terrible game! You *barely* scored a goal! [italics added]

In (24) the speaker wishes to convince the hearer that he 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 (25) 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.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have examined the use of *almost* (and *barely*) in Rhetoric. We have seen that especially in those cases where a proposition p leads to conclusion q and proposition p is not (entirely) true in the real world, a speaker can use a formulation with *almost* to try and convince the hearer still that conclusion q is the case, without having to tell a lie. We have seen that from a speaker's perspective, there are several constraints (*Lie, Give-Arg, Efcy and Expl) that work together in determining which formulation helps the speaker best in achieving his goal of convincing the hearer of a certain conclusion. Formulations with *almost* surfaced as the optimal output for achieving the speaker's goal.

Note

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