

### **9.00-9.30**

David Mitchell

MSU Denver

#### *Verbal -s in 1960s Harlem: A case for affect*

It is argued here that verbal -s was used to convey affect among AAVE speaking school children in Harlem during the 1960s. This affective constraint on the use of verbal -s in AAVE has been casually noted in studies like Labov (1968), Pitts (1981, 1986) and Moody (2011). It was also demonstrated empirically by Mitchell (2019) via survey data collected in four separate regions of the US. Now, the current investigation adds further confirmation to that report by using actual language data gathered by (Greene and Ryan 1965). The methods here included using linguistic context (neighboring emotive adverbs), and transcription contexts as indicators of an elevated emotional state on the part of the speakers. The transcription indicators included punctuation choice, the use of italics, and personal notes added to the transcription about the children's behavior. It was demonstrated that the -s marker is indeed significantly more likely to be found as the number of contextual markers increased. Other well-noted constraints, such as the Northern Subject Rule (although the proximity portion of this constraint has been reversed to favor the -s when the subject is adjacent), Habitual Aspect, and the Embedded Clause Constraint were also found to have a significant effect on the use of verbal -s. These results shed light on an aspect of AAVE grammar during a time where not much data exists for study, and indicates that verbal -s was being used as a marker of affect much earlier than expected (contra Mitchell 2019). This study also adds support to Maynard (2002), who argued that expressive linguistic phenomena can be identified by using situational contexts other than those that are purely linguistic."

### **9.30-10.00**

Sali Tagliamonte & Gemma McCarley

University of Toronto

#### *Pretty well gone and almost done: Historical Developments in the English Adverbs of Approximation*

English has two classes of adverbs that are used to express the joint meaning of inexactness and proximity, e.g. I'm almost/pretty much/close to/nearly/just about/more or less done writing this abstract. Despite extensive variation, little empirical attention has been paid to what governs the use of these adverbs of approximation. From a list of more than twenty possible forms, we extracted 8,986 tokens from a large corpus of spoken Canadian English from 1200 speakers born from 1879 to 2011, an apparent time depth of 132 years.

The results show dramatic changes in the distribution of forms over the last 130 years: the two most frequent adverbs, almost and pretty much, respectively change from 5 to 47% and from 3 to 43% over the period. Figure 1 shows the rapid rise of almost which remained the most frequent approximative by far until pretty much overtook it among individuals born in the 1970s. Distributional analysis of linguistic and social categories reveals that no social factors (gender, education, occupation) are involved in these shifts. Further, although the data covers 21 communities, no trace of areal diffusion could be found, suggesting that the process is underlain by historical processes such as layering, functional reorganization or semantic shift.

Previous research (cf. Sadock 1981; Quirk et al. 1985; Wierzbicka 1986; Leech 1991; Horn 2017) has argued that approximating adverbs of this type have distinct semantic functions, pointing out that the use of almost can be delimited by the fact that the referent described is not much different to if it were true. For example, (1a-b) are similar in meaning as are (2a-c). The form almost has additional nuances: 1) it can only modify assertions “from below” (Wierzbicka 1986: 607) as in (3a), which allows for Sam to be 47, 48, or 49 but not 50, 51, or 52; and 2) “narrow escape” contexts (Wierzbicka 1986: 606), (3b), where almost conveys the meaning that something could have happened, but did not, i.e. the only felicitous interpretation being that Joe did not kill John.

We propose that the eight most frequent adverbs of approximation (almost, N=2693; pretty much, N=1863; close to, N=1171; pretty well, N=1140; just about, N=518; near, N=387; more or less, N=365; and nearly, N=272) can be analyzed by whether they follow these two semantic restrictions. The first class, including close to, near, and nearly, patterns with almost. The second class (pretty much, pretty well, just about, and more or less) does not have the same tentative meaning. Instead, Sam is pretty much 50 also allows the reading that Sam is 51 and John is pretty much dead, conveys the meaning that John is likely dead.

If we partition the data based on these types, two distinct histories are exposed: first, competition between almost and near (Figure 2) and second, competition between pretty much and pretty well (Figure 3). The first set exhibits a linear shift in apparent time. In the other, the change is abrupt, located at a particular point in time. Moreover, although these changes began as independent systems, they intersect as the changes progress: pretty much becomes popular only after 1950, eventually coming into competition with almost.

In summary, the analysis demonstrates that independent semantic systems evolving in the same time span can influence each other as change progresses. In interpreting these diachronic trajectories, we will focus on the interaction between semantic fields and their associated contextual influences. By attempting to also situate and explain the watersheds in 1950 and 1970 we hope to break new territory in folding into the explanation how external forces impinge on these inherently linguistic processes to affect their interaction.

(1) a. Harry is almost bald. b. Harry is bald.

(2) a. Harry is pretty much bald. b. Harry is just about bald. c. Harry is nearly bald.

(3) a. Sam is almost 50 years old. b. Joe almost killed John.

Figure 1: Adverbs of approximation

#### References

Horn, L.R. 2017. Almost et al.: Scalar Adverbs Revisited. In: Lee, C., Kiefer, F., Krifka, M. (eds) Contrastiveness in Information Structure, Alternatives and Scalar Implicatures. *Studies in Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, vol 91. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10106-4\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10106-4_14)

Leech, G. 1991. *An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage*. England: Nelson.

Sadock, J. 1981. Almost. In *Radical pragmatics*, ed. P. Cole, 257–271. New York: Academic.

Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech & J. Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

Wierzbicka, A. 1986. Precision in vagueness: The semantics of English 'approximatives.' *Journal of Pragmatics*, 10(5), 597-613. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(86\)90016-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(86)90016-0).

Figure 2: Most frequent forms in subclass 1 (near vs. almost vs. close to)

Figure 3: Most frequent forms in subclass 2 (pretty well vs. pretty much)."